

A photograph of three football players in blue training kits huddled together on a grass field. They are looking intently at a football held by one of the players. The background shows a cloudy sky and a large blue flag or banner on the right side of the frame.

NEIL HARMAN

CLOSE QUARTERS

An Extraordinary Season
on the Brink

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The Madness Awaits

THE morning of Thursday, 25 July 2019 had broken and found the United Kingdom in a similarly shattered state. For three years the old country had been up to its nostrils in divisive angst and days like this compounded both misery and the loss of a common sense of direction.

A deep blue British sky was usually to be cherished but the heat was becoming too oppressive. The mercury this day would near 100°F, causing overhead railway cables to crackle, lines buckle, points fail and thus services were cancelled, concourses choked, thoroughfares clogged and buses rammed.

Queues formed everywhere. One of the longest was outside a London lido where even if you were patient enough to make it through the throng, stripped off and entered the cooling waters, there was only enough elbow room to bob up and down as if you were impersonating a buoy.

Rather than acknowledge that this shared keeping of heads above water was necessary to contend with the Brexit mayhem ahead, Boris Johnson was characteristically late to the Downing Street podium and welcomed his first full day as Prime Minister as the herald of ambrosia for all the UK's citizens.

This cuffing of reality was to become a common theme in the months ahead, on the football field almost more than in the

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corrosive chamber of politics. Particularly on one football field in Buckinghamshire.

The day's bananas football news was topped by manic scenes from north London where a couple of knife-wielding car thieves attempted to steal the £90,000 Mercedes SUV of Arsenal's Mesut Ozil (with him still in it) before his team-mate Sead Kolasinac leapt from the passenger seat and took them on with his fists as a quivering Ozil sought sanctuary in a nearby Turkish restaurant.

Nothing quite that exciting was happening in High Wycombe, although there was a bit of a buzz developing. An animated group of young men in light and dark blue football kit filed into a room of balsa walls and splintered window frames where the shade was provided by brown-striped curtains that once hung in a household 20 miles away.

Gareth Ainsworth, the manager of League One Wycombe Wanderers, grew weary of complaints that his players couldn't be expected to work on deployment of forces if they couldn't see what was being explained to them. Any early afternoon sunlight fell directly onto the flat screen at the end of the room, rendering it impossible to define shapes and forms.

Ainsworth's request for spend on curtains was met with the Old Mother Hubbard shoulder shrug that had become the cash-starved Wycombe board's go-to response to housekeeping requests. They said 'No' and insisted this was prudent control of the club's listing state.

The manager drove home, took a pair of cutters to the drapes in his living room and fashioned them into a size that would fit the training ground windows. Now his team would see. He ordered new ones for the house.

On this midsummer murder of a day there was not a spare seat in the refreshingly dark common room that marked quite a transformation at the football club.

A month earlier, Wycombe's supporters had been reduced to squinting at the resources Ainsworth could summon to begin

preparations for a second consecutive season in the third tier of English professional football. The count was a meagre seven outfield players and two goalkeepers, and the prevailing mood was one of hopelessness.

The debate that wake-up call of a morning was on the essentials: a lick of paint for the posts and crossbars – ‘to make it look to the lads as if we’ve got some new goals’ – additional clips to secure the nets properly to the goal frames and tidying up the unsightly waste at the back of a tin-plated building that had seen better days.

‘Come on boys,’ Ainsworth implored his five-man staff, assistant manager Richard Dobson, goalkeeping coach Andy Fairman, head of sports science Dave Wates, head of medicine Cian O’Doherty and analyst Josh Hart. ‘The chairman’s on his way and we need to get these signed off.’ I naively wondered if the discussion with Trevor Stroud might incorporate player recruitment. I had plenty to learn about Wycombe Wanderers.

Ainsworth swept his hair behind his ears and scoured the gym floor to see what resources he’d be working with on this first day of pre-season when summer’s cobwebs clung to more than just the masonry. The manager wanted to appear his usual energised self – he rarely entered any room without a whoop of enthused delight – but his stomach felt as empty as the landscape one floor down.

A knot of players were being nursed back to health in O’Doherty’s department while others were disconnected – centre-half Anthony Stewart had just become engaged and his partner was six months pregnant, and Joe Jacobson, the full-back, had just returned from his honeymoon. Adebayo Akinfenwa – the face and physique of the team – had been given leave for extra time in Los Angeles where his million followers on Instagram were fed regular updates of hedonism on Sunset Boulevard.

Akinfenwa was pictured with a ridiculously muscled arm across the contrastingly puny shoulders of Jordan Henderson for an image that received a slew of irrepressible comment. ‘Bayo’

had long been a committed Liverpool fan. Steven Gerrard wrote a glowing foreword to Akinfenwa's autobiography *The Beast* and to stumble across a second Reds' Champions League-winning captain in the flesh was, well, a beautiful thing.

One doubted – given the backdrop of Hollywood Hills – that a conversation between the two men broadened to the state of Wycombe's playing budget for the new season. Had Henderson learned it was a measly £1.15m (his gross wages for a couple of months if the national press were to be believed) he may have been temporarily shaken from his post-Madrid transcendental state.

Two divisions separated Liverpool and Wycombe in pure on-paper terms, but the truth was that unless something nuclear happened to their respective finances the clubs were heading inexorably in opposite directions.

On the back of bounteous American investment and with its worldwide fandom bursting at the seams, Liverpool were able to plunge millions into an aspiration for Premier League supremacy that would be celebrated even more wildly than their 2019 European Cup glory.

Wycombe, largely unheralded beyond junction four of the M40, had long been straining every fiscal sinew for simple, sustainable self-sufficiency. These were now stretched to snapping point. By any conceivable marker the two clubs would be a long way further apart come the following May.

Everywhere you looked, discrepancies were as wide as a sea. A Premier League manager didn't often soil his own hands with the upkeep of the training ground. I may have been wrong but couldn't picture Jurgen Klopp heaving mighty hoses across his shoulders to water its bare spots, shovelling sand where rabbits had left their calling cards, distributing and stacking mannequins, dragging full-sized goals around by the rigging and arguing the finer points of worm infestation.

