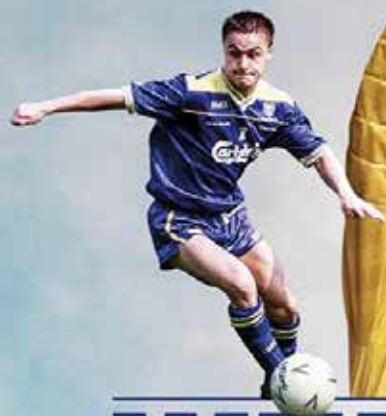


Gary Jordan



WHEN DAVE WENT UP

**The Inside Story of Wimbledon's
1988 FA Cup Win**



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One
1975

THE WORLD of non-league football is vast. Some team names are instantly recognisable and others will have fleeting glimpses of moments as national headlines, caused of course by the glamour of the FA Cup. As each round is successfully navigated, a new challenge is drawn up.

The velvet bag, with the Football Association logo embroidered carefully on to its side, would entice many exciting moments as the now long-gone tradition of tuning in to a radio soon after the previous round's games had been played out, all on a Saturday as well, to hear the balls clacking around as they are taken out one-by-one, in the hope that your team would get a favourable draw, or that dream tie against a top-division side. The draws for the early rounds were not broadcast live, and you would have to wait for word of mouth to know who you would face next, such was the non-existence of mobile phones, the internet, or the whirlpool of social media.

Wimbledon were just like any other team in the mid-1970s, in that they would ply their trade in their regional divisions, gaining promotion, avoiding relegation, and keeping the books ticking over. A bonus would be a cup run, either at amateur level, or if a team was lucky enough getting past the qualifying rounds of the FA Cup to have that moment in the sun – although as the early rounds were played through the winter months, it would be the biting wind and heavy mud-covered pitches, rather than warm sunshine.

Allen Batsford took charge of the Dons in the summer of 1974, coming from another amateur club, the smaller but well-known Walton & Hersham. Two seasons before his arrival at Plough Lane he had successfully taken them to FA Amateur Cup glory at Wembley, the Swans beating Slough Town 1-0. During that same season he took Walton to the second round of the FA Cup, having beaten Bristol City of the Fourth Division in the first round proper, and they also finished as runners-up in the Isthmian League. Then, the following season they took Brighton & Hove Albion to a replay in the second round, where they then dispatched the professional outfit 4-0. Making this even more special was the fact that Brian Clough managed the Seagulls.

Batsford was a student of the game and was always looking at ways to bring new tactics into his way of playing. Allied with a thorough discipline regime, his teams were always tough to beat first, and then could play the game as

he wanted. His approach to his players was of loyalty and respect, knowing that if he treated them as equals, they would perform for him on matchdays. To say Batsford's stock was high is an understatement, and so the Dons swooped and got their man to help kick-start a new era for the club. After nine years with the Swans, it was time for Batsford to dip his toes into a new pond and after two interviews he was offered the job.

That was the easy part; assembling a team on a shoestring budget was the real challenge, as he admitted, 'There were just six players at the time, so I had to bring in people I knew. I brought in five from Walton & Hersham and I was fortunate the two sets of players gelled.' The roll of the dice worked and even though Batsford was not fully aware of their playing ability he was positive that with hard work the new squad could achieve remarkable things. He was particularly impressed by schoolteacher Mick Mahon, and thought he was of league standard. Also, Ian Cooke was singled out for praise early on.

It was an instant transformation and the five Walton players who arrived with the new boss went straight into the opening-day fixture, a 2-0 loss at Nuneaton Borough. 'We gave away a couple of silly goals,' said one of the new recruits, Dave Donaldson. 'I wasn't sure that I'd made the right move. Selwyn Rice was sent off and the team was totally disjointed. Looking at the game you would never have predicted what was to follow.' Instead of feeling sorry

for themselves the Dons went on a run of 11 consecutive league wins, and mixed into that was the start of the FA Cup run that is still talked about now as one of the greatest by any non-league team ever.

