

SHOW ME THE WAY TO
PLOUGH
LANE

GARY JORDAN

SHOW ME THE WAY TO
**PLOUGH
LANE**

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF
WIMBLEDON'S
RETURN HOME

FOREWORD BY ALAN CORK



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ACT I
NOMADS

*'Show me the way to Plough Lane,
I'm tired and I want to go home.
I had a football ground 20 years ago,
and I want one of my own.
Wherever I may roam,
to Selhurst Park again (fucking dump),
You will always hear me singing this song,
show me the way to Plough Lane.'*

True Meaning

FOOTBALL CLUB: an organisation of players, managers, owners, or members associated with a particular football team.

COMMUNITY: a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.

HOMELESSNESS: the state of having no home.

HOME: the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household.

THE ABOVE are official definitions in the *Oxford Living Dictionary*. They are of course quite broad to the subject matter in this book, but the four words are key, and have plenty of meaning and depth to all supporters of every club up and down the land.

What is a football club without its sense of community? And furthermore, what if that club has nowhere to call home? Where does that community go, and how will it continue without the foundations of a stable home?

Let's break down those definitions a bit more.

What is a football club? Yes, the definition is a good summarisation of what a football club needs to function. It ticks the boxes of players and their managers or coaches, while owners are helpful as someone needs to sign the cheques. These are vital commodities, but the most crucial is missing and you're all ahead of me now when I say supporters. The very lifeblood of any club is the fans. Whether they are the diehards who go to every game, both home and away, or ones who have emigrated to the other side of the world where the Wi-Fi signal is so bad they must climb a mountain to get the latest results, it doesn't matter. They are the very reason why football exists.

It isn't about the money generated by supporters when they dip into their pockets to buy a replica shirt, a matchday programme or a burger, or part with hard-earned cash to watch the game either through the turnstiles or with an arguably over-the-top television subscription which in turn provides windfall payments to clubs that make the rich richer, and the divide greater, but I digress. It's far more than that. We won't go into the cliched lines of it being a working man's game, but that is exactly what it is, the game of the people. It brings every kind of person together, rich or poor, young or old. You could be sitting or standing next to a stranger but all the while you are there on what could be a freezing cold night, you have that solidarity, a sense of belonging.

A sense of community.

Of course, when you hear the word community you will automatically think of your local area, whether that be your immediate street or road, the surrounding area with perhaps its small row of shops with a pub on the corner, stretching as far as the town you live in and its overall sense of where you come from. Whatever way you look at things, it's where you belong. You hear stories of people coming back home after years away and remembering the pride of their community. A lot of this is nostalgic; we are now living in times where community for the younger generations could well mean that on gaming consoles. It is after all a group of people living in an environment, albeit artificial, with a common feeling of belonging together.

Communities often come to the fore when there is a large event locally. This could be anything from a visit to town by a member of the royal family to an annual fireworks display. The football community gathers every other weekend, sometimes more if the fixture schedulers throw in the occasional back-to-back home game. This crowd, no matter how small or big, was a community. They have their own private church if you will, the home ground at which their team would play. A strange way to look at it perhaps but any fan will tell you they've often sung songs of praise to their heroes, or even said a quiet prayer or two when times were desperate. Those who worship in this parish will tell you that the football is the heart of the community. Its roots embed deep and spread far and wide, influencing all around it. If the football team is doing well then everyone has the feel-good factor, and maybe more will congregate. Even if the team is under-performing the locals will still rally round and do what they can to help. Without football at its heart, what does the football community become? Where will they go?

They become homeless.

This is a far more contentious issue as being homeless, whether forced or otherwise, is not something anyone ever wishes to contemplate. It brings images of isolation, desperation, depression, so no matter how we view this from the outside, it doesn't come anywhere near to what it must feel like being on the inside. To have what you think to be solid foundations under your feet, only to have them taken away from you, would be a tremendous shock. Even the most thick-skinned, hard-nosed person would struggle to deal with that. You would fight with everything you have to establish the reason why this has happened, as to the circumstances that led to your removal, and then try with every fibre to find ways in which you can stay where you believe is your home and community.

Roaming Origins

It's rare to find a football story starting with a windmill. As you will find out though, this is not an ordinary story about football.