Ainsworth was as much groundsman as he was manager. Back and forth he ploughed barelegged into knee-high nettles

that bordered the training ground to recover ball after ball that missed its target – his players were terribly rusty – and never moaned that this drudgery was beneath him. ‘I wouldn’t ask anyone to do anything I wouldn’t do myself.’

All Ainsworth really wanted was decent player numbers to build a team that could win enough matches to keep Wycombe in League One, not an extravagant dream for a professional football manager but one that was squashed when he was handed his wiggle room for the 2019/20 season.

Then, a few days into rehearsals and with the real thing a month away, there appeared an angel from New Orleans that landed on the manager’s shoulder and whispered ‘do not fear’ or something to that effect. This bringer of news of great joy went by the name of Rob Couhig.

A septuagenarian lawyer with zero experience of English football was promising to sprinkle the magic dust of real, spendable dollars. If he came through, Wycombe might have a shot at survival and at the very least be sportingly competitive. This unexpected gesture from the USA’s deep south had encouraged a perceptible bounce in the step of the players, old and new, as they converged for a mandated gathering.

Ainsworth had been able to invest a fraction of Couhig’s benevolence as a benefit-in-kind so there were now 23 faces in the group, more than double the count-on-the-fingers-of-one-hand opening day of pre-season.

This was nirvana around these parts. Not only was there a healthy quota of players but the entire football staff were summoned with Kelly Francis, the secretary without whom nothing at the club functioned. These were the trusted few in front of whom the manager could say anything and know it would be kept within the four non-soundproofed walls.

* * *

A reverential hush descended on the group. The pool table cleared. Ainsworth said a few words of introduction and

stood aside. The speaker today was not the manager but his irreplaceable second-in-command of seven years Richard 'Dobbo' Dobson. The kernel of his talk was what it meant to be a Wycombe Wanderer.

Dobson bore the appearance of a substitute teacher, the one the bad boys at the back of the class delighted in poking fun at. The 43-year-old had a slender frame, close-shaved red hair, wore a freshly minted, grey Wycombe training kit and had flip-flops for footwear (well it was beach weather).

For those who had heard him speak many times on his specialised subject and others listening for the first time, it was worth hanging onto every syllable. There was a gravitas to each word. They all counted.

'The gaffer and I spoke about this when we started our journey in 2012. We wanted it to be that every player who joined us stayed with us or came through us, when they moved on would say that the best time in his career was when he was at Wycombe. That we had the best dressing room with the best bunch of people. It started with the characters we have brought into the building.'

He flipped the chart on an easel in a corner of the room. It highlighted the words 'technical', 'tactical', 'social' and 'physical' all directed to a central reference point: 'psychological'. 'What does psychologically strong mean? Resilience has seven factors so you have to dig deeper than that. Every successful team builds on a psychology.

'The best team may not have been the best technical team, the tactical side was our [the coaches'] job, though you could sometimes get away with not being tactically the best. You didn't always have to have the quickest or strongest players but this [pointing to psychological] was what we had in abundance.

'If you got into this building, you'd done well, because all the time you'd been out there on the training pitch, let me tell you new recruits, you had been stalked like you wouldn't believe, on social media, your phone calls, the background checks and so

on. You could have had the best trial in the world but, believe me, if you were the wrong type, you wouldn't be in here today.

'How would we know if someone had a good or a bad culture? Txiki Begiristain [Manchester City's director of football] once said that talent would get you into the dressing room but how you behaved within the culture would determine how long you stayed there.

'It wasn't a surprise that people stayed here for long periods of time. Within the space of a couple of years at many clubs, 90 per cent of the squad had turned over but a lot of lads stayed five years, or 15 in Matt Bloomfield's case. Many left and wished they hadn't. A lot came back. This was more than football.'

Dobson would leave favoured quotes and sayings scrawled on boards around the training ground. He was especially fond of the sage words of Frank Dick, the former head coach for UK Athletics, who said 'A coach at some point will have rough diamonds in his team. If being a rough diamond hurts a player it's his choice, if they hurt you it's your choice, if they hurt the team, it's no choice.'

'If it hurts a player, it is his choice, think of that. The standards we set here, if somebody doesn't hit them he is killing himself because he stands out. At some clubs the first player in the gym in the morning will be the only one there and looked on as abnormal. Here if you're not in the gym first thing in the morning and stretching you stand out a mile. What is culture then boys?' The responses came slowly at first, then everyone chipped in – 'beliefs', 'standards', 'way of life', 'routine'.

'Everything you say, everything you do when you come into this club has to align and contribute to the culture – every word and every action. If a single person slips by walking into our dressing room before a match with a frappuccino then the whole lot slips. That's where the rest of you say to anyone who falls below what we expect "Hey, this doesn't happen here."

'It doesn't have to be a bollocking but just a simple "these are the standards we set and we don't fall below them as a group".'

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The social and psychological side are the things that make us because we do them particularly well.'

The perfectly shaded video screen flickered into life to show the New Zealand rugby union team with captain Richie McCaw at its head shaped like the reds at the break of a frame of snooker performing the Haka, the Maori exhortation with its call to work in harmony as one. 'All together!'

Dobson was not advocating that Adam El-Abd – Wycombe's central defender who possessed the build of an openside flanker – lead a display of tongue-poking, eye-popping and thigh-slapping against the forces of Bolton Wanderers on the opening day of the season, much though it would have made a few hairs stand on end.

'What are you seeing boys?' to which responses came from them thick and fast: 'Intensity, passion, union, preparation, pride, fearlessness, respect, commitment to heritage.'

'Those are absolutely right. But culture is not something that you turn on and off like a tap. You can't excel at the training ground then go home and behave like a bloody idiot. This culture has to be within you, always, in terms of excellence. Look at the All Blacks' togetherness. Would the Haka have the same effect if there were three guys doing it in one corner, four in another, five in another?

'The first thing that hit me is that the psychological gains are already mounting against your opponent. When we leave the dressing room, if we do it in dribs and drabs and are still putting our shin pads on in the hallway, what message does that send, as opposed to we all stand there, we wait, and when the captain say it's time, we all walk out together.

'We're saying that we're organised and we're ready. We will leave the dressing room this season when the last person is there. Look at the words you've used watching that clip, they scream "culture" and this is what we're all about. Next I want you to study the intensity of this performance. Everyone knows Pavarotti.'

