

ERIK SAMUELSON

The Extraordinary Story
of AFC Wimbledon

All Together Now



All
Together
Now

How Wimbledon Fans Brought
Their Club Back Home

ERIK SAMUELSON



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INTRODUCTION

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.' Margaret Mead

THIS BOOK is set inside the world of football but it is really about a group of very resilient, determined people and how they reacted to and overcame adversity. It starts with a travesty of natural justice and the uprooting of a community football club as the justification for a new hypermarket in a bland, anonymous town in Buckinghamshire. It ends with the re-formed club, AFC Wimbledon, moving to its brand new stadium a mere 200 metres from the site of their old home in Plough Lane. And throughout this extraordinary journey the club was owned and run by its fans.

I am from Sunderland. I grew up watching 'The Lads' from the Fulwell End terrace at Roker Park and have great memories of the promotion-winning team in 1964 through to the glory of the 1973 FA Cup Final win.

My career took me to London and in the late 1980s I started taking our sons, Pieter and John, to support their local football team, Wimbledon FC. After following the Dons around the country for a few years I realised that they were now my team – a switch that amounts to heresy where I come from. Fast forward a few years and I'd become known to chat site users for financial analysis and criticism of the WFC announcements that sought to justify a move to Milton Keynes. As a result I got to know the people leading the protests against the move and drafted a plan to take over the

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club when, as I thought would happen, it fell into administration. Instead, four fans founded a new club and I was fortunate enough to be alongside them and able to help from the beginning.

Having explained how I got involved, that is enough about me; this is not an autobiography. Instead I see myself as the narrator of this fantastic story, drawing upon my memories, the thousands of documents I've trawled through to inform that story, and the 96 conversations I've conducted with the extraordinary people who've contributed to this great journey.

*All Together Now*¹ starts with a decision to allow WFC to relocate to Milton Keynes and the fans' decision not to accept this nonsense and instead start again at the bottom of the football pyramid. Working to an almost impossible timescale, the four founders created and registered a club and found a stadium in which to play. Rebuffed at the first attempt, they found a league to take the fledgling club, a manager to oversee the team and, following open trials on Wimbledon Common, players to play for that team.

Within a year the club had acquired its own stadium; within nine years it had won five promotions and regained a place in the Football League. I say 'regained' because there is no doubt in my mind that this club is the true continuation of football history and heritage in Wimbledon. Five years later the club was promoted to the third tier of English football and briefly above the club which tried to usurp its history. A further four years later our new stadium opened in Plough Lane, Wimbledon. And all of this was achieved while remaining a fans-owned club.

This book isn't about football matches, goals and saves. It is about the people in football, their resilience, their determination to right a wrong and their incredible commitment, all set to a backdrop of the game we love. It talks about the heroes who played major parts in where we are today. Plus a few villains, of course. It also includes some insights into areas that fans don't often hear about, such as agents and transfer tribunals. But it is primarily about how a group of football fans turned on its head the FA Commission's pompous proclamation that, following the move to Milton

1 As a diversion from writing this book I tried to think of song titles, lyrics or other sources from popular culture as chapter titles. *All Together Now* was a natural choice for the book because it reflects the cooperative way we build our club. It is serendipitous but pleasing that the song, by The Farm, was inspired by the famous Christmas Day football match in no man's land in World War 1.

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Keynes, for fans to form a new club in Wimbledon ‘would not be in the wider interests of football’. As Craig Slater of Sky Sports News said on the day of our debut in the Football League, ‘If this isn’t in the wider interests of football, I don’t know what is.’

A few things about the book. If you are looking for detailed match reports then you will be disappointed. Instead of, for example, describing how hard Danny Kedwell hit his decisive penalty in the play-off final and how high the net billowed, it will tell you what he was thinking as he stepped forward to take it.

And finally, this isn’t a history; it’s a story. Nonetheless, I’ve gone to great lengths to verify dates and places. Quotes have been sourced either to a specific publication or an individual. But different people have different recollections of the same event and, as I have found, those memories have changed and in some cases been distorted over the years. Where there are inconsistencies I’ve gone with the version that fits best with my memories or, failing that, the one that sounds most credible. Douglas Adams said at the start of his wonderful creation, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, that it ‘contains much that is apocryphal, or at least wildly inaccurate’. I hope I’ve done a little bit better than that.

