



## The Story of MK Dons - Part 1 - The Early Years

As we all know, MK Dons are the legal continuation of Wimbledon FC, who were formed in 1889 (as Wimbledon Old Central Football Club) and played, most famously, at Plough Lane in Merton Urban District (now London Borough of Merton) from September 1912 to May 1991, when the club moved their first team home matches to Selhurst Park as part of a groundshare agreement with Crystal Palace, following the publication of the Taylor Report on football ground safety. They played at Selhurst Park until their move to Milton Keynes in September



**Plough Lane**

2003. Following severe financial problems the club had gone into administration in June 2003 prior to the move and the following June the club was rescued by InterMK Ltd, led by Pete Winkelman, when they came out of administration and the name was changed to MK Dons. This was to reflect the move to their new home, whilst still paying respect to the heritage of the Dons.

**Pete Winkelman** had been keen on bringing a professional football club to Milton Keynes for some time and had had meetings with a number of other clubs such as Luton, Barnet, Crystal Palace, Queens Park Rangers, and Wimbledon but none came to fruition apart from Wimbledon. He had made it clear that he was not out to steal a football league club. He was only interested in bringing a club which was in serious difficulties to Milton Keynes, and then only if a move to MK was the last resort to ensure survival. Wimbledon FC was the only club which fitted the criteria at that time. The planned new stadium was to be part of a multi use retail development, which was the only realistic way to sustain a new football stadium. Milton Keynes was not unique in this respect. Similar ventures had taken place at Manchester City, Cardiff and Coventry.

**Wimbledon FC** had, of course, been trying to move home from as far back as 1980. In fact the club had been invited for discussions about moving to a new location by Watford, Luton, Birmingham, West Bromwich Albion, Portsmouth, Brighton, Milton Keynes, Cardiff and Scotland. However, in 1980 Ron Noades, then chairman of Wimbledon FC, had entered talks with the Milton Keynes Development Corporation about the possibility of moving the club to Milton Keynes. Around this time Noades purchased local team Milton Keynes City FC and Wimbledon directors, including Sam Hammam, Bernie Coleman and Jimmy Rose became Milton Keynes City directors on top of their roles at Wimbledon. Noades had publicly stated there was no future for Wimbledon FC at Plough Lane.

His plan was to merge the two clubs to produce a club using Wimbledon's place in the Football League under the Milton Keynes FC name. There were also more surreptitious reasons for buying the club which are not relevant here. Needless to say the scheme fell through and the club was sold on.

Milton Keynes FC finally folded in 1985. The name did briefly appear again in the late 90s but this was basically a Sunday League club comprising mostly employees of Mercedes-Benz, a local employer, and known as Mercedes-Benz Football Club. The Club changed their name to Milton Keynes FC in 1998 but folded in 2003 following financial difficulties.

Back to Wimbledon FC and in 1996, Sam Hammam seriously considered moving the club to Dublin. Luckily for the fans the Football Association of Ireland blocked the move, but the Norwegians who invested in the Club at that time were led to believe (rightly or wrongly) that the English football authorities would not pose a problem.

Wimbledon had also written to every Borough close to the area about a move, but none were forthcoming. In January 2000 Sam Hammam wrote to the Norwegian owners of the club to voice his concerns at the financial predicament. In May 2000 they were relegated from the Premier League.



Then in August 2000 Pete Winkelman of the Milton Keynes Stadium Consortium (MKSC) approached Charles Koppel, left, who was then Chairman of Wimbledon FC. MKSC were a group of local business people who together with stakeholders and community groups were working to secure the provision of professional football in Milton Keynes. MKSC were building a major development in the Denbigh area of Milton Keynes, which is near Bletchley. Their proposals included a modern, state of the art, 28,000 all-seater stadium. Pete Winkelman had a meeting with Mr Koppel to discuss his proposals for the provision of the new stadium. It had been both a preoccupation and a priority for Mr Koppel to find a home for the club since he arrived in April 2000. On 4<sup>th</sup> January 2001, Wimbledon first announced that they were considering a move to Milton Keynes. At a Board Meeting in July 2001, after much discussion, it was resolved that the Club should indeed pursue the Milton Keynes option and agree the Heads of Terms. Most Board members felt the Club had no choice.

In a letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2001 to the Chief Executive of the Football League at the time, Charles Koppel wrote *"The move to Milton Keynes represents the only realistic solution for Wimbledon Football Club, which is immediate and welcoming"*.

On the financial front it is interesting to read the views of the appointed accountants, Deloitte & Touche, who are widely regarded to be among the foremost experts in the field of football club finance.

*"The move to Milton Keynes is WFC's last chance of financial survival. If it is allowed to move it may then look with some optimism at its future and is expected to develop to its true potential and compete equally with other clubs of its standing and with the hope of promotion and further success. If it is not it will not simply drop down the divisions, it will go into liquidation. The shareholders would not provide further finance, and the Directors would be forced to put WFC into an insolvency procedure. Since there are no assets to fund an administration the Club would go into immediate liquidation. No-one would be likely to fund the heavy losses with no prospect of recovering any financial outlay and so it is highly unlikely that the Club would be taken over. Infinitely more harm would be caused to football if WFC went out of business. Everyone would suffer, most of all WFC's true fans. It would be replaced in Football League Division 1 by a different team altogether."*

In a letter dated 2 August 2001 WFC therefore made a formal application for the Football League's approval of the move to Milton Keynes. The Football League Board met on 16 August 2001 and unanimously rejected WFC's application. However, the Club, not to be deterred, wrote a letter to the Board of the Football League reminding them of their basic right to a fair and impartial hearing, based on fact. The Board met on 17 April 2002 to reconsider the decision concerning WFC's application to relocate. On 2 May 2002 the FA appointed an Independent Commission of Inquiry, comprising three members, to review the case.