Scott Kashket broke the contemplative mood by asking, presumably tongue-in-cheek, what team he played for. The ribbing rose and fell quickly. ‘Pavarotti has sung this song thousands of times but see the intensity in his face at the end when he knows he’s nailed it. This has to be our intensity.’

The final exhilarating chord of Puccini’s ‘Nessun Dorma’ – the BBC’s 1990 World Cup anthem – stirred the room. The light in Luciano Pavarotti’s eyes at the precision of the last note was that of someone who knew he had given it all that he had in his soul and voicebox. The song was replayed with its volume reduced as Dobson impactfully voiced over.

‘This is what will get you to the top. We have to strive for excellence. If you strive for perfection you can’t get there. Nobody is perfect. We’re going to lose matches. We’ll take them on the chin and keep striving for what we’re focussing on.’

‘Now we should talk about first impressions. Whenever anyone walks in, these are vital. I was at the Chelsea training ground a couple of years ago with Steve Holland when he was first-team coach [now the assistant to Gareth Southgate with the England national team]. John Terry was helping himself to lunch. He put down his tray, walked over and introduced himself. I knew who he was. But his actions said a lot about the place for me and you do that a lot now.’

‘Phones. Phones. I’ve seen more phones at the training ground already this week than in an EE store. Boys, this is work. We understand life and the world is changing. You take a photograph of yourself on a Saturday night when you’re out and you send it to your mates. We get that.’

‘When we’re working, when we’re stretching, let’s not have phones with us. If the American investors walk through the door and people are on their phones, imagine the impression that sets. I’m not going to police you. I leave that down to you now. That’s trust.’

‘Dress code boys. I thought we were better last season, not walking into service stations wearing flip-flops. For home

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matches, it's a suit and tie and away we wear club colours. Headphones. I remember watching Arsenal on TV one match last season and every one of the players walked into an away ground with headphones on. It looked terrible. Let's be smart in every way.'

* * *

The final preparatory match of the season set Wycombe against Maidenhead United of the National League eight days before they plunged into ten months of full-on competition. This was the third year in succession the clubs had met in a friendly and Matt Cecil, Wycombe's head of media and a living, breathing encyclopaedia, said it had been a perennially testy occasion.

As a new season neared, so nerve-ends were exposed and tempers easily frayed. At the height of expectancy for the 2018/19 season, Wycombe supporters en route to York Road learned that Luke O'Nien, a highly favoured midfield player for the best part of three years, had been sold to Sunderland for a reported £135,000, which helped pay a bill or ten.

On this appropriately unsettled evening, the reigning supporters' player of the season Jason McCarthy failed to appear on the team sheet. Familiar emotions had been aroused. He was whispered to be heading to Championship club Millwall.

Three previous friendlies had been against buff non-league opposition – firstly Barnet, managed by Darren Currie, who had been Wycombe's £200,000 joint-record signing from the Hertfordshire club in 2001 and who went on to score 14 goals in 126 appearances. How many professional clubs had made its most expensive signing almost two decades ago?

From Barnet, there were contests against Woking – where in the Wycombe team trialists outnumbered official players – and Wealdstone. Half-an-hour before the kick-off at Woking, Adebayo Akinfenwa was having his massive thighs massaged on a leather-trimmed table by the side of the pitch, which looked

like something out of a 1950s biblical classic but without the Hedy Lamarr love interest.

When Brentford of the Championship arrived for the one rehearsal at Adams Park, it felt as if something tangible was happening around the ground. Talk of potential American interest in the club was fizzing through the lounges and kiosks and some of Wycombe's football matched the mood of bridled optimism.

They led 2-0 after a first half of imposing intent encapsulated by Northern Irishman Paul Smyth, signed on a year's loan from Queens Park Rangers and truly something out of the blue – an old-fashioned pocket dynamo who ran straight at his defender and lifted bums from seats. We cried out for these players at whatever level we watched the game.

Michael Kenny, the matchday announcer, declared (not over the public address system) that he'd be leaving his girlfriend for Smyth if he kept this up. The second half was far less dramatic. Brentford hauled two goals back, Smyth was substituted and a delicate conversation avoided in the Kenny household.

After the match a knot of Wycombe players mingled in a hospitality lounge with the 500 Club members who had dipped into their pockets to provide the funds necessary so Ainsworth could at least contemplate a summer offer or two.

Alex Pattison, a young midfielder from an exciting but since fractured generation at Middlesbrough, had been the first confirmed new face, due in no small measure to the £20 notes the 500 Clubbers transferred to the club's account to keep things ticking over.

Patto seemed particularly reserved and nervous. I put it down to his age – 21 – and being among strangers and only truly appreciated his reticence when I learned that his mother, Alison, had passed away a few weeks earlier from a recurring brain tumour.

Alex had spent an unfulfilled time on loan to Yeovil from Middlesbrough, returned to his parent club to sign a few

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statutory forms and walked into his family's home on Teesside to find his mum lying on the floor. He tried to resuscitate her, called an ambulance but knew in his heart of hearts that she had gone.

He was still traumatised, had made up his mind to quit football and try his hand at something else when he took a call from Ainsworth and was given a chance he hadn't expected. 'I talked it over with my nana and dad and they said I should give it a go. It was a League One side after all.' It was a season when he would have to come to terms with such a deep loss and learn how to truly express himself again.

The manager unexpectedly appeared in the suite and marched up to the stage. 'You guys have put your hands in your pockets and said you weren't going to let our club fade away after what happened last year. That enabled me to sign players and determine targets. Alex Pattison is your man, we were confident we could get Dominic Gape to sign for another year and you saw how Paul Smyth tore it up in the first half [loud cheers].

'Since then we've had the introduction of Rob Couhig, Pete, his nephew, and consultant Mark Palmer who we hope are coming in to help out. The feeling around the club is spectacular, so positive, and there's an ambition to build it in the right way. Please don't get carried away and think everything is going to be superb and there's plenty of money so we'll get promoted. That is unreal.

'What is realistic is improving on last year and see if we can do that the year after and the year after that. If we can build in this league, the next target is something special. To think about it is spine-tingling. But for now, let's finish above 17th in League One this season.'