Wimbledon Common, or in fact to name the location correctly the Wimbledon and Putney Commons, was for the best part a wasteland that the local village had. It was owned by the Lord of the Manor and in his attempts to monopolise this he tried to ring-fence the area for use of his tenants, allowing them to let their cattle graze and to obtain a certain amount of wood each year. John Poyntz Earl Spencer, in 1864, was the Lord of the Manor and he pursued a way to gain more from the Commons. His proposal of splitting the Wimbledon side as a park and the Putney side for building development was opposed by nearby residents. After a seven-year stand-off the 5th Earl Spencer finally backed down and

agreed to an annuity of £1,200 with the understanding that the residents would maintain the upkeep of the land, hence the 1871 Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act.

Long before this time, John Watney, a man who owned and successfully ran several natural-powered corn mills in the locality, put in an application to build a windmill in the Commons, but he died before seeing this plan through. In 1816, however, the idea was again floated by Charles March, a nearby carpenter. He was granted a plot of land to build a windmill for the princely sum of two shillings a year, for a 99-year lease, solely that his mill would benefit the local community. Fast forward a few decades to Earl Spencer and his plan to separate the Commons, and in doing so he also announced his wishes to build a Manor House on the site of the windmill. After this was scuppered, the mill ceased its operations, and the family in charge eventually sold up and took the millstones and machinery with them. The windmill was then converted into accommodation that housed six families.

In the immediate vicinity of the windmill, indeed the clubhouse set in its long shadow, was the London Scottish Golf Club, recognised as one of the oldest 18-hole courses in the world after its foundation in 1865. The Scottish Rifle Volunteers had laid out the first few holes a decade before calling them names such as Blockade and Running Deer. In 1908 the Wimbledon Common course opened and shared the same course but in a different order, with its clubhouse set on the opposite side on the layout.

Further up the road from the golf and windmill was the Old Central School. Founded in 1758, the school was the second charity school in Wimbledon; however, after some setbacks with the building work and some high-

profile bickering between the schoolmaster and the vicar, who had sectioned off some land, the school wasn't up and running until 1773. Original trustees included the 1st Earl of Spencer, the 2nd Marquess of Rockingham Charles Watson-Wentworth, who later served as prime minister, and William Wilberforce (uncle to the namesake who went on to help abolish the slave trade and would later act as treasurer for the school during his time in London). The school started to flourish and even though the curriculum was of the basic reading, writing and arithmetic, the children – 50 boys and 50 girls – were gaining valuable education that otherwise wouldn't have been possible. The schoolmaster at this time was Joseph Andrewes, who served until his death in 1788.

The school continued to thrive and was part of the national school framework that pushed for extended elementary education. It was known as Old Central in official documentation in 1893. Many new schools were now established in the area and the Education Act of 1870 was necessary to maintain the standards across the country, so maintaining the term 'Old' was a way of keeping the school's identity within the new structure. John William Selby took over as headmaster in 1889.

Plotting the Course

Wimbledon Football Club was founded in 1889, under its first title of Wimbledon Old Centrals, and the first match on the Common was played against Westminster on 2 November that year with the home side winning 1-0. Football itself was an ever-changing landscape in its infancy with teams being set up all around the country at a rate of knots. If you weren't a businessman or a school not involved with setting up a football team then you were being left behind. With the

Common as its base, and the Fox and Grapes its changing facility the team was amassing interest and the first years after formation they played a wealth of friendlies against local opposition, winning their fair share.

Winning was becoming a habit and Wimbledon were the first team to complete a treble at Junior level status, so progress had to be considered and this included moving away from the Common. In 1901 they started to play games at Worple Road West, and then on 1 May 1905 a general meeting was called with 30 members deciding to drop Old Centrals from the club's name. This wasn't something that everyone agreed on; at the annual club dinner the club president suggested that it was taken with 'some regret'. Nevertheless, Wimbledon as they became known were now affiliated with the Surrey FA, but as the century turned the club started to struggle, the crowds dwindled, and results were poor. Several new locations were found to play games, but eventually the club ran into debt and despite fundraising efforts and requests for help from local authorities to find a pitch to play on, they had little choice but to stop playing on 3 September 1910.