On 28 May 2002, The Independent Commission came to a decision, approving the move with the words, “*Our decision is that, in light of its exceptional circumstances, WFC should be given approval to relocate to Milton Keynes.*” Note that the words used were “*WFC should be given approval to relocate*” and not “*WFC should be relocated to Milton Keynes*”. In other words, Wimbledon FC were the motivating force behind the move.

In the Commission’s report they stated:

*“We do not believe, with all due respect, that the Club’s links with the community around the Plough Lane site or in Merton are so profound, or the roots go so deep, that they will not survive a necessary transplant to ensure WFC’s survival. What is unusual about WFC fans is that they do not seem to come from a single geographical area. Indeed, the vast majority of WFC fans do not live in Merton or Wimbledon. 20% of current season ticket holders live in Merton and 10% in Wimbledon. We do not accept that WFC will die if the Club relocates. The Club has been in Croydon for 11 years (almost half its Football League history). There is no stadium which is a focus for the community in Merton, and has not been for 11 years.”*

### 2002/3

Wimbledon had now achieved their aim and the wheels were set in motion. There were various delays throughout the year, however, and The Dons therefore started the new season at Selhurst Park on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2002 in front of a crowd of 2,476, in the Championship. The Manager at that time was Stuart Murdoch, who had been promoted from goalkeeping coach in June 2002, replacing Terry Burton who was sacked after narrowly missing the play offs twice in a row.



**Selhurst Park**

Attendances plummeted, due in no small part to the formation in 2002 of AFC Wimbledon by a group of supporters against the move. This had the effect of splitting the support, which drastically affected the finances of Wimbledon FC and contributed to their later problems. The Dons finished the season in 10<sup>th</sup> position but owing to the severe financial problems, the club finally went into administration on 6 June 2003. In the meantime, Milton Keynes were converting their National Hockey Stadium for football use in preparation for the anticipated move.



**National Hockey Stadium**

## 2003/4

Initially, Wimbledon started the new season at Selhurst Park against Crewe Alexander, winning 3-1 in front of 1,145 supporters. That was their last win at Selhurst Park before their move to Milton Keynes. On 27 September at the National Hockey Stadium, Wimbledon played their first game in Milton Keynes against Burnley, with a rousing comeback from 2-0 down to claim a 2-2 draw; Dean Holdsworth scoring the first goal for the Dons in Milton Keynes. This was in the Championship, of course. The attendance for that first match was 6,789, which was incredible in the circumstances, as the attendance at the last Wimbledon 'home' game at Selhurst Park had been 1,054, against Wigan. However, it had been a miserable season and Wimbledon ended up at the bottom of the Championship, 23 points from safety, and were relegated to League One. During this period Inter MK had been preparing their bid for a takeover of the club and on 18 March 2004 the bid was accepted by the club's Creditors and the Wimbledon FC were brought out of administration.



**Wimbledon v Burnley  
27<sup>th</sup> September 2003**

## 2004/5



At the beginning of the 2004/5 season, the club was still managed by Stuart Murdoch, but they made a poor start and in November, Murdoch was fired. Jimmy Gilligan, the Assistant Manager held the reins for a few weeks until, in December, Danny Wilson (left), previously at Bristol City, was appointed as the new manager of MK Dons, the change of name and ownership having taken place over the summer, following the rescue by InterMK as described above. As usual, under new management, things began to improve for a while but things eventually went downhill and they finished 5<sup>th</sup> from bottom, escaping relegation only by virtue of Wrexham having had 10 points deducted for being in administration, and by a marginally better goal difference than Torquay.

## 2005/6

There was to be no such fortune for Wilson this season when, following further dismal results, the Dons were relegated to Division 2. They had one of the worst away records in the division, losing 13 games, a tally only equalled by Yeovil. Following this unacceptable showing, Danny Wilson was also shown the door on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2006.

Enter Martin Allen, of the well known footballing family, who came from Brentford, having resigned at the end of May following them narrowly missing out on promotion in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division Play Off Semi Final in 2005. It is interesting to note that one of Brentford's previous managers and also Chairman, was Ron Noades, who had figured regularly in Wimbledon FC's early attempts to move to Milton Keynes.



## 2006/7

During the 2006/7 season things looked a lot better under Allen and the Dons looked to be automatic promotion candidates for most of the season. However, in the event, they finished 4<sup>th</sup> and entered another Play Off battle. Unfortunately, they lost 1-2 to Shrewsbury, at home, the only goal being scored by Keith Andrews, having held them to a 0-0 draw at Gay Meadow. Andrews had been had brought in by Allen from Hull City at the start of the campaign. During the summer of 2007, Allen was offered the job as Leicester City manager, which he took, but only lasted 5 games before he was sacked.

## 2007/8

In the summer of 2007 the Dons' new stadium was rapidly coming to completion, or as complete as it was likely to be for the next few seasons. Only the lower tier would be seated for the present, which would still provide enough room for 22,000 supporters, more than enough until they got into the Championship. Finally, on 11th August 2007 the Milton Keynes Dons finally moved into their new permanent home and looked forward to a brighter and secure future.



COYD

continued in Part 2