* * *

Six weeks before he uttered those words, Gareth Ainsworth had never heard the name Couhig. In far-off Louisiana, Rob was secret squirrelling into as many elements of Ainsworth

– manager and more importantly man – as he could lay his hands on.

Like any conscientious trial lawyer, Rob pored over the evidence required to construct his case. It was precisely the forensic attention to detail Ainsworth and Richard Dobson used when they were attracted to a player.

A responsible investor dipping his toe into the perilous mire of English football needed to do his due diligence and Rob was sharpening focus on the club in his sights, especially the man who had kept the team's head above the foam. The deeper Couhig dug the more he believed Wycombe Wanderers were the club for him – but only so long as they kept the present occupant in the managerial chair.

This was not a given in their current plight. Having assured Wycombe's survival with 53 points on the last weekend of the previous season – though it would have needed an absurd correlation of results that day to send them down – Ainsworth discovered he would have to make an even better job of patchwork quilting the team next time around.

From the bonus he earned for keeping Wycombe up, he was personally subsidising the pay rise the Supporters' Trust that had run the club for seven years had refused for Dobson. Then he discovered the club hadn't kept up the payments on his health insurance so he had to make good on that shortfall as well.

Wycombe paid the lowest wages in League One and much of League Two. £1,200 a week was the very height of extravagance. One or two took home £1,500+ but they were a significant exception. They had fewer player numbers than any club in direct competition and the hours Ainsworth spent on his knees in his local catholic church could become very useful when negotiating with any player who considered relocating to Adams Park.

He was about to celebrate seven years in his job – only Jim Bentley of League Two Morecambe had currently served one club longer across the four professional leagues – but lack of

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sustainable hope meant both an acute sense of demoralisation and an ever-increasing susceptibility to itchy feet.

Ainsworth had spent ten days of the summer working flat out to acquire a League Managers' Association diploma, a course on which the pupils were schooled in mental toughness and resilience, transformational leadership, health and well-being and football finance. He could have role-reversed on the last subject. Ainsworth knew so much about shopping on a tight budget he'd have been the perfect face of Poundstretcher.

Wycombe were in dire fiscal straits, more than their most ardent supporters realised. The status as a fans' trust had long been fought for, fiercely protected and admirably principled based on a simple motive to do what they believed best-protected the club. Fans would never let the side down, well not deliberately.

The downside was that in the wacky world of football finance even those supporters with genuine business acumen were wrestling with a sport where the normal rules didn't exist. Being fans once they got into positions of influence, they tended either to become institutional tightwads or no expense spared dream chasers.

Now the Wycombe trust was at its wit's end. The money had run out. The balance sheet simply refused to balance. The manager needed to know what the future held and when he asked the trust leaders what happened next they stared at their feet.

The board of directors of Wycombe Wanderers FC consisted of Trevor Stroud, the chairman, his deputy David Cook and former chairman, now president, Ivor Beeks MBE, JP, who had seen most things come and go (largely go) at the club for half a century; the trust board numbered 11 and all had a say in how Wycombe was run. That was a lot of snouts in a rapidly emptying trough.

* * *

Rob Couhig was not the first American with a glint in his eye to show his hand at Adams Park. From the midpoint of the 2018/19 season, Seaport Capital, a New York City-based private equity company owned by Jim Collis and Bill Luby, was in constructive dialogue with the Trust and its proposal to take control of the club appeared watertight.

Luby had been a member of the consortium that purchased Derby County in January 2008 with the club on the way to relegation from the Premier League. Manager Paul Jewell was given funds in that transfer window and the following summer as 16 players joined and 12 departed, but the team struggled to gel.

Jewell left midway through the following season and was replaced by Nigel Clough, son of Brian, who was such a heroic figure at the club in the 1970s. Derby was said to have played 'austerity football' under Clough Jnr but their finances stabilised. Once that happened Luby's group looked to extricate themselves with a bit in it for them.

Pumped by Wycombe fans eager for intelligence on how it had fared under the alliance, one County contributor wrote that if Collis and Luby became involved 'they'll be all business, hard but professional, probably try to get you up a league and then if a good offer comes will sell. They shrewdly rescued a sinking ship here and stopped a crisis on the field become a crisis off it.'

Collis and Luby had presented to the Wycombe board and the sums added up to the extent the trust were very tempted. Conversations went back and forth for the best part of nine months. Then a former Wanderers player, Andrew Harman, emerged with an offer that skewed hope of a smooth transition.

The Buckinghamshire businessman called a meeting at the Holiday Inn in January 2019, where he proposed an investment of £2m and the construction of an academy bearing his name. There was much debate about whether Harman was on a vanity project and his proposal was rejected ten to one by the trust board. He upped his offer by £500,000 but the margin of opposition remained the same and he stepped away.

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That would not have been so bad had Collis and Luby not decided to move on too. They cited investor fatigue brought on by waiting so long for their offer to be accepted and the extent to which the gloss had gone off the entire project for them.

They had a full diary of business interests back in the States that demanded the personal touch and didn't much relish being arm's length owners, saying that was neither fair on them nor the club. They departed leaving a tab for £500,000 they had loaned Wycombe so it could stay afloat while discussions were ongoing. That was another debt that would need settling.

Wycombe were back to square one in the game of chance on a board that contained plenty of snakes and no ladders. Trevor Stroud, chairman of both football club and trust boards, told Ainsworth that in the circumstances drastic cuts were required. The manager was desolate.

He knew players currently on the books would delay signing contract extensions and how could he bargain for new blood when he could offer a mere trifle compared to those clubs who dangled £5,000-a-week cherries on top of sponge-cake salaries?

The minute agents asked what he had in mind for wages, Ainsworth could just imagine the cackling laughter and clicks on the line.

* * *

Through Mark Palmer's network of contacts, the Couhigs had initially been ready to invest in Yeovil, the Somerset club that climbed to the Championship in 2013 then slid down the leagues like a toboggan whose brakes had failed.

A forensic assessment concluded – with sound evidential logic – that Yeovil had long fought a losing battle with their balance sheet. The family thought they had a deal agreed but the Yeovil board suddenly, ungraciously, rejected them. Rob Couhig never did find out why.