But there was still some hope for football in Wimbledon. Wimbledon Borough, a team made up primarily of council workers, soon to be joined by players and staff from the Old Centrals setup, were playing games in Coppermill Lane, on land that was previously disused. They also had a rebranding in 1912/13, dropping Borough from their name, and at the same time found a new home with help from the local authority, on the corner of Plough Lane, Durnsford Road and Haydons Road. The piece of land was a rubbish dump, part swampland, but was soon turned around over the next couple of seasons. The area surrounding the roped-off pitch was vastly improved to accommodate changing rooms and a large,

covered, seated stand, all for the princely sum of £50 for the lease. At the time of the Great War the club again suspended its play but were still very much alive and ready to restart. The ground, while not seeing any on-pitch action, continued to have improvements made, then on 23 November 1918 it was announced that it was ready for football to resume. In 1928 the Wimbledon Stadium was opened, built on the land that was next to the pitch used by Wimbledon Borough. Used for greyhound racing and then speedway, it also saw boxing in its early life. Wimbledon FC, for simplicity, played at many sites up until finding Plough Lane as its ultimately established home: Robin Hood Way, West Place, Worple Road West, Pepys Road, Grand Drive, The Chase, Cambridge Avenue, Burlington Road and Coppermill Lane.

In 1923, the increase in football's popularity after the war led to larger attendances at Plough Lane and even though Wimbledon had made great strides in improving spectator facilities there was always room for more. The purchase of what would be the South Stand from Clapton Orient was a huge boost, and despite being flattened by bombing in World War Two and subsequently restored in 1950 it would look the same as it was when first built and relocated. The team was enjoying success on the pitch, and this allowed for more expansion on the site. In 1933 the standing area in front of the North Stand was improved, and new offices were built.

The largest recorded attendance at Plough Lane was in 1935 when 18,080 crammed in to witness the visit of HMS *Victory* in the FA Amateur Cup. The arrival of Sydney Black was to be a turning point in the club's history. Appointed in 1955 as chairman, he made significant changes that would propel Wimbledon forward. As well as wanting a team that would compete at the highest level of non-league football, he

needed a ground that would match that ambition. In 1957 sufficient cash was raised by the supporters for Black to honour his promise to pay the rest to build a new clubhouse, then just two years later a new roof was put on the North Stand, and a year on a roof on the West Bank meant fans could watch in more comfort. Floodlights came soon after with upgrades to other areas. It was all coming together, and in just under a decade of being in charge Black had fulfilled his promise.

One of Black's most important moments was securing the future of Wimbledon FC by buying the freehold of the ground from Merton Council and immediately lending it back to the club. The price was £8,250 and came with the clause that the council could buy it back for the same sum if it were to be used for anything other than sporting purposes. Sadly Black passed away in April 1968; his legacy is one of great vision and generosity and in his will he left money to Wimbledon that would see them fit to play for the next couple of seasons. This left a big hole at the top of the club, which his brother Cyril wasn't keen to fill, so much so that he sold his majority shareholding to local businessman Bernie Coleman. The club found some stability but Coleman's patience on certain projects he suggested but failed had worn thin, and he looked for someone else to take control. Step forward Ron Noades.

The Big Time

On 17 June 1977 Wimbledon Football Club were elected to the Football League after three consecutive Southern League titles, winning enough votes to break into the Fourth Division at the expense of Workington Town. The campaign was long and arduous, but very single-minded, which was Noades to a tee. After visiting nearly all of the clubs in

the league's top divisions to state Wimbledon's case, and a promise of 38 votes, they eagerly awaited the results at the league's annual meeting held at the lavish Café Royal in the heart of London. Four clubs were looking for reinstatement – Halifax Town, Hartlepool United, Southport and Workington – then Altrincham were representing the north and the Dons the south in search of election. With 27 votes Wimbledon were fourth in the order but that was enough, beating the 21 of Workington, and Altrincham's 12. 'We didn't get the 38 votes which gave me an indication what chairmen were like,' Noades told Steve Elson for the *Yellow and Blue* programme in 2001.

