

Neal Ardley

Younger AFC Wimbledon fans may only know tonight's special guest as being a former Dons manager – but Neal Ardley's long association with Wimbledon's football club began a long time before that!

Capped 10 times at England Under-21 level, Neal came through the famed Wimbledon youth system that produced so much homegrown talent, in his case playing alongside the likes of Chris Perry and Stewart Castledine and, still a teenager, he made his first-team debut in a 2-1 away win at Aston Villa in April 1991.

He would go on to spend 11 years in the Dons side that continued to punch above its weight in the Premier League and reached the semi-finals of both domestic cup competitions in 1997. When Wimbledon lost their coveted top-flight place in 2000, no-one looked more distraught at The Dell than Neal himself. In 2002, after 245 appearances, he moved to Watford, meeting Neil Cox, with whom he would later form a successful managerial duo.



After 111 games for the Hornets he joined Cardiff City, then Millwall, but returned to the Bluebirds to become manager of their Youth Academy after hanging up his boots in 2007. Neal had already

prepared for a post-football career at the early age of 24, taking coaching badges and completed his UEFA Pro coaching qualification in 2010.

When the spectre of the move to Buckinghamshire happened, Neal had been very supportive of AFC Wimbledon, wishing the Club well and along with former Dons teammates Marcus Gayle and Jason Euell, was present at the reformed Dons first home game in the Combined Counties League. So it was perhaps no surprise when all three returned to Wimbledon in various capacities.

Neal was appointed Wimbledon manager in October 2012, bringing Neil Cox with him as his assistant. It was a baptism of fire as the struggling Dons were in danger of quickly losing the EFL place they had worked so hard to earn and going into the final game were sat in a relegation spot, but pulled out a nervy 2-1 win over Fleetwood Town to escape the drop. Ardley would also be the first Wimbledon manager to claim the scalp of their nemesis with a 3-2 EFL Trophy victory in Buckinghamshire. But it was 2015/16 that was the highlight as the Dons reached League One with a well-executed 2-0 Play-off Final win over Plymouth Argyle at Wembley. Life in the third tier was often difficult and after six years and 326 matches in charge, Neal and the Dons parted company two years later.

Neal continued to hold prestigious managerial roles however, taking charge at Notts County, then Solihull Moors, taking both clubs to within 90 minutes of reaching the EFL and his most recent position was a five-month spell at York City. We are sure he'll be 'back in the game' soon and are very pleased to welcome him back to the Dons this evening!