Saturday, 14 September 1974 is not a date that football historians will know well. In fact it is a nondescript date in football. This, though, was the day that *the run* started, and against that famous name of Bracknell Town. Yes, this is where history would start. Spartan League Bracknell had started the season brightly and were unbeaten, compared to the Dons' one defeat. The first qualifying round and the visit of Wimbledon saw a crowd just short of 1,000 witnessing a tie that got off to a fast start. Keiron Somers let fly a blockbuster of a shot after decent work by Mick Mahon on the left. Somers would have thought his effort was in, but Steve McLurg managed to get his head to the ball, which in turn deflected the goalbound effort on to the bar. This was just the opening minute and shortly after that the Dons were behind. The rural setting of Larges Lane was cheering loud when John Adams connected with a long Alan Jeffries free kick, the striker getting to the ball marginally ahead of Dickie Guy.

Bracknell had their tails up and soon after could have doubled their lead. Adams linked up with his strike partner Norman Budd, and after a swift exchange of passes Budd was clean through only to blaze his shot over the bar. A let-off, and further warning that the FA Cup for this season

could be over before it even truly began. The Dons started to up their game. Somers and Roger Connell started to cause problems for the Bracknell defence, but it was Ian Cooke who had the first real chance to level the scores, with a fine run and shot that saw Ron Gurney in the home goal save at full length. The equaliser did come and on the 20-minute mark it was Cooke who got the goal. Mahon swung over a deep corner, Somers nodded back across the goal and Cooke was ready to put his header into the net.

Now in the ascendancy, it did not take long for Wimbledon to go ahead for the first time in the game. This was all about the power and agility of Connell, with the help of a full-back. Bob Stockley was getting some freedom and making overlapping runs with regularity, then on half an hour he chipped a cross over for Connell who headed goalward only to see the ball come back off the post, and despite being on the floor he recovered his feet enough to stab the rebound home.

The game was all but up by half-time with a third Dons goal, and Connell's second, making the most of an injury to the Bracknell captain who was receiving treatment for a shoulder injury. The bearded sharp-shooter was starting to take control of the game and despite being off target shortly after putting the Dons ahead he was ready when Stockley and Cooke combined again to set him up. Cooke chased what looked a lost cause, with Stockley's ball going to the corner flag. He somehow worked his way around

his defender to place a perfect cross over for an easy header which Connell duly despatched.

Bracknell now had nothing to lose and did all they could to cut the deficit. Wimbledon were making life difficult for themselves and Dave Donaldson dithered on the ball, almost allowing Rudd a chance. Worse was to come with 15 minutes left when Guy and Billy Edwards got in a mess with Rudd in on goal again. This brought some remonstrations from Batsford on the sideline and the sharp words seemed to steady the boat a little. Guy was called upon again a couple more times, but the final whistle came with some relief. This had been a test and proved that as keen as the Dons were, they had to be at their best if they were to have the continued dream of a big name coming out with them in the draw.

For the next round on 5 October, Maidenhead United were the visitors – not necessarily a big name but at least there was no travelling this time as the tie would be played at Plough Lane. The run-up to the game was not exactly smooth. Dave Lucas was sidelined with a muscle injury, Mick Mahon was out with fibrositis, and in a weird late twist new signing Glen Aitken was also forced out but for quite different reasons. Aitken had recently been acquired from Gillingham and was named in the side to play the Isthmian League Second Division outfit, when just five minutes before kick-off the club learned that the registration of the signing had not been cleared. With a

mild panic setting in it was known that Malcolm Swain, who had just completed a month's trial loan from Reading, was in the ground; more precisely in the bar! After a sprint to his car to grab his boots and get his kit on, the game could start. Again, the front pair of Connell and Somers would be too much for the opposition, and despite holding on for the first half an hour the Maidenhead goal was finally breached. Eddie Junger was keeping his side in the game early on with fine saves, most notably from Connell as the striker turned deftly and cracked a vicious shot which was kept out by the full-stretch Maidenhead stopper. It was Connell's strength that proved decisive for the opener, as he rode a hefty challenge to stay upright and unleash a powerful shot that went in at the near post.