However, it really was a landmark moment and Noades was at the heart of the campaign that paid off. His 'Dons 4 Div 4' marketing rang loud and clear, and when the voting results were announced he revelled in the moment, 'I am absolutely delighted for the club's sake, the manager Allen Batsford, and that of our supporters. Obviously, people voted for us on our facilities and our potential. Perhaps the biggest thing in our favour was the three championships, and the fine record of other Southern League teams who have got into the league.' Hereford United in 1972 and Cambridge United in 1970 had also been elected from the Southern League.

Noades continued, 'We are in the Fourth Division but we aim to go higher. We have the potential to be one of London's leading sides.' It was a bold statement but Noades was confident he could back it up. Just a year earlier he had purchased the club from Bernie Coleman for less than £3,000. The Plough Lane ground may have been tiny in comparison to the big, established sides in the capital, but it had space for more than 15,000 fans and with improvements totalling £10,000 already completed, including a new 16-piece weight

training gym that even Queens Park Rangers players were envious of after a visit, the ambition was clearly there. This was also shown by an application to Merton Council for a proposed 25,000 capacity, of which 17,000 fans would be seated. In the short term, though, the floodlights needed an upgrade, as well as extending the covering over the North and South stands. League football would potentially increase attendances, and with high-profile FA Cup runs already in the bag, some player names were already known to the more educated followers of the game. Indeed, manager Allen Batsford had carved quite a reputation and he took a quiet moment to reflect on the election of his side, 'I was apprehensive when I came to the meeting.' He added between sips of champagne laid on by more confident directors, 'I must admit I was prepared for a disappointment.'

Being voted in wasn't quite the way Noades wanted things done in future, as he felt that teams should be rewarded for their performances on and off the field, not in the confines of Football Association offices, 'A club should get in on its merits rather than anything else. The onus is on the Southern League management committee to foster a pyramid system that would help to gain [Football] League status. It is wrong that clubs should have to spend so much money just for the chance of qualifying rather than on merit.'

Wimbledon were holding their own as a league team, and Noades was getting good reviews. Robert Oxby wrote in *The Times*, 'To visit Wimbledon is to find a club bursting with industry and enthusiasm. The improved facilities and the success of their nightclub, which leads directly to the more expensive seats in the stand, has left them unworried by their comparatively low crowds.' Noades had turned the club's fortunes around off the pitch since taking over; his

businessman approach had seen the books level out somewhat after restructuring how Wimbledon operated to allow them to progress on the pitch.

He was, however, still thinking business and always looking at the horizon, which would rankle with the fans, who did not always agree with how he ran things. In November 1978, Fulham chairman Ernie Clay was also looking at the bigger picture and saw potential in a new stadium plan. An all-purpose arena would house both Wimbledon and Fulham, as well as speedway, greyhound races, and why not throw in a spot of county cricket for good measure? 'It is something we definitely want to do,' Clay said with clear honesty. Noades was his usual polished self, 'I don't think it's too ambitious. It is the sort of thing we are thinking of doing at our own ground anyway, but if we can go in with Fulham and do it on a bigger scale, so much the better.' Clay offered Craven Cottage as a place to share while the project got off the ground, but Noades would only take part if it was part of a deal that would help the new project off the ground, 'We are already having talks with Wimbledon greyhounds and speedway, and now I see that Surrey may have to leave The Oval. Why not build a new stadium for the whole lot, us and Fulham?'

The idea would need a lot of red tape to be cut through, but a target area just off the A3 in the heart of Greater London Council land was favoured by both men. Noades said, 'We did a survey and found that of a crowd of say, 6,000, only eight per cent actually live in the Fulham area, half of those live on the other side of the river. At the moment, the people living around Craven Cottage have their lives disrupted every other week by football supporters, and it would make more sense to build a stadium somewhere else.' Money would be another

issue. 'For a start, we wouldn't borrow money at fluctuating rates of interest. We would be looking for grants from people like the Sports Council because there would be squash courts there and so on. I suppose we would need an interest-free loan from someone like the government,' pondered Noades. It seemed that complete self-financing wasn't on Clay's agenda either, 'When you think how much money is made out of football by people like the pools and television companies, and how much we pay in the way of tax, I think we should be able to ask for some of it back. We could sell our ground to the GLC, if they could be prepared to help us find and finance a new stadium.' Clay did have some logic to his cause, 'You can't make a football ground profitable by only using it 21 days a year. We use our ground less than 100 hours a year. You wouldn't buy a car and use it for only 100 hours.' Maybe, though, Noades wasn't just looking at the horizon but further afield, 'My ideal is the continental idea. Juventus and Turin share one big ground with all sorts of other facilities. They have family memberships, and the complex is in use all the time, that's what I want to see for us.'

