

An interview with former Merton Councillor and Wimbledon FC fan - Horst Bullinger

### **WHY DIDN'T MERTON COUNCIL DO MORE TO HELP WIMBLEDON FC?**

It was a question of finances.

During my time on Merton Council I was invited by the British Embassy in Berlin to attend a reception given by the Ambassador for a German school class who had visited Merton the year before and experienced that some of their boys got beaten up. Together with a teacher who had made this public I followed up that case and represented the Council at the Embassy, relaying the Mayor's apologies to the boys and the school.

There was no money to pay for my trip. The Mayor told me that she couldn't even get funding for travelling to France for visiting Merton's partner town there. So I went to Berlin at my own expense. Needless to say, the British Embassy didn't offer any help with my travel costs either. The school also had to fund their bus journey of about 500-km themselves.

Merton was - and presumably still is - in dire straits. They had to crank up the parking fees and fines to a level which must by now be among the highest in the country. If all car drivers in Merton suddenly left their cars at home or - if using them - obeyed the parking regulations, the Council would have to increase the Council Tax even further.

Apart from the financial malaise, one has to say that the then Labour Council was not too keen anyway on helping Wimbledon FC, as Labour didn't win a single Council seat in Wimbledon itself.

Merton is an artificially created borough, throwing together three areas. Wimbledon (which had a Council on its own before the other two joined), Morden and Mitcham. These areas have not much in common and in the case of Mitcham, nothing at all.

When the Tories took over Merton in 2006 on a shaky majority the train had left the station, but they would neither have been able nor willing to finance a move of Wimbledon FC back into the Borough or anywhere near it. There were just not enough votes to be won by supporting the football club, rather the opposite.

I know of a Tory councillor candidate who stood in an election in the ward that includes Plough Lane and who was a staunch WFC supporter. He had no chance to win a seat there at the time, but he tried his best by pretending to support the residents in their campaign against a return. In fairness to him, he was well aware of all the facts, especially the Council's financial blight. But this action signalled quite clearly that by then the discussion about Plough Lane was at best an academic one.

He is to this day a great friend of mine and I readily forgave him his hypocrisy. After all being born and bred in Yorkshire didn't stop him from being a life time supporter of Manchester United, which must be the pinnacle of hypocrisy, or 'treason' as the Yorkshire folk would call it. He did however come with me regularly to MK for the first season there and he doesn't support AFC Wimbledon.

### **WHY DIDN'T THE PEOPLE OF WIMBLEDON GET BEHIND THE FOOTBALL CLUB?**

The Wimbledon public is lukewarm about football. I shall never be able to understand where ca. 30,000 supporters came from in 1988 at the Wembley cup final. The majority of them seemed to come from nowhere and disappeared after the next day's celebrations without trace.

When I walked through Wimbledon Village on the Sunday morning, together with a lot of others on my way to the celebration at the town hall, I overheard two elderly ladies sitting outside a café. One of the old dears asked the other: "Do you know what on earth is going on here?" That is Wimbledon for you.

AFC Wimbledon can try as hard as they like, they will not be able to create a climate for football in that part of London. Also don't forget the close proximity of clubs like Chelsea and Fulham.

## **WHAT WAS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF WISA?**

The role of WISA wasn't clear in the beginning.

I joined them as I understood that they simply wanted to bring Wimbledon FC back to the Borough. I remember a meeting during which Kris Stewart said that "our mate" Roger Casale, (then Wimbledon MP) will surely help us. I raised a voice of caution and suggested that everything Roger Casale promised should be taken with a great pinch of salt.

Not much later I met Roger in the street near my home in Raynes Park and he asked me if I really wanted to keep Wimbledon FC in London. I told him I certainly did, but you could easily see that he would be guided only by the vote winning (or losing) capacity of the issue. This is not a cheap political jibe as I was fully aware that my own party would view things in a similar light.

WISA's real role became clear soon afterwards when they dived head over heels into the AFC creation. Some of the articles on WISA's website demonstrate what the Council really had in mind for the great old Plough Lane. It makes me sick to read WISA's statement of thanks to Barratt and the Merton Council.

Quite a few of my friends including Tory Councillors have become staunch AFC supporters and even my own grandson has joined a talent development group at the AFC. But I hope he graduates to Chelsea or Fulham at some stage.

In my opinion decent Wimbledon FC supporters were fooled into believing the Wimbledon FC follow-on lies dished out by WISA and are now AFC supporters, like one or two of my friends who were hoodwinked by the AFC propaganda. If they regarded themselves just as a new Wimbledon club I would wish AFC well, but after stealing the WFC history (with Merton Council's blessing!) such support is not forthcoming.