At just 1-0 up by half-time the Dons had to be on their toes as Maidenhead started the second period brightly, but nerves were calmed when Edwards, who had earlier almost created a goal for Cooke, combined with Cooke again to provide an opening for Somers who neatly scored with his left foot. The third goal had some flair to treat the crowd of over 1,300. A free kick on the edge of the penalty area saw Dave Bassett knock the ball through Swain's legs and Connell rifled home his shot. The fourth was from an error in Maidenhead's defence as Stockley's low cross somehow evaded everyone and Connell was on hand to complete his hat-trick. There was almost a fifth, but Bassett saw his header thump off the bar.

Two weeks later the Dons had another home draw, this time against Wokingham Town, another Isthmian Second Division team. To their credit Wokingham stuck to their task and held the Dons to half chances, despite the home team's dominance. Another healthy crowd of just over 1,500 then witnessed the tie turn in confusing and controversial circumstances just before the interval. Stockley was again marauding down the line and his cross went over the target of Somers, and Dixon in the goal caught the ball as Cooke came in to challenge. Play was to continue, but the referee noticed his linesman waving his flag on the sideline. 'I wasn't in a position to see it myself, but my linesman was in a perfect place,' said Mr M.G. Richardson. 'The keeper took the ball over the line as he went to throw it out.' This was the official's explanation after the game, and Stockley, who had crossed the ball, was given credit for the goal. There have been more bizarre goals but this one broke the resolve of the visitors at a crucial point in the game.

Wimbledon then put the tie to bed early in the second half. Mahon had already threatened to double their lead when he struck the underside of the bar after great link-up play by Connell and Somers. Then just a couple of minutes later Cooke did get the second as he was on hand to convert a loose ball after Somers' header at goal. The only blot on this game's copybook came halfway through the second half when a penalty was awarded to the Dons after a handball. Mahon took it but his shot was too weak,

and Dixon was able to save easily. Despite the Dons hitting the bar twice within a minute with around ten to play, the match was already won and now Wimbledon had one more hurdle to jump before that dream tie.

Again, it was a fortnight between games, and into early November for the fourth qualifying round. The Dons, who were rolling in the league, carried the form into their cup games. The final qualifying round sent the Dons away to Guildford & Dorking United, who were struggling in the same Southern League that Batsford's side were flying in. In fact, they had met just a few weeks before at the same venue, and a Cooke hat-trick and Mahon brace saw the Dons run out comfortable winners, but it had taken four goals in the last 15 minutes to see the game off. And this was remarkably similar. Just over 1,200 were on hand to witness what was mostly a run-of-the-mill match. It was reported that the atmosphere was severely lacking that of a game which had such a potential big prize at the end of it, although this did not bother the Dons as they opened the scoring in the first ten minutes. Connell, who else in this run so far, netted with a header from a cross by Mahon, who else again, which flew past Alan Spratley in the Guildford goal. This allowed Wimbledon to ease off a bit but remain alert and wary to any danger. The home side did grow into the game but lacked any clinical thrust, and Guy only had routine saves to make, especially as the ground was slick after some rain before and during the early part of

the game. Guy did have a moment when he let a shot slip away from him only to thankfully see it rebound back off a post. Connell was a constant threat, and if Guildford had a striker with even half of his ability the tie could have been different. As it was, Connell was toying with the hosts' defence as he plundered a shot at Spratley who could not hold on but had the rebound put out for a corner.