Then Noades caused more of a stink when he proposed a multi-million-pound move to a nearby disused sewage works and was even threatening to take Merton Council to court to the tune of £31m over the pre-emption value of Plough Lane, which had been in place for over 30 years. As part of an appeasement the council offered the sewer works, which Noades eyed up as a possible option to get Wimbledon into a more modern facility. This was all even though Plough Lane was continuing to look more and more the part. Planning was approved to double the size of The Sportsman pub and enable two restaurants, which would serve the pub and the increasingly popular Nelsons nightclub. In addition to

this was a new hard surface playing area behind the West Terrace. This would provide sufficient training facilities for the schoolboy players instead of having to travel outside the borough. It was officially opened by the sports minister, Hector Munro MP, with several other local dignitaries present, including the president and secretary of the FA, Sir Harold Thompson and Ted Croker. 'Not only will it be a valuable training facility for our own Wimbledon team, but it will also be available for local youth clubs, schools and sports associations. It is suitable for almost any outdoor sport, not just football,' Noades told those reporting. The all-weather surface would cost £6 an hour to hire out. 'This is one further step towards integrating Wimbledon Football Club into the life of the local community. We want youngsters to come here and feel that the club is theirs,' said Noades. The Sports Council helped fund the project with a grant of £34,500, which was 75 per cent of the total cost. This was part of their ongoing Football in the Community project.

Legacy

After his death at the age of 76 on Christmas Eve 2013, Ron Noades was described by one of his former employees as a pioneer in the game. He had relative success with the clubs he owned. His longest tenure was when he led a consortium that acquired Crystal Palace for a sum of £600,000 from Raymond Bloye in January 1981, until he eventually relinquished control to Mark Goldberg in June 1998 for £22m.

It was Alan Smith, manager of Palace from 1993–95, who was leading the obituaries and called Noades a pioneer, adding that he was 'a hard worker and knew his football and was ahead of his time on some things'. He was doing so in recognition of the way he had also made

the Croydon-based outfit a team that could challenge for honours. He also noted that Noades was one of a small group of people who started to really see football in a new way, that of a business. After all, you don't make a profit the way he did selling Palace without some business nous. With any business, you're always looking for an edge over a competitor and no sooner had the 1981 deal to buy Palace been done than rumours started to suggest it wasn't just a buy-in but instead a possible takeover/merger. A member of the six-man consortium, also on the board of Wimbledon, was Bernie Coleman, who went on record to say, 'It is in the forefront of our thinking that the two clubs will share the Selhurst Park ground.' The case for sharing was because of Wimbledon's continued success on the pitch and wanting to find a new ground, fit for league football after climbing out of non-league so dramatically in 1977. A restricted financial covenant meant that Wimbledon had limited borrowing powers to invest in new players. Coleman continued, 'It is such a sensible plan that we hope will be approved. There is no question of one of the clubs losing its identity. At the moment it is the intention of the consortium to stay on as Wimbledon directors.'

This would be a huge conflict of interest. How could you be purchasing one club while still being at the business end of another? The Football League were keeping a close eye on things, aware that fan protests were under way. With merger being all the talk in *The Sportsman*, it was decided that the fight would be better faced on two fronts and so a larger, more purposeful meeting was set up at Nelsons, where Palace fans were also invited. The meeting was not for the faint-hearted and extraordinarily strong opinions were voiced. Some supporters even organised a trip to Solihull on

the day that Football League chairmen were meeting, with this item on the agenda. They would discuss a proposal that would stop officials being involved in the administration of more than one club without the prior consent of the league. Football League secretary Graham Kelly wasn't fully against the idea of smaller clubs, who could be seen to be in financial difficulties, having a helping hand from a larger club. It would not be of detriment to the game and lead to a case of franchising, he felt. 'The management committee want to introduce an element of control in the league as a whole. Ground-sharing could be a thing of the future,' said Kelly. 'The Football League stuck their noses in even though they had no idea what they were doing. Liverpool and Everton were run by the same family, but nobody bothered them,' Noades told Elson in his interview.