'I was very disappointed the way we were treated there. People said we backed out because they got relegated but nothing could

have been further from the truth. We put up our money, we had the feeling we were getting ready to take over, it got to the day where Yeovil had to put up or shut up and the people there said, “We don’t want to do it.” That was their right and things tended to work out for a purpose.’

Rob was in New Orleans with his wife Missy when the Yeovil deal fell through and over dinner that night they discussed dropping the thought of getting involved in English football. But Rob couldn’t quite let go. A week later his phone rang and Palmer was back on to offer a new opportunity. Rob was already working on one of his own.

‘It was difficult for me to get rid of the itch so I rang the guy at Bury. That was an interesting conversation.’ Steve Dale was the owner of the Lancashire club who purchased it for £1 from previous owner Stewart Day in December 2018. The air had since been thick with the scent of dodgy dealings, subterfuge, investigations, inquiries, political interventions and fan revolution.

‘He [Dale] and I talked for a bit and then I put my nephew Pete on the phone because he did our due diligence work. Pete immediately said to me that the guy was a screwball. I had asked Dale, “How much do you want?” and he couldn’t give me an answer. He said he wanted to clean up the debt and do this and that and I said, “Assuming you do that, how much do you need?” He couldn’t tell me.’ The line went dead and the club soon followed.

Then came the call from Palmer asking Rob to take a look at Grimsby Town of League Two. ‘I went there and I say this delicately but it was not a place I thought my wife and I would want to come to one week every month. It was freezing in late May. Driving away from there I was debating whether to go to Bury and try that again when the phone rang and I was asked if I wanted to meet the Wycombe people. I looked at my map, it was near Heathrow airport and so I thought, “Why wouldn’t I?”

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'I met Trevor [Stroud] and thought he was a guy who cared desperately for his club and was looking for a solution to a big problem. He was playing his cards pretty close to his chest as to how big the problem was so I said I'd be interested and please let me know. A week later he called and said, "We've selected you," which was quite amusing. I said I'd do it and what did he need? He said, "Half a million pounds."

'That's when I knew I'd lost my mind because I'm not an overly rich person but I sent him the money and went home and told my wife.'

* * *

There were plenty of hurdles ahead but within 12 hours of the start of his negotiations with Wycombe, Rob Couhig was on board a plane from Louisiana to London and arrived without ostentation at the training ground with Missy to meet the scratchings of the first-team squad.

At first sight, he reminded me of a corner-store owner right out of *The Waltons* rather than a highly respected trial lawyer who had twice run unsuccessfully for mayor of New Orleans. There was both a charm in his manner and a lack of trapping that I suspected would suit the environment into which he wanted to move.

Wycombe's trust members converged on a suite (more a depressingly cold area with a bar on one side) at Adams Park on Thursday, 11 July to meet Rob, Pete and Palmer to get a sense of them as people and the depth of their intent if not yet their pockets. Gareth Ainsworth chose to stay away, fearing he'd be expected to cheerlead for the potential owners. He shouldn't have to make up people's minds for them.

Trevor Stroud spoke of credible offers of investment, emphasising that Wycombe had not been flaunting itself. All discussions emanated from those showing an interest, not by the club going around with a begging bowl, though they probably had one handy.

Collis and Luby had come and gone, many doubted Harman was a credible alternative, there were soundings here and there that hadn't amounted to anything realistic and fresh funding was absolutely imperative.

Stroud – initially a fan of Tottenham Hotspur – had been a Wycombe apostle for 30 years, emerged from putting his hand up for trust membership to the elected leader of the pack, had kept former chairman Andrew Howard's five-year plan for sustainable EFL survival on track and was amazed he still oversaw a League One club.

Months of trying to balance hope and reality was taking a toll. 'It has been very stressful and expensive because I haven't been able to do my day job. I'm down to one client. I keep waiting for the phone to ring from him. But once I get into something I'm dogged, whatever it is. If it's finding the cheapest litre of fuel, I won't be beaten. Somehow, through it all here, I managed to remain married and vaguely sane.'

The chairman had done nothing more upsetting in his term of office than telling Ainsworth his budget had to be savaged. He craved happier times new investment should bring. 'If they [the legacy members] don't take it [the offer], I'll say, "You can have your keys back, I've done all I can."'

He was looking out at a sea of friends who might not all accept what he was about to say. The trust remained trusted though, and in Stroud's mind this was a case of Wycombe surviving or going under, which is what would have happened had it lost to Torquay United on the final day of the 2013/14 season and been relegated to the National League.

A decent proportion of those in the room were among the Wycombe 929 at Plainmoor that day to witness the most daring of their remarkable acts of escapology. This wasn't a placard-waving, unseemly crowd given its average age, but there was a noticeable tension in the room. The defining moment in Stroud's chairmanship had arrived. He took a swig from an enormous water bottle.

He said the deal agreed – in principle – was for Rob Couhig to acquire a 75 per cent shareholding, requiring the same percentage of legacy members to vote in favour given the constitution that tied the club to such restrictive numbers. Until that vote was taken – most signs pointed to the spring of 2020 – Wycombe Wanderers would remain 100 per cent owned by the trust.

That said, Couhig had agreed to fund the club in the interim to an agreed sum (not revealed) that Stroud said, ‘allowed us to re-instate the playing budget of 2018/19, which I’d reduced by 30 per cent, a decision that had broken my heart and Gareth’s.’

Stroud affirmed that all Wycombe’s outstanding club and trust debt – he stopped short of specifics – would be cleansed on the successful completion of a deal. On the basis that the required 75 per cent of legacy members nodded him through, Wycombe would become Couhig’s to own, with the trust taking on a quarter shareholding. Its voice would be heard but more faintly than before.

Rob Couhig was introduced. The greeting was diffident, though appreciative. His dialect seemed more Brooklyn barstool than Louisiana bar and he was a polished public speaker. But this was a very different jury to the ones he was used to trying – and more often than not succeeding – to persuade.

How would an advocate from howdy-doody land go down with an audience better suited to a Conservative Party hustings? These were dyed-in-the-wool season-ticket main stand dwellers, not the drumbeat of the terraces.

‘Why am I here? Why I am interested in this team? I’ve been fortunate in my life to be able to do certain things, to take risks, some of which have turned out fine, others not so much, but we move on and we learn. About three years ago, having had great success with baseball we [his family] began to look at what else we could do that would be a challenge at this stage in our lives.