Please don't think for a moment that I wouldn't be "so vocal" if I didn't reside abroad. Firstly, I still reside in Wimbledon, (by 'ex womble' I meant 'ex WFC supporter'), but spend a fair amount of time abroad. I have no hesitation to put my name to my comments and I was known on the Council for never holding back my very own views, often at the very end of the party line.

## **DO YOU THINK THE FANS OF WIMBLEDON FC SHOULD HAVE DONE MORE?**

I am ashamed to this day of my previous fellow WFC 'supporters' who spent all their time, before and throughout the matches at Selhurst Park shouting down the Norwegians and - literally - turning their backs onto the players. It can be assumed that most of those characters now support AFC and that is one reason why I would never be able to take much interest in that club.

The fans did let the club down in my opinion. Their behaviour was quite disgraceful and must have affected the team's performance during all home matches at that time. If they had turned up in sufficient numbers at Selhurst Park, the club may have been able to stay in London, but there was no sign of sufficient fan support for WFC, regardless where in the area a stadium would have been built.

I am convinced that if Wimbledon was in North London, you would still get a sizeable number of ex- WFC supporters to the matches at MK. The journey from SW London however is extremely time consuming.

Global warming is a bit like AFC Wimbledon. If you tell the people a story long enough they begin to believe it in it

## **WHO DO YOU SEE AS THE TRUE CONTINUATION OF WIMBLEDON FC?**

As an ex Womble, as far as I am concerned MK Dons are the proper follow-on club from the old Wimbledon Football Club, regardless of all the nonsense dished out on the 'Franchise' issue. As a local Councillor in Merton I had the doubtful pleasure of witnessing the cloning of AFC Wimbledon.

This was a cheap way out for the Council and an easy way out for the fans. The Council avoided giving proper assistance to Wimbledon FC for staying in Wimbledon. Mind you, in the end they couldn't find a place for their AFC creation in the Borough either and they ended up in Kingston.

### **WHAT WAS THE MERTON COUNCIL POSITION ON AFC WIMBLEDON?**

I wouldn't say there was an 'agenda' within the Council against Wimbledon FC and for AFC Wimbledon, at least not early on anyway. And it certainly wasn't a party political issue. As I have already said, I was in a hopeless minority, even in my own party, who must have feared to be saddled with an insurmountable financial problem, if they won the next election.

There was simply not enough money available for supporting the WFC. I don't know whose brainchild it was to found AFC in the first place. WISA was presumably one of the movers and shakers and both sides on the Council were in favour of the new club.

WISA was formed during the proposed move to Dublin, in my view that's when the groundwork was laid for the AFCW club. Later when the Dublin move was stopped from happening the move to Wales was then proposed by Hamman this again was stopped by Welsh FA.

Hamman then managed to sell the club to the Norwegians. All this time WISA were still about and I think were making plans for formation of AFCW.

When the move to MK was proposed by Koppel (who had bought out the Norwegians), WISA members and other Wimbledon FC supporters formed AFC Wimbledon. The whole club was we are led to believe thought out and up and running within 3-4 months!! Or was it planned in advance and this was an excuse to make it a reality.

### **DID WIMBLEDON FC HAVE TO MOVE FROM PLOUGH LANE?**

The move away from Plough Lane was necessary, as the facilities were a bit of a joke. After finding out how to get to Selhurst Park, it wasn't half the problem for the supporters as many made it out to be. There are plenty of supporters of other London clubs in the Wimbledon area and beyond who have to cope with much more arduous journeys to their home matches than a trip from Wimbledon to Selhurst Park. For a lot of supporters, e.g. in Mitcham it was even easier to get there than to Plough Lane, where parking was virtually non-existent.

That being said, we all thought that Selhurst Park was a temporary solution for the time needed to find and develop a new ground, or indeed develop Plough Lane by using land occupied by the Dog Stadium and an adjacent transformer station.

There was the idea to go to Beddington Lane in Mitcham, which would have been quite a good location. But apart from the lack of funding, the notorious Wimbledon nimbysists would have fought any development of a football stadium.

There was a quite militant residents association at Plough Lane who fought tooth and nail against the return of Wimbledon FC to their original home. Mind you, they got what they deserved. One of the worst conceived flat block developments in the country, without any consideration for traffic and parking. Instead of having problems on match days, they have grid lock every day.

### **WHAT DID YOU THINK WHEN WIMBLEDON FC CHANGED TO MK DONS?**

Well, the name died, but if the ingredients survive at MK Dons as a new shell for them. One should look on the bright side of life, rather than death. Merton Council, Sam Hammam, the Norwegians and Pete Winkelman were involved in this process. But Peter Winkelman in a positive way, because without him the funeral would indeed have taken place.

## **AND WHAT TO THE FUTURE?**

I just hope now for the sake of the club, that Milton Keynes slowly develops a football culture to go with the tradition of Wimbledon Football Club, albeit under the new name MK Dons.