Fulham were also eyeing up a deal to buy into Palace, with Ernie Clay still at the helm at Craven Cottage. With the financial director at Fulham, Brian Dalton, Clay announced that negotiations had been ongoing for a few days, which surprised Raymond Bloye as he would've wanted any talk of a buy-out well out of public consumption. Clay was aware that with his offer now out in the open, others could well jump into the mix, and his old running mate Noades would be one candidate as his longing to move Wimbledon would surface once more. As always, Noades was keeping his cards close to his chest and refused to be drawn into a bidding war. 'We have not and will not be making a bid,' he said. Clay knew that even though his offer was a good one, a reported £500,000, he would step aside if other interested parties came in, 'I'm not going to get involved in an auction. If someone else wants to buy the club, and the deal is in the best interests of football that's all right.'

‘Wimbledon have not and will not make an offer to buy control of Crystal Palace,’ Noades was forced to concede after Bloye was starting to get cold feet on the deal. The outgoing chairman, who would remain on the Palace board, was seeking reassurances that flamboyant manager Malcolm Allison would remain in charge, amid speculation that Dario Gradi would swap dugouts as part of the deal. The deal went through and Gradi did indeed follow Noades into the Palace setup, on a three-and-a-half-year deal. After three years in charge of the Dons he wasn’t surprised when Noades asked him to make the short move across south London, ‘I am not frightened of the job. In fact, the more I think about it the more it excites me.’ This was a case of Noades showing off his business prowess, wooing the Palace board and calming them down but at the same time having a trick up his sleeve, albeit one that wasn’t very well veiled. Soon after Noades, Coleman, Jimmy Rose, and Richard Faulkner resigned from the Wimbledon board to take up full positions on the Palace board, just to complete the business transaction in full.

One thing Elson caught from his time talking to Noades was just how into football he was, and that sometimes his business decisions took away his overriding passion for the game. Noades even went as far as saying that his most enjoyable time in the game was when he oversaw the Dons at Plough Lane, ‘We kept the non-league attitude even when we got in the league. Everyone was against us, and we all stuck together against the rest of the world. We didn’t have high expectations, so nobody called for the manager’s job if we lost. If we got a draw at Exeter, we thought it was a good result.’

Among his efforts to better Wimbledon as a club, Noades would also be remembered as the man who first mooted the idea of a move to Milton Keynes. He was convinced that

Merton Council didn't want a football club on their doorstep, part of the reason of his pursuits to move elsewhere citing that he attempted to buy the Prince George Playing Fields but the approach never got very far. He did attempt to put the record straight with an in-depth article in a matchday programme in October 1980, which stated that the original clause in the club's deeds if Plough Lane ever ceased to be a football ground: Part A of the clause made in 1948/49 stated, 'In any such case the Trustees shall make an offer in writing to the Corporation to sell the said property to them at the price of £8,214 and any such offer shall remain open for acceptance for a period of three months thereof.'

Noades went on to explain that this was clearly a great deal as over time with all the alterations and building, the Plough Lane site had become of far more worth than this amount. An estimated value of £500,000 was put on the area, but Noades was not happy as, or at least how he saw it, Merton Council were dragging their heels. His notes went on, 'Indeed by stubbornly refusing to allow even a modest revaluation of the ground's pre-emption value they are slowly strangling our very existence.'

With the expenditure going over £200,000, and the club's directors not wanting to go to the bank any more than they should reasonably be asked to, it was now getting to a point of desperation. Clearly laying the blame on Merton Council, despite stating that the site will always be used for football 'even if we only play once a year with a schoolboy side, we will never allow them the right to operate the pre-emption', Noades was seemingly bending over backwards to offer assistance to ensure the future of the club remained at Plough Lane, willing to accept a raising of the pre-emption value to nearer to £500,000 with reviews every five years. He said