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‘WE’VE LOST.’

That was the stark message lifelong Wimbledon FC supporter Ivor Heller received from an insider at the FA. It was Monday, 27 May 2002. The football club he’d followed from boyhood was to be uprooted from its community and moved 60 miles north, to Milton Keynes. There was to be no review, no right of appeal, no second chance. The decision would be announced publicly the next day.

A local man, Wimbledon born and bred, Ivor is five foot nothing. But he is the one people remember; a non-stop bundle of energy with a never-give-up attitude, even in the face of great adversity. So his immediate reaction to the call seemed totally out of character; he decided that it was time to close the book on protesting. Instead, with three other fans he would form a new club. More exactly, they would re-form Wimbledon FC in its home community. We would get back into the Football League – and wave two fingers at that Milton Keynes lot and their pirated football club.

There was a precedent for such ambition. In its long and colourful history WFC was renowned for ignoring conventions and confounding expectations. For 88 years the club had played in one or other of the leagues below the top four divisions that are collectively known as the Football League. In 1977 WFC was elected to the Football League and after an astonishing rise through the divisions, the club was promoted into the top tier of English football (later to be rebranded the Premier League) for the 1986/87 season.

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In 1988 this success was sealed when WFC won the FA Cup, beating the newly crowned league champions, Liverpool, then one of the top two or three teams in Europe. But then came the Hillsborough disaster in 1989 when 96 Liverpool fans died as a result of a crush in an ill-equipped stadium at a badly managed FA Cup semi-final. The Taylor Report, instituted in the wake of the tragedy, introduced new safety regulations and a requirement for all-seater stadiums in the top two leagues. Wimbledon's ramshackle, albeit much-loved, Plough Lane ground couldn't meet the new safety regulations and in 1991 WFC decamped to Selhurst Park, to ground-share with Crystal Palace on a temporary basis.

There followed years of bitter wrangling between the club's owner, Sam Hammam, and Merton, the local council, about a site for a new stadium. Each blamed the other for the lack of progress. During this time there was much talk about a new home at various mooted sites outside the borough. In particular, news leaked out about an astonishing and barely believable proposal to relocate to Dublin, in Ireland. The idea won the enthusiastic support of Premier League teams and was very close to success before being scuppered by opposition from League of Ireland clubs, fearful of competition for players and fans from a Premier League club based in Dublin.

In 1997 Hammam pocketed a reported £28m by selling an 80 per cent interest in the football club, but not the stadium, to two Norwegian multi-millionaires. They reputedly believed that the Dublin move was a done deal, but quickly realised they'd been sold a pup. They had bought a team with a small fan base, no stadium of its own and limited income.

In 1998, having persuaded the council to remove a restrictive covenant, Hammam sold the old Plough Lane stadium to a supermarket chain for £8m. Within a couple of years, WFC had been relegated to what is now called the Championship.

Along came Peter Winkelman, former music producer and property developer. He was desperate to bring a league club to Milton Keynes, in part because planning permission for an out-of-town hypermarket could not go ahead without 'enabling development' – a stadium would do just nicely for that purpose. But he needed a club to play there and had no interest in bringing a local club up through the divisions. He needed a ready-made club. He wasn't fussy which one. Luton, Barnet, Queens Park Rangers and Wycombe rejected his advances but WFC was vulnerable and

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a deal was done. Wimbledon FC was going to up sticks and move, lock stock and barrel, to Milton Keynes.

Fans, led by the Wimbledon Independent Supporters Association (WISA), had protested strongly against the proposed Dublin move. Now they swung into action again. A sophisticated press campaign was supplemented by lobbying MPs and councillors, protest marches, boycotting the club's merchandise, and even lying down in front of an opposition team coach to prevent it leaving.