I fixated on English football. I began to look for the right opportunity and was fortunate to meet Mark Palmer who

consults with over a dozen clubs, and we wanted to embrace the Wycombe way, to make it better and deliver the product we want for everyone. It is tough to find the right team because I insisted upon something a lot of people in football don't appear to be interested in – building an economic model that made sense.

'I am not so rich, nor does it make good sense, to pour money into a team so I can have five years parading myself around, saying "look at me". In everything I've done my interest has been to build a culture and institution for success. This place has that. I went through a few clubs, some of which I liked, some of which I didn't like. We got pretty close in Yeovil. Then a few weeks ago Mark called and said, "Why don't we go and see Wycombe?"

'The goal is to have an engagement, just as before a marriage. When I first talked to Trevor, I said, "I don't know you and you don't know me," but I believe if we do things right, people will want us to be part of a marriage going forward. Candidly, I don't want to be any part of someone who doesn't want me. Trevor drove a hard bargain. I said, "Well I'm in for some money so what level of interest rate will I get?" He looked at me as if I was mad.

'We finally came up with this deal. My nephew Pete, a tremendous analytics guy, will spend as much time here as the immigration people will allow, even though he has kids in school back in New Orleans.

'You should all be aware of my philosophy. I'm not interested in mediocrity, either on the pitch or off it. What I want is that when fans come to a game, they have a good time. I can't guarantee success on the field but shame on me if the place isn't clean, the ladies go the ladies' room and aren't embarrassed by its state. If you can't get a good cold beer, a [hot] dog, and a decent pie, that's our responsibility because we know how to deliver that.

'Obviously, having a good football team is vital. We are among the most fortunate clubs because we have the right

manager at the right time, he is assembling the right players and I know he can take us to where we need to be.

I've known lots of people in his position in various sports and I couldn't name on the fingers of one hand people with as much maturity, integrity and devotion to getting the job done as we have here with Gareth.

'Y'all can contact me any time. I'm not saying I'll be able to reply at that moment but I'll respond within 24 hours, because that's the way I like to operate. It's your club and mine. We will fulfil our goals together and the premier goal is to be a financially sound institution that will last forever and that we'll put a great team on the field.'

Pete Couhig, Rob's high-spirited nephew, was to be the go-between, linking the operational and football sides of the club on a day-to-day basis, once he had sorted out his family affairs back home. 'Our job is to create as much money as we can for Gareth to bring young quality players to the club so it can grow naturally while we try to get the ship straightened financially.'

Pete's curriculum vitae suggested he was impressively sound at raising capital. 'Three years in business with a company I co-founded called RES US (Resource Environmental Solutions, pioneers in ecological restoration across the United States), it was the 399th fastest growing company in the whole of North America.

'We went from zero to boom and over ten years had a great time, the family was an active investor and now we have the opportunity to take all that experience and apply it to this business and see where we can go.

'Typically you find the lawyer is the detail person and the business guy is the entrepreneur with the crazy ideas. It is exactly the opposite with Rob and I. The respect I have for his craziness is through the roof. In years of investing and starting businesses, I've become very practical about what works and we'll be applying that here to increase revenues and become very

efficient at spending. You'll get sick of me saying "cost benefit analysis".

'We need to be efficient in all we do so we can create the capital for Gareth to spend on the squad, that we can spend on stadium improvements, and on everything that everyone in this room knows what it takes to become a successful club. Let me tell you guys something about Rob, he's like a dog with a bone. When he wants something he gets it.'

His uncle asked for the microphone back. 'I think you now realise that we are confident in our own minds that we are capable of doing what you're going to want us to do. You don't have to worry about that. Everyone who comes into a business has a tendency to say, "We can do what these guys have been doing better and let's get them out of the way." In this case, that's not so.'

'Yes, this club has been held together with string and twine, they lost £400,000 two years ago and £700,000 last year. That said, the staff have done a wonderful job and just because we know what we're doing doesn't mean they didn't know what they were doing.'

One wondered if this could all be true or was Rob Couhig simply saying nice things to keep the die-hards onside? The club had, indeed, been haemorrhaging money for months, and without the injection of funds already wired from his account to the football club without a second's hesitation Wycombe would have foundered.

As it was, the family regarded the club's financial situation as insane, bordering on irreparable. Indeed, someone whispered to me that night that if the Couhigs had not come along when they did and already invested a few dollars in the enterprise, Wycombe Wanderers was truly up a Louisiana shit creek without a paddle.

* * *

Ten days after Rob Couhig's inaugural address and on the back of an initial trickle of investment, Wycombe's squad began to flower. Paul Smyth, a sprightly forward from Belfast with two Northern Ireland caps, arrived from QPR thanks to Ainsworth's association with the club where he'd been a rampaging forward across 141 appearances from 2003 to 2010.

The reaction from QPR supporters suggested that its old player had engaged in a sleight of hand that would have made Fagin blush.

Inside 72 hours four more dressing-room hooks had new names attached. Right-back Jack Grimmer, a free agent after 53 appearances for Coventry City, joined on a two-year deal. The former captain of Scotland's under-16s, who scored at Wembley in the 2018 play-off final to secure Coventry's promotion to League One, lost his place the following season to Dujon Sterling, on loan from Chelsea. He was demoralised, released, spent a couple of days keeping fit with Notts County and was desperate for a new home.

Ainsworth couldn't conceal his glee at acquiring such quality, especially as Jason McCarthy had packed his suitcases for Millwall and Sido Jombati, a long-time defensive servant, wasn't expected to recover from a metatarsal injury for two months. Grimmer was an unexpected and hugely welcome tick in the box.

Jacob Gardiner-Smith – the son of Labour's international development spokesman Barry Gardiner – had played for Russia's Zenit St Petersburg and the not-quite-so-remote outposts of Hendon and St Albans. Jacob had been recommended to Ainsworth by Luke O'Nien, the former Wanderer now at Sunderland, and signed for a year. It was hoped that, unlike his father, he wouldn't appear to be permanently attached to a bench.

Next was Giles Phillips, a central-defender from QPR in whom Ainsworth saw definite potential. Chicago-born Phillips was tall, elegant and assured, as if he'd never had a rough edge.