Wimbledon, with one foot in the first round, were taking their time putting their opponents out of their misery but were showing a bit more bite in the second half. Guildford, despite being just a goal down, were showing no real effort to get back into the tie, and therefore it was inevitable that Wimbledon would make their dominance count. With Somers and Connell a constant threat, and uncharacteristically missing chances, it was some pressure by Connell that led to a mistake by Alan Wright in defence. The striker headed the ball beyond him and Donaldson, who was keeping up with play, applied the finishing touch. That was with five minutes to go, and in the last minute of the contest it was Ian Cooke who got his reward for another outstanding performance. Latching on to a Somers header, he drilled a shot across the goal into the far corner. The scoreline flattered a little as the Dons were not at their best but they had done enough to score three times and put themselves in the draw, with the chance to put their fine run of form, currently 16 unbeaten at this stage, up against a Football League side.

The first round proper did not offer the 'glamour' everyone at the club had wished for. Instead they were handed a tricky home match against Bath City. Also in the Southern League, Bath had started the season well, but Wimbledon were on a huge 20-game winning streak. The Dons were simply beating everyone they came up against, in all competitions. A huge crowd at Plough Lane, helped with some games being called off locally, was close to 5,500. Wimbledon were now starting to make people sit up and take notice, as scoring goals and winning games attracts crowds; add the bonus of FA Cup action and why would you not want to see what was happening? Allen Batsford was assembling a team ready to make Wimbledon famous for something other than the tennis championships up the road each summer.

Bath had set their stall out early and their manager, Bert Head, had organised his team well. The defence had been tasked with keeping the free-scoring Connell quiet and playing counter-attacking football. Wimbledon stuck to their guns and even though the pitch was heavy they were always looking for that killer pass to break the Bath resistance. Selwyn Rice was conducting the team in midfield like it was his own personal orchestra. Moving the ball around, with fierce tackling and endless running, he really was the key instrument as well as conductor. There were early chances, and Cooke should have done better when played in on goal by Somers, but he miskicked his

effort. Bath looked dangerous on the counter, boasting ex-Arsenal winger Alan Skirton in their ranks, and Bryant had to be alert to clear a cross for a corner. His game was cut short by injury though and this meant one less threat to worry over. Bath were forced to change their tactics and they reverted to a more defensive shape.

This invited Wimbledon on more and on the hour they nearly got the opening goal. Cooke did well to create space for himself but his shot fizzed past the post. Soon after that Bassett's shot was smartly saved. Then it was Guy's time to save as he kept out a great Tinson header. With the game entering the final ten minutes it seemed as if the Bath plan would work, and a replay would be played in the west country, but there was late drama as an indirect free kick was awarded to the Dons after Connell was obstructed. His touch from the set play to Mahon, however, was deflected harmlessly back in to play. Then with the clock reaching 90 minutes the fairy-tale cup tie finish for any schoolboy happened.

No one could quite believe what they witnessed and to this day it is a shot that lives in folklore for those who were there to see it. Mahon did not hesitate when a loose ball came his way at least 35 yards out. Often these distances get exaggerated over time, like the stuff of legend, but this was so far out, further than you would think possible. Tired legs did not come into it as Mahon hit the ball with such pace and power, and it went as true as an arrow into the Bath goal. It remains one of the single best moments of a

Wimbledon match – just ask anyone who was there. It put the Dons into the second round.

Kettering Town were the next FA Cup visitors to Plough Lane, and having beaten Swansea City 3-1 in the previous round their confidence was high. The form they carried over from the Southern League was also good so this was the toughest test yet on their run. Almost 6,000 fans came through the turnstiles just 11 days before Christmas, the biggest crowd for 11 seasons. The Dons' unbeaten run now stood at 24 and both teams fancied their chances of progression, which would mean a place in the third round for the first time for Wimbledon. As other teams had done before them, Kettering set up defensively with the hope of snatching a goal on the break. This only allowed Wimbledon the space needed to apply endless pressure on their goal.