Hopes rose when the Milton Keynes proposal was rejected by the Football League. Then, in the light of a threatened legal challenge, the Football Association (the guardian of football in England) chickened out and appointed an 'independent commission' to resolve the dispute. There was to be no appeal. And the call that Ivor took meant all the protests had come to nothing.

It was over.

Ivor leapt into action. Immediately he called Kris Stewart, the WISA chairman. They agreed that Kris should stay with the group of protesters outside the FA's headquarters in Soho Square for the formal announcement the next day, Tuesday, 28 May 2002. In the meantime Ivor would get things in motion from his office at his print works, just around the corner from the now dilapidated stadium in Plough Lane. Kris would join him the next day.

Next, Ivor called Trevor Williams. Trev loves football, any football at any level. For years he'd been watching non-league games so he was the automatic choice as the expert advisor on forming a new club – something he cheerfully admitted he knew nothing about. He and Ivor arranged to meet the next morning where they would later be joined by fellow Dons fan and leading protester Marc Jones. And so Marc, Ivor, Trevor and Kris became the founders of a new club.

Many action films start with the bringing together of a band of stropic, idiosyncratic individuals who go on to achieve great things against all the odds. Marc, Ivor, Kris and Trev would never dream of describing themselves as heroes but what they started turned into one of the greatest ever stories in football.

To paraphrase an old saying, great ideas have many parents. No one knows who first suggested forming a new club (or, as many prefer, reforming the old one) but the idea had been bandied around for months,

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with Marc one of the most energetic and persuasive proponents. It didn't need a genius to brainstorm the main elements. They needed to register a club with the Football Association, find a league to play in, find somewhere to play, and recruit a manager to bring in some players. They would make up everything else as they went along.

Ivor's print factory was to be their headquarters. Their designated office was narrow and drab with no external light. Imagine a corridor with a couple of tables in it; if anyone sat down they had to stand up again to let people past.

They worked quickly, interspersed with much animated debate about details; what to call the new club, where they would prefer the ground to be, who could be the manager? Very soon the faded paint on the walls was obscured by dozens of Post-It notes of actions to be taken, people to be called, e-mails to be written. Some of the Post-It notes lost their urgency long before they lost their adhesiveness.

By mid-morning on Tuesday, even before the official announcement of the decision, Ivor had contacted David Fowkes, the chief executive of the London FA. By the time David arrived at the print factory on the Wednesday morning, Ivor, Trev and Kris had agreed what they wanted to say.

David recalled events later in a book about the Wimbledon and District League,² 'While the former Wimbledon FC was registering with the Berks & Bucks FA as Milton Keynes Dons FC, any attempt to register Wimbledon FC back in London should have been doomed to failure. Normal FA policy was for newly formed clubs to begin life at the lowest level of Saturday football, in other words below the National League System (commonly known as "the pyramid")'.

What Ivor and Kris didn't know was that David was delighted to have the opportunity to correct a decision that he regarded as a travesty. His philosophy was simple, 'Wimbledon fans want to watch Wimbledon in Wimbledon.' He had watched WFC as a boy and for 32 years had been involved in one way or another in the Wimbledon and District Football League, so he saw this as 'an opportunity for the WDFL to give something back to the club that had given so much to the league for so many years in earlier times'. No wonder that, years later, Ivor led David on to the pitch

2 From *A History of the Wimbledon and District Football League*.

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and introduced him to the fans by saying, 'We wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for this man.'

Huddled together in the cramped little office, David completed the form on a question-and-answer basis. He dismissed 'Real Wimbledon' as the club's name because, 'While nicely ironic, it would raise eyebrows at the London FA,' and he didn't want anything to stand in the way of the application. After 'FC Wimbledon' and 'Wimbledon AFC' had been rejected as being likely to cause objections, they settled on 'AFC Wimbledon'.³ In most clubs, 'AFC' stands for 'Association Football Club' but in this case it was just a means of getting as close as possible to calling the club Wimbledon FC, and no more than that.

Next on the form came 'date of formation'. To their delight, 'David didn't even look up when Ivor said 1889 [the date that WFC was formed]. He just wrote it down and moved on.' Next came the question about where the team would play and Ivor winged it, 'We're close to an agreement to play at Kingsmeadow.'

