

WEMBLEY heartache shouldn't make a chairman happy, but for Wycombe's Andrew Howard play-off agony in 2015 was crucial for a brighter Chairboys future.

Joe Pigott's 120th-minute equaliser denied Wycombe a place in League One as Southend won the League Two play-off final on penalties, earning promotion in their place.

While the Adams Park faithful were left devastated, Howard breathed a huge sigh of relief.

He insisted that Wycombe would have been put in an impossible financial position had they gone up.

If Howard's assessment of where Wycombe stood just over a year ago is refreshingly honest, it's in large part because he now thinks they are financially ready to take their place in the division above.

Stability

"I was the only one who was relieved when we lost the play-off final," he explains.

"I think it would have tipped us over the edge. The loss allowed the club to be in a much better position.

"Now, we'll be in the same position financially in League One or League Two. And I think that, if the lads play well and stay away from too many injuries, then we have as good a squad as anybody in the division."

The financial stability Wycombe have secured since Howard's arrival in 2014, with the club in danger of slipping out of the Football League, comes before a potential windfall from Jordan Ibe's £15m move from Liverpool to Bournemouth.

While the exact details of the sell-on fee are still being ironed out between the three clubs, the 20-year-old's switch to Anfield from Adams Park back in 2012 could be huge for a club that had

By Paul Eddison

to scrap their academy the same year.

But, whereas Ibe is the once-in-a-blue-moon talent who earns his formative club big bucks – much like John Stones has done for Barnsley this summer – Howard is just as focused on creating a regular pipeline of talent.

"We haven't enough money at the moment for an academy but youth is still very important for us," he says.

"A player like Ibe comes along maybe once every ten years and it's the players who have gone for £50,000 or £100,000 that are just as important for the club.

"It's also important to do the right thing when money comes in. When you get money in, you have to make a decision whether you want to put food on the table for a year or throw a big party.

"I'd rather put food on the table for a year, even if I do like parties.

"When I do leave this club, I want to say that it's in a better state than when I joined."

A businessman initially, Howard became Wycombe chairman as part of a bet. As a displaced Leeds fan, he vowed to take over the Chairboys if ever the two sides found themselves in the same division.

He followed through on that promise in 2014 and, two years on, feels he is finally getting to grips with the challenges of running a football club.

"Being in charge of a club is completely different to any other business," said Howard, the founder of Beechdean ice cream company, as well as Beechdean Motorsport.

"I have had to be a lot more



FINALLY GO FOR



REALIST: Wycombe chairman Andrew Howard knew that premature promotion could have ruined the club

PICTURE: Action Images

diplomatic, getting people on the same page. With a football club, everyone has an opinion."

That is its own challenge, but it helps to have such a strong working relationship with manager Gareth Ainsworth, who last year signed a five-and-a-half-year deal, a huge commitment for a club the size of Wycombe.

As Howard explains, when you have the right man, you keep hold of him

"Gareth is one of the key gen-

erals at the club. I get him into board meetings," says Howard.

"He's a brilliant man manager; one of the best I've come across. He looks after the football side of things, I don't intervene there. I don't understand football tactics. I'll only talk to him about body language and look after the people side."

And in terms of ambitions for this season?

"It's categorical, we're going for promotion."

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