Eventually, after a fast start, the first goal of the game came. Cooke, who had been a huge influence in the campaign so far, later said of his header after 13 minutes, 'It's always nice to see them go in like that, especially when it's something we have rehearsed in training.' Captain Cooke was full of praise for his team, 'I think we played quite well and deserved our 2-0 lead at half-time.'

The second came on 37 minutes when Mahon, who had provided the cross for his skipper to open the scoring, converted a penalty won by the persistent play of Connell. The Kettering goalkeeper Gordon Livsey tripped up the

attacker after he let the ball run loose after a back-pass and Mahon put away the spot kick with ease. The game did not pass off without incident as Stockley was booked for a two-fingered gesture towards the away fans who had been giving him some stick. This was after he won the free kick that led to the opening goal. It was a shame that Kettering had shown up to play so defensively; in fact it was very naive given the amount of goals Wimbledon were capable of scoring. It was just a matter of time before they did so again. Once they had the lead the game was over as a contest.

History was made and Batsford had more than delivered already in his brief time at the club. 'At no time did I think we were going to lose. They [Kettering] didn't put us under anywhere near the same sort of pressure that Bath did in the last round,' the manager said. At this point though no one really cared as the draw for the next round was imminent, and surely this time Wimbledon would get their reward for such an impressive assault in the competition.

First Division Burnley, at Turf Moor. At last! The big time really had come calling. Granted, it was not the biggest fish in the pond, but they had decent players in their side, such as Brian Flynn, Ray Hankin, Paul Fletcher and Leighton James. This was just the tie that all Dons players, and fans, had hoped for. It was a chance to highlight their talent and togetherness.

For Allen Batsford this was a chance to pit his tactical nous against a team from the top table of English football.

Knowing how the opposition set up and played was key to Batsford's approach. He and coach Brian Hall set their own plans out during a training session just hours before the game. Fresh in the minds of the players, they created a blueprint which the team turned into a masterpiece of planning. Wins like this do not just happen – this was a team that was eighth in the First Division and complacency played a part in their thinking. Nevertheless, with the way Wimbledon played the game they deserved the win. One goal was enough to decide the tie, and once again it was Mahon who provided the magic. 'I thought Roger Connell was going to get in the way, but luckily he didn't, and I just hit it with my left foot,' he said. The ball went through a crowd of players in the box and ended up safely in the goal.

Mahon added, 'I wasn't even sure it went in. I never saw it hit the net!' Skipper Ian Cooke was amazed that the top-flight club's staff did not make any changes during the game as they were being beaten to everything aurally, 'Burnley should have spotted that their forwards were not winning the ball in the air. They really underestimated us.' Dickie Guy had to be on his toes a few times, but nowhere near as much as he would have anticipated before the game. It was his opposite number who was being tested more frequently and although the England under-23 stopper Alan Stevenson was equal to most things that came his way he could only parry Cooke's effort in the 49th minute into the path of Mahon. It was the first time since Darlington in the 1920s

that a non-league team had beaten a First Division side. Burnley defender Peter Noble was clearly dejected but also praised his amateur counterparts, 'I know what it must feel like for Wimbledon but let's face it, we want shooting.'

Batsford had done his homework and identified that Welsh international Leighton James would be Burnley's main threat, so he doubled up on him with Stockley and Bassett. The final whistle was greeted with whooping and hollering. Perhaps this was the first twinkling of a Crazy Gang, and as the pre-purchased champagne started to flow – was that confidence or simply good preparation? – the manager told reporters, 'Absolutely marvellous. But we should never really have put a First Division side out of the cup.'

With the game won all ears turned to the radio and the draw for the next round. Surely any draw now could not top this one, and if it did would Wimbledon be able to repeat their dramatics? Of the Dons' next opponents, Batsford then said, 'Couldn't be better. Last year I thought they were the finest team in the land. But now we feel we can go there and do well.' Who was he referring to? Leeds. Leeds United.