The application needed approval by the London FA Council. David moved quickly. He knew that the LFA could well regard us as a newly formed club and consequently insist that we start at the bottom of the ladder. And that would have meant playing games on public pitches. To avoid that, we needed to be awarded senior status.

Not for the first time, good fortune intervened. A meeting of the LFA board was scheduled for that evening. David takes up the story, 'I was absolutely not going to take this to the LFA cups committee who do the status because there were one or two on the committee who I knew wouldn't support it.' He was right because for the next ten years one member of the cups committee could be heard muttering into his beer, 'They're not really the true Wimbledon.'

Instead David went direct to Norman Moss, the LFA chairman, and collared him at the Guildhall. With the full-on zeal of a convert, David explained to Norman that this would be the real Wimbledon, 'The fans

3 Thanks in part to the club's success, the 'AFC' prefix became increasingly popular. Ten years later, when Croydon Athletic applied for re-registration to the FA Leagues Committee following the demise of their original club due to fraud, they asked to reform as AFC Croydon Athletic. The Leagues Committee accepted the application but decided that it was the last 'AFC' they would accept because, in an un-minuted remark, 'The use of AFC in the name buggers up the alphabetical order for cup draws and league tables.'

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aren't going to travel up to Milton Keynes, they are going to go and watch this team, and we can't have them playing on Tooting Bec Common in Division Four of the WDL. They are going to be massive from the word go.' Norman didn't hesitate and they quickly agreed that AFC Wimbledon must be allocated senior status. David called Ivor with the good news the next morning.

The next step was to find a stadium in which to play. Terry Eames was a former WFC player who had taken part in the protests against Milton Keynes and had got to know Ivor, Marc, Trev and Kris while doing so. He joined them at the office. Ivor takes up the story, 'Terry had managed a couple of non-league clubs fairly recently. He knew Dulwich would have us and also he had a mate at Leatherhead who would help. I said that was too far and there's closer grounds.'

After the meeting, thoughts returned to Ivor's comment about non-league Kingstonian's ground, Kingsmeadow, on the outskirts of Kingston upon Thames. Among its attractions was a link to Wimbledon FC because the reserves and ladies teams had played there for some years. The other obvious candidate was Tooting and Mitcham's new ground at Bishop's Road, not least because it was in Wimbledon's home borough of Merton. That was discarded because, in Ivor's words, 'It didn't feel right.' I have never understood why Ivor was set against Tooting but, as I realised some years later, the feeling was deep-rooted and he was against most suggestions that had anything to do with Tooting! So Kingsmeadow was the target.

It was desperately urgent. They had set their sights on joining the Isthmian League, commonly known by its then sponsor's name as the Ryman League.⁴ It was 29 May and to comply with the rules, the new club had to have a three-year ground-share agreement signed before the Ryman League AGM on 17 June, or the application would founder. So Ivor phoned Kingsmeadow and got through to Anup Khosla, the stadium owner's son. After a brief conversation, Anup spoke to his father, Rajesh Khosla, a businessman who had bought the stadium and Kingstonian FC a year earlier. He saw the stadium as a group of lounges and bars he could hire out for Indian weddings; it just happened to have a football club attached.

4 The Isthmian League has new sponsors nowadays but it was known as the Ryman League all the time we played in it, and that's still what most of our fans call it. So I've used that name throughout this book.

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Within an hour, Ivor took a call from Rajesh and they agreed to meet the next day. It was still less than 48 hours since the commission's announcement.

Kingsmeadow is a nicely laid-out non-league ground, which had been built as recently as 1989. It comprised one stand with seats for just over 1,000 fans and three terraces, two of them partially covered, with space for a further 3,500 or so. There were over 200 parking spaces and three bars which were capable of accommodating about 700 people in total. And, importantly, while it wasn't in Wimbledon's home borough of Merton, it was only just over five miles from Plough Lane. After a quick tour, Kris and Ivor concluded that it would do nicely!