League One might come as a bit of a shock. The manager felt he could mould the 21-year-old into a defender of real substance and a loan for the season was mutually perfect.

Jamie Mascoll followed, a left-back released by Charlton after their promotion to the Championship, on a one-year contract. Mascoll had once worked for extra pocket money in the kiosks serving food and drink on match days at The Valley before being taken onto the playing staff. He was clearly not afraid of hard graft and was described by his new manager as ‘my pet project.’

Wycombe had had to draft in members of the football staff for a semi-decent five-a-side in the first couple of weeks of pre-season. Now, they would have an entire first team and full substitutes’ bench for the season’s curtain-raiser against Bolton Wanderers.

There was an awful lot of pinching of skin in the coaches’ room.

* * *

Gareth Ainsworth walked into the Caffe Nero in Wokingham one June morning in 2019 and we took a window table. The idea of sketching a season with Wycombe had been forming for a while and I broached the possibility to him. There was a long pause.

He was wrestling with the perilous nature of the club’s finances, the looming sense that he would be unable to perform one more miracle – ‘we’re really screwed Neil’ – and how the first relegation of his managerial career might be an unwelcome blot on his CV.

He mulled over the pros and cons for ten minutes then said, ‘To hell with it,’ determined to give it another season and accept whatever consequence befell him. And why not let the public that looked at football’s finances with utter incredulity appreciate what it took to manage a League One club that didn’t have a pot to piss in?

CLOSE QUARTERS

Imagine his transformative mood as new jerseys embroidered with new names and numbers started to roll off the production line. Yet an onset of light-headedness provoked a different set of concerns. How would the manager deal with the strain of selecting the right team from an ever-enlarging collection of egos?

Ainsworth had a team of generals, Adam El-Abd, Matt Bloomfield, Joe Jacobson and Adebayo Akinfenwa, the senior pros he trusted each to mentor a group of players, watch them like surrogate parents, to cajole and console – the management’s eyes and ears. But what if one of these had to be left out? Ainsworth said that in dealing with these differing circumstances, he’d need to acquire a new skill set. All these thoughts had begun to pre-occupy many of his waking moments and several non-waking ones as well.

‘I love my squad – they’re black, white, nice background, not so nice a background, some with money, most with very little money. When they train together, listen to the noise. They’re all in, relishing each other’s company.

‘It’s how it was when I played for John Beck at Cambridge, Lincoln and Preston. He told me to run, pass, head, shoot and if he said I needed to run up the steps of the stand ten times after training, I would do that too. These lads would do the same for me.

‘I couldn’t afford any weak links. I often recounted *The Nail* by former US President Benjamin Franklin: “For the want of a nail the shoe was lost; for the want of a shoe the horse was lost; for the want of a horse the rider was lost; for the want of a rider the battle was lost; for the want of a battle the kingdom was lost; and all for the want of a nail.” These boys all have to be nails but if we lose one nail, we can lose the kingdom.’

There were a number of hard as nails players on view for the final pre-season friendly. Maidenhead was not for the aesthetes, but exactly the robust challenge Ainsworth expected. The National League side was managed by Alan Devonshire,

once a darling of West Ham United, and across all positions they were an average of two inches taller than their League One opposition.

My sense was that Wycombe would require guile, accuracy of passing, shrewd use of alternating tactics and great group togetherness if they were to be consistently at this height and strength disadvantage during the season proper.

At least a little time was on Wycombe's side. For the opening day opponents, Bolton Wanderers and their Lancashire neighbours Bury, the sands had been slipping inexorably into the lower compartment of the hourglass. Their futures were in dire peril.

Debbie Jevans, the interim chairman of the EFL, assured me on Sunday, 28 July, 'If the players and other creditors haven't been paid in full five days before the season opens there is no way I'll allow either team to play.' That deadline fell the following day.

* * *

The photoshoot for the official 2019/20 Wycombe squad picture was at 2pm on Monday, 29 July precisely as the EFL convened a conference call to discuss the impoverished states of Bolton and Bury. The clubs had been given until five that evening to demonstrate that their finances were sound enough for their opening fixtures to be sanctioned.

It was a glorious afternoon at Adams Park, the players parading first in the new daffodil-yellow second-choice kit before switching to the famed shades of blue. Pete Couhig was enamoured by the quaintness of the custom but was bemused by its timing, especially as Fred Onyedima was at that moment taking the medical that would secure his second return to Wycombe from Millwall as Jason McCarthy made the opposite track.

The arrangement had added complexity because Championship-club Barnsley were due a sell-on fee for McCarthy

that had to be confirmed and signed off by the trust. There was much to-ing and fro-ing before the deal was completed. ‘We’ll be taking these again in a month [the day the League One and Two transfer windows closed] won’t we?’ Couhig said. ‘This is just stupid shit.’

Maybe so, but for those individuals, firms and families who sponsored players, had their names on the front of the shirts, supplied the mattresses, the expensive gym equipment and sound systems at the training ground, who provided goodwill and any spare change they could for the players’ fund, this was a day in the sun. The club wouldn’t be here without such generosity of spirit and hard cash.

By later that evening, all debate about team photographs was froth and bubble. The EFL decreed that Bolton were allowed to fulfil their fixture at Wycombe but Bury’s game at MK Dons was suspended and, unless there was a dramatic change of circumstance, their following match against Accrington Stanley would go the same way.

This was only a month after Bury could have been sold to Rob Couhig had the owner been able to give a straight answer to his request for exactly how much he wanted to dig him out of the shit he was in. It was not long before #FucktheEFL became a trending hashtag on Twitter, in the north of England especially. #FuckDale (Steve, not Rochdale) was rather popular too.

In Buckinghamshire the arrivals continued. Onyedinma put pen to paper on a three-year contract and David Wheeler, admired at MK Dons and Exeter City for his resolution in attack and midfield, signed for three years on a free transfer from QPR – fast becoming an unofficial feeder club. The first thing I noticed about Wheeler was his classical first-day-back-at-school haircut.

Trevor Stroud’s lightened mood was demonstrated by a mic-drop confirming Onyedinma’s return. The chairman posed as if to speak, dropped the microphone, stepped aside and Fred was behind him, arms folded, trying hard to look serious. In four

seconds of Twitter magic the sea change in the club's standing was clear, even if, in Stroud's words, 'I only did what I was told.'