Having beaten the top Lancashire side, the Dons would now travel to Yorkshire, to Elland Road and a team packed full of international footballers. 'Leeds are such a worldly team. But we shall be going there to make it as difficult as possible for them, and we shall probably ask advice from a First Division club again,' said Ian Cooke,

who was sure that Leeds would be more aware of the south Londoners after this huge upset, 'I don't think Leeds will underestimate us as much as Burnley did.' And this was ratified by their manager Jimmy Armfield: 'We must treat them [Wimbledon] as professionals and not get complacent and underestimate the opposition. It will be important to be in the right frame of mind.'

And so came 25 January and the journey to Elland Road and infamy. In front of over 46,000 fans – including 2,000 hardy Dons followers – the largest crowd of the fourth round, another footballing miracle occurred. This time Wimbledon did not win the match but they did win the hearts and minds of the nation with a backs-to-the-wall performance that repelled everything the mighty Leeds could throw at them. Goalkeeper Dickie Guy was in outstanding form and even had the audacity to save a penalty with less than ten minutes left in the contest. It was one of those days that come around once in a generation. If Batsford thought that Wimbledon should never have defeated First Division Burnley, then he sure knew how to play down the odds of his team.

'I don't usually save many penalties,' Guy said in the aftermath of what he had achieved with his team-mates. 'I made up my mind a week ago that if Peter Lorimer took a penalty I'll go to my right. Most of the blasters who have taken them against me put it that side.' Lorimer was exactly that, a blaster of the ball, whether it be from the spot or

open play. This time, although struck well, it was not the Scot's best penalty. 'It's worth missing all the others to have stopped this one,' Guy grinned. 'Perhaps I was saving up for it.' With time remaining in the game Guy was still busy and could not bask in his glory moment. Leeds, fuelled by the miss, or rather save, piled forward but Guy would not let anything past him. This was a team that had only conceded one goal so far in the entire run, in the fourth minute all the way back in their first tie at Bracknell. That seemed a long time ago now as Guy flew across his line and denied Eddie Gray, Johnny Giles and Gordon McQueen with some point-blank saves. 'I don't remember much about the final whistle. I just got to the dressing room and anyone who was anyone was there. I was dragged out to face the media. I had to have a swig of brandy to calm myself down!' recalled Guy. He was later to be interviewed by the BBC and then after staying over in Leeds for the night, he travelled back to London with his wife in an ITV car, as he was booked in to be part of *The Big Match*, hosted by Brian Moore. 'It was the highlight of my career,' Guy said.

As much as this game will be known for Guy's heroics, it could also have been a day for Keiron Somers as he turned down the opportunity of a square pass to play in Cooke or Connell. Instead, he attempted to take on one too many men and his chance went begging. The closest the Dons came to a goal was when Billy Edwards' well-struck shot hit the post. All the Wimbledon players on this day were

heroes and it's wrong to single too many out, but there was some outstanding work in defence by Selwyn Rice until he had to leave the game early in the second half, to be replaced by Glen Aitken. Rice said, 'I just had a shot. [Billy] Bremner left his tackle a bit late when he got me. It was the first kick he'd had until then! When I got to the other end of the field there was blood all over the place.' After receiving several painkilling injections, the gash would require three stitches.

Batsford kept his cool over the penalty decision – it was an obvious foul by Bassett on Eddie Gray – but after the game had some harsh words about the horror tackle, 'Bremner went over the ball. What amazed me is that the ref saw it, told Bremner off but didn't give a free kick. It makes a nonsense of things.' Leeds were very ponderous in their approach play, and even though they respected the Dons they never really enjoyed any sustained pressure until the panic of not getting their desired result started to set in. 'We gave the ball away too much in midfield,' Armfield rued afterwards. There were harsh words said in the home team dressing room after the game, but already more plans were being made for the replay after this fascinating cup tie ended goalless. And to think that Wimbledon did this without the services of the talismanic Micky Mahon, who missed out due to being stricken with flu.