Good fortune shone on us yet again because it was clear from the beginning that Rajesh Khosla wasn't 'a football man' but he was definitely a money man. 'That,' said Ivor, 'was obvious as soon as we met him.'

There were already three teams playing on the poorly maintained pitch and adding another would make it almost unplayable. For that reason alone, a football man would have dismissed our approach out of hand. But Old Man Khosla (OMK), as we came to call him, clearly wanted us – or at least our money – especially after Ivor told him we expected crowds of 1,000. So the need for a stadium, which had looked like it could derail the club even before it started, was sorted almost immediately. It was perfectly situated. A sizeable number of fans already lived in the area and for others the journey was only one bus or one train ride. AFC Wimbledon had somewhere to play.

Ryman League Division Two had 16 teams. The contract with OMK rather eccentrically provided for us to play 16 league games, plus one pre-season friendly. The annual fee was £20,000 with extra games at £1,200 each. In return we got a prepared pitch, goalposts, etc., and the promise that bars and concession stalls would be open – although all the profits from those would go to OMK. The deal was for the Ryman-stipulated minimum of three years but OMK had the right to terminate it after only one season if Brentford FC took up an existing option to use the stadium.

All that was needed now was the £20,000 licence fee for year one, but there were already plans in hand for that. By then Ivor had been in touch with Nick Robinson, a lawyer by profession who was the secretary at the Ryman League. Nick was already on the case. The league's chairman was Alan Turvey, coincidentally a member of the three-man FA Commission

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which had voted 2-1 to allow the move to Milton Keynes. Alan died in 2018 but Nick remembers their conversations vividly, ‘Alan felt that the commission had made a very bad decision and he was furious about it. He kept saying “it shouldn’t have been allowed”, but he was barred from speaking publicly about it. So he was very frustrated that he couldn’t say anything or be on the record – but he made sure it was known that it was a majority decision and that he voted against!’

As soon as Turvey heard about the new club he told Robinson, ‘We must get involved. We will offer them a home [in our league].’ Robinson pointed out that there needed to be a vacancy in the division but Turvey was adamant, saying, ‘Just make it happen, get them in.’ This determination to help was reflected in a letter from Nick to Kris Stewart, in which he said that ‘in the particular circumstances’ he was prepared to recommend that the Ryman Management Committee accept our application, despite the possibility that our lease might be terminated after only one year.

As it turned out there was a vacancy and the application was submitted – but there was a problem. The Ryman League is a limited company and as such is bound by its rules, known as the Articles of Association. The problem was that any resolution to be voted on at an annual general meeting had to be circulated 21 days in advance. Since there were only 20 days between the commission’s decision and the Ryman League AGM it was impossible to comply. The papers had already gone to members and AFC Wimbledon wasn’t on the agenda.

Searching for a way around the problem, Robinson sought legal advice. He was told that if 95 per cent of the votes at the AGM were in favour, then the 21-day rule could be set aside and the club could be admitted. Ivor and Kris completed the forms, submitted them and marked 17 June in their diaries.

Aware that time was of the essence and confident that fans would support the idea of a new club, the founders hadn’t sought support for their actions. However, not everyone was as quick to see things their way, as they found at the WISA AGM on the Thursday night, two days after the announcement of the commission’s decision.

The timing of the meeting was fortuitous. Having heard the news and the possibility of a new club being formed, the attendance rocketed. Instead of the usual 50 or 60 committed members, 1,000 fans crowded in to the community centre in the middle of Wimbledon with an overspill

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outside, listening to the proceedings on loudspeakers perched precariously on window sills.

Everyone was impatient to debate whether to form a new club. The formal agenda items were dispatched with almost indecent haste and the meeting turned to three resolutions. Resolutions to boycott 'franchise' (as they were already being called) games at Selhurst Park and to continue to fight the plans for Milton Keynes were quickly passed and the meeting moved on to debate forming a new club. The AGM minutes reported a lengthy and impassioned debate on the merits of these strategies.

The debate swung backwards and forwards. Some fans wanted to continue protesting and thought a new club would be a diversion. Could we seek a judicial review of the decision? Should we take the protest campaign to Milton Keynes and put pressure on local politicians?