Josh Parker, a striker who had 26 caps for Antigua and Barbuda and was still trying to come to terms with a wild and terrifying experience at Red Star Belgrade, was the confirmed ninth new entry after he had been released by Charlton Athletic. He immediately opened a coffee shop in the town named TONE – The Old New Experience.

Ainsworth was having one himself. He decided that was that in terms of new faces and ran his fingers across the tactics board in the coaching room where a thumbnail of each player's face was attached to an adhesive counter. He drew all the forward faces into one penalty area.

'We could go full Keegan,' a reference to the former England striker's period as manager of Newcastle United in the 1990s, when his team perfected reckless abandon. 'Fuck me look at that attacking strength. Has any side in our league got that variety?'

* * *

Indeed, Smyth, Wheeler, Parker and Onyedinda, in addition to Adebayo Akinfenwa, Alex Samuel, Nick Freeman and Scott Kashket, offered a surfeit of positive options, whether Ainsworth played three forwards, a diamond or a more resolute 4-4-2. He was right that this was a display of riches not afforded many managers in League One and allowed himself a cheery whistle as he contemplated his resources.

We moved to the common room with another message to drill home. 'Wycombe Identity' was the mantra. 'If you don't live to our standards, you're going to be living somewhere else. Here, no one thinks they're bigger than anyone. Of course, a player may be better at certain things than someone else, but no one is *better* than anyone else.'

'Here it is give, give, give. On the coaching side, we need to improve every day. You have to respect what every single person brings to the party. You cannot do your job without the help

of someone else's attributes and strengths. Here, you back your mates. You accept and own everything you do.

'If you make a mistake it's yours as much as it is when you make a good pass, score a goal or save a penalty. We are all part of the jigsaw. One day that jigsaw may be complete but it's a long way from that today, even with all the new boys arriving.'

Certain shapes, styles and pieces were intrinsic to Wycombe's approach. Ainsworth continuously impressed on his players the need to adhere to his ten-yard rule – to quickly stultify an opposition player's time to look up and measure his options. That ten yards of space had to be engulfed without delay. His midfield would thus require engines that didn't break down, at least not often.

The manager's probable preference for 4-3-3 meant that in the initial stages of the season Matt Bloomfield, Alex Pattison and Dominic Gape would need to form an alliance marked by feverish momentum.

Gape was a protégé of the vaunted Southampton academy system, working with far-sighted coaches on the south coast from the age of seven, and he captained the team from a young corps labelled a golden generation. He had grown up with Luke Shaw, Calum Chambers, James Ward-Prowse, Jordan Turnbull, Harrison Reed and Sam McQueen, an intelligentsia of talents.

Many managers would have rejected him on size alone. At 5ft 7in he was Tom Thumb in a football kit. Ainsworth often said had Gape been a few inches taller he would have been a Championship regular no doubt about it.

There had been an opportunity to move in the summer – 'sideways rather than upwards' – but when he learned of decent investment on the way Gape signed for an extra year, as had Akinfenwa, somewhat at the opposite end of the physical spectrum and 13 years his team-mate's elder.

Wycombe's fans cherished both men for the extremes they brought to the team. Bayo was now 37, a one-man rolling maul, offering a presence and substance no other club in the league

possessed with his 16 stone of solid, unremitting bulk. The leadership he delivered by virtue of his physical strength and force of personality made him stand out in every possible way. He was one of a special kind.

Akinfenwa could lift Gape from the floor with one sweep of his arm and wanted to do so often since the penultimate weekend of the 2017/18 season when Gape's winner at Chesterfield guaranteed Wycombe's automatic promotion to League One and hero status at Adams Park. But Gape was much more to the club than a single, history-defining shot. He was a pivot, a secure base, the marshal of so many moves.

'I knew my strengths, which was important for a footballer, and I stuck to them. I wasn't a player who was going to pick the ball up, dribble past ten players and score, that wasn't me. The team were best off when I didn't have the ball too long.

'If I had a picture in my head of where everyone was on the pitch, I saw my winger had a one v one chance, my next thought was, "How can I manipulate the ball to him?" I knew I was playing well when I had clear pictures.

'Did I get to play lots of sexy passes and do lots of things that I'd like to do? Not really. You could be the best passer in the world but if you weren't winning second balls, headers, tackles and getting stuck in, your range of passing was irrelevant. Especially the way Wycombe set up, as a high-paced counter attacking team, I might only get one opportunity a game and I had to be able to execute that pass otherwise I was a waste.

'You wouldn't see many games in our league when a midfielder played hundreds of passes. What I'd be doing for the most part was fight for second balls, compete for headers, try to intercept, to turn the play over and defence into attack.'

And bloody good he was at all of those elements of football without the trimmings on which much of League One was based. He never appeared out of breath or flustered, a tribute to his powers of endurance and technical ability given the demands Ainsworth and Dobson placed on the midfield players.

CLOSE QUARTERS

Gape was very much the heartbeat of the Wycombe way. Football at its most selfless and intense. The little man battling against the odds.

* * *

Those odds were unambiguous and unanimous. The club was a certainty to be relegated, a veritable lamb to the slaughter. Even Bolton Wanderers, starting with the 12-point deduction for falling into administration in May, were quoted by some bookmakers with better odds of survival than the upstarts from the pretty, field-speckled end of a Buckinghamshire industrial estate.

The football staff shrugged their shoulders, girded their loins and gathered their thoughts.

Six weeks before the season, the entire edifice had been built on quicksand that was slowly sucking Wycombe under. There was now the potential for a solid structure. A second League One campaign in succession had arrived with the sun on the team's back.

There was something curiously distinct about the club that the staff inspired with such passion. They in turn had grown into its identity over a decade of campaigns and without their leadership Wycombe would almost certainly have foundered as a full-time professional club.

Those who played in the famous quarters did so on less than the average League One wage, were shorter in numbers and physical stature than every club they were to compete against and had long accepted being written off by the neutrals and even some of their own.

Yet the bond this devout, diverse squad had forged in a month led one to believe that when they emerged together for the first day of the season – and with the bit of luck every team required once in a while – they wouldn't be the whipping boys roundly predicted.