The defending First Division champions had another chance to 'ease through' to the next round, such were the

words of former boss Don Revie, and Brian Clough, who had of course been beaten by a Batsford team before. This, though, was a different chapter, in an altogether different story. The replay was originally planned for Plough Lane but was moved to Crystal Palace's Selhurst Park ground, such was the demand for tickets, a decision that was not taken easily. When tickets initially went on sale they soon sold out and fears of touts and forgeries meant the safest option was to relocate the tie to the neighbours' larger ground, coupled with a very waterlogged pitch which led to it being delayed for a few days.

An even bigger crowd was in attendance to see a goalless first half which kept the impossible a reality, although it was almost a dream start as inside the first minute Somers had an effort cleared off the line by Terry Yorath, and then Rice forced David Harvey into a super save. Still inside the first five minutes, Connell let the occasion get to him after he dispossessed Yorath inside the area only to fire his shot well wide of the goal. With the early flurry of chances gone it was Leeds who started to come into the game and push the Dons back on to their heels, but the stubborn defence did not yield. That was until the 50th minute when Bassett, who had given away the penalty in the first game, was not so lucky this time as a wild Johnny Giles shot deflected wickedly off the defender and gave Guy no chance of stopping the ball going in. 'It wasn't the hardest of shots. I was in line with it and all I heard was

Dickie Guy shouting “Keeper!” So, I turned sideways to move out the way,’ Bassett recalled. ‘But I just couldn’t get my left knee out of the way in time and the ball hit it and went in the other corner.’

It would have been forgiven if Wimbledon had folded at this point but to their credit, and the manager’s, they stuck with it and even though they could only create half chances they did stay in the game. Amazingly, despite having taken their more illustrious opponents to a replay which was lost to a deflected goal, Batsford came under fire for not being aggressive in his tactics, but when you’ve equalled an FA Cup record with seven consecutive clean sheets and are known for having one of the meanest defences in the whole of non-league, it didn’t worry the manager too much. As for Leeds, they did not retain the league title that season but did go on to the European Cup Final where they lost 2-0 to Bayern Munich.

The following season the Dons went on another run to FA Cup glory. This time they were afforded a late start as they entered the competition in the fourth qualifying round. A local derby against Kingstonian brought back some memories of clashes with the Ks through the decades, and Wimbledon, now in full flow, put their neighbours to the sword with a six-goal blast. Just over 3,000 came through the gate to see the Dons start their cup exploits with a goal inside ten minutes by Cooke, and although the visitors soon grabbed a goal back this only pushed

Wimbledon on harder. Bryant restored their lead before Mahon got another wonderful goal on the stroke of half-time. At 3-1 the game was all but done so Wimbledon played in a more relaxed manner and scored twice in a minute, Bryant with his second and Connell getting his obligatory goal. Edwards rounded the scoring off a couple of minutes from full time.

The first round brought some echoes of the past as the Dons were drawn against Nuneaton Borough, who had beaten them 2-0 to start the Batsford era. That game seemed a long time ago now, such was the amazing FA Cup run and then Southern League title win. Borough were on an unbeaten run of 18 games in the league, so came into this tie full of confidence, and backed by a crowd just shy of 4,500. Once more the game plan was set and Wimbledon shut down the Nuneaton attack and nicked the only goal at the start of the second half through Connell.

For the second round, Brentford were drawn out of the hat to visit Plough Lane. This was another one the Dons players and faithful could feel confident about. The Bees were a mid-table side in the Fourth Division, and with indifferent form. They had former Wimbledon goalkeeper Paul Priddy between the sticks, and whether that would play into their hands with inside knowledge only time would tell. Almost 8,400 packed into Plough Lane with lofty expectations but it was Brentford who struck first to quieten the crowd, then a second was added from the spot

before half-time. Brentford shut up shop and got the win. The adventure would have to wait for at least one more year.