A few fans wanted to wait for a year before deciding to form a new club, hoping that an acceptable solution could be negotiated within that time frame. Those in favour of forming a new club argued that we had very little time and we should get on with it. And if we didn't form a club we'd have no team to watch in the following season. We needed to do something positive rather than protesting.

Listening to the debate, I wasn't sure which way the decision would go. And then two things happened. First, Trevor Williams, who isn't one for pushing himself forward, was pressed to repeat what he'd been muttering throughout the meeting. So, for what was possibly the first, and almost definitely the last, time in his life Trev spoke at a public meeting. His message was simple, 'If everyone here tonight turns up and watches us, we'll be one of the biggest non-league clubs around.' The tide started to turn.

Then came a watershed moment in the development of AFC Wimbledon. Kris Stewart recognised that the meeting had reached a crucial point. As chair of WISA he was required to be neutral so he temporarily handed over to vice-chair Nicole Hammond and took up the microphone.

He spoke with a passion and energy that would have been the envy of many an evangelical preacher, 'I've had enough of protesting, of trying to talk sense to owners who will never listen. I just want to watch some football.'

There was the briefest of pauses and then a roar of approval. The debate was settled, just like that. There was enough time to add a fourth resolution, that WISA should fight specifically for the name, badge,

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history and colours of WFC. The minutes record that both resolutions were ‘resoundingly carried’, including overwhelming support for creating a new club. That was just as well since that was all Kris, Ivor, Trev and Marc had been doing from the moment Ivor had taken that late-evening call, 72 hours earlier.

The meeting ended with Ivor asking for a show of hands from people who would be willing to pay £200 for a season ticket for the new club. He explained that to secure a ground-share agreement for next season, we needed to be able to commit £20,000 within two weeks. In his full-on salesman mode, Ivor urged supporters to please send cheques for £200 as soon as possible.

Trevor Williams continues the story, ‘When Ivor made the season ticket request I went from “all this is exciting and a good idea” to “it scares the shit out of me”. I suddenly felt a massive responsibility that this now had to work. The standard of football didn’t worry me, or the fact that we might lose every game, but people had emotionally invested in the football club and suddenly I felt that we mustn’t screw this up.’

The already frenetic pace increased, as Trev explains, ‘I had a key to Ivor’s place. I got there at silly o’clock on the Friday morning, only a few hours after the WISA meeting had ended. There was a queue of people already there, “Papers”⁵ being at the front. That is when I first went “bloody hell”. It was 7am and if you were at the meeting you’d only have found out about it at 10pm the previous day.’

It was becoming obvious that we had something very substantial on our hands. It was also becoming clear, although perhaps not to him yet, that Trevor was acting as club secretary, a role that was to be thrust upon him soon afterwards.

My life changed as a direct result of that evening. The WISA meeting transformed my commitment from behind-the-goal supporter and chat-site commentator to full-time finance man plus anything else I thought I could do to help.

Originally my involvement had been limited to posts on the WISA chat site, critically analysing WFC’s financial pronouncements. That led

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5 ‘Papers’, so called because he is never seen without a sheaf of papers under his arm, is a well-known and much-liked fan of the club. He scarcely misses a game, first team, ladies, youth matches, and was well known for counting the crowd at our games and announcing, via one of the chat sites, what he declared the actual attendance to be.

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to me meeting Kris and Ivor. The WFC chairman, Charles Koppel, had threatened to put the club into administration if the move was rejected, so I had volunteered to write a business plan for taking the club out of administration. That idea was redundant; now we needed a business plan for a new club.

Despite my normal reluctance to be pushy this was something I was desperate to do, so I told Kris and Ivor that they needed a proper business plan and a finance director – and it should be me. I was astonished when, without pause for breath, they agreed. As Ivor said later, ‘We knew we needed someone with your sort of background and credibility and we weren’t going to hang around to see if we could get permission to appoint you.’

I went away to find anyone who could help me think through what you need to run a football club while the four founders continued making sure everything was in place for us to start the 2002/03 season in the Ryman League Division Two. AFC Wimbledon was on its way.