After a second successive Southern League championship there was ambitious talk of pushing for a promotion to the Football League but to do that, the Dons needed to put themselves back in front of the public. Winning non-league titles and trophies was one thing, but the Wimbledon board wanted more. Coming into the FA Cup first round weekend the Dons had lost three of their last four games ahead of a home tie against Isthmian League side Woking, who were making the short trip to Plough Lane. It was a special day for Dickie Guy, who was making his 500th first-team appearance. He did well to keep a clean sheet but was also thankful that striker Tony Roberts did not have his clean shooting boots on as he squandered two chances after the break with the game still tied 0-0. It wasn't until the 72nd minute that Wimbledon got the winner. A free kick from Bassett was flicked on by Holmes, with Bryant free to score.

More Isthmian League opponents were drawn out next, which meant another local team, as this time Leatherhead were the ones to try and knock the Dons off their perch. Wimbledon's form was still not great in the league and it was hoped that a cup run would be a spark. With a place in the third round on the line, and thoughts going back to the missed opportunity the season before, Wimbledon played with far more purpose, and despite some stubborn resistance

early on the first goal was knocked in ten minutes before half-time, Bryant getting the breakthrough. Any chance of an upset was quelled just two minutes after the restart with Ricky Marlowe getting the first of his two goals, which were either side of a Reid effort for Leatherhead. Now the stage was set, with the third-round draw serving up another salivating tie.

Jack Charlton had won pretty much all there was to win – after all there is not much more to prove once you are a World Cup winner. But now he oversaw a Middlesbrough team struggling in the First Division. They wanted to make life as difficult as possible and unnerve the Dons, and part of the plan was a refusal to play under the floodlights so the kick-off was moved to a slightly earlier start of 2pm. A crowd of just over 8,500 was considered poor given the visitors for this tie and the push for promotion. Both teams blamed each other for not swelling the gate, or maybe it was the bad weather, a cold, dank day in south-west London, or it was possibly just good planning to stay away as the tie didn't live up to its pre-match hype. 'League teams never looked forward to playing us, they were used to their luxury,' said Dave Donaldson.

It was true; Plough Lane was the archetypal non-league ground with its muddy pitch, and low lighting, with dressing rooms that were small and pokey. A far cry from the Ayresome Park home comforts. That was the beauty of the FA Cup, though; the small teams had an advantage

when they were paired up at home against a big club – it was the greatest of levellers. As well as Charlton being the manager, Middlesbrough had a certain Graeme Souness in their ranks at the start of his lengthy career. Wimbledon went toe-to-toe for most of the game, and chances were few and far between, but Donaldson also recalled a goal that was called back: ‘We felt we had a perfectly good goal disallowed. Roger Connell put it in, and the referee harshly chalked it off. It would have been perfect justice for their arrogance.’

With the first game ending without a goal, it was up to Teesside for the replay three days later. Both sides were unchanged, but the one thing that had changed was the weather as a snow-covered pitch greeted the Dons. As with the Leeds game two years before the Wimbledon defence was holding firm and able to keep Boro at arm’s length but the First Division side were relentless in their pursuit of a goal and eventually it came via a penalty. Kevin Tilley took down David Armstrong, who got up and placed the ball past Guy. It was tough on the young full-back who had a decent game, but as Armstrong got by him he had been late in the tackle. ‘I just remember thinking it was so unnecessary. Yes, it was a penalty, but I thought there was no need for it, we should never have given it away,’ said a despondent Ian Cooke, who had been helping cover the area as per the Batsford game plan. Every time a winger got the ball, the idea was to double

up and with Cooke chaperoning Tilley they should have dealt with it better.

For Cooke it was bittersweet as it would be the last chance he would have at a giant-killing. Wimbledon would go on to win the Southern League again and duly get elected to the Football League. Cooke said, 'Allen had said that if we went into the league, we would stay part-time and that suited my career. But when it came to it the decision was taken to go full-time. I was 32 and that was when I left to join Slough.'

One of Wimbledon's best and most loyal servants would never get to play in the Football League. 'It was one of the biggest regrets of my life,' he added.