

HERE'S a secret about Dean Brennan: He's always been a bit of a closet Wealdstone fan.

This isn't just him trying to convince me that coming to the Stones is probably the best move of his managerial career - he actually joined in the singing with the Stones regulars at St Albans a few years ago when his Hemel Hempstead side were hot on the heels of the Saints in the play-off race!

"It's true - me and Stu (his assistant manager Stuart Maynard) were at the game on a filthy wet night in March two or three years ago and were under the cover with the crowd, watching the game and hoping St Albans would lose. The Wealdstone fans are always noisy - we knew this from the games at Hemel when they always packed out the away end - and when they went 3-0 up it was a time to celebrate and we joined in the songs!" said the new Stones boss.

"The passion and friendliness of the Wealdstone supporters has always struck me: We've been to most of the Monday night games at The Vale and it's always a good atmosphere - at Hemel we'd get decent crowds but they mainly just stood there at watched, at Wealdstone there's real interaction between the players and the crowd and we want to engender more of that at games.

"That was always the team talk when we brought Hemel to the Vale - Don't get bullied by the crowd, stand up to them and keep them quiet; get them moaning and you're halfway there .

"We know that when the fans come through the gate they want to be entertained and for the team to be honest and give everything. I want them to work their

It's the Stones' new boss **Dean Brennan**



A delighted Dean is unveiled as the new Wealdstone manager back in May by chairman Rory Fitzgerald (left)

socks off, do their jobs, tackle and win the ball, overload the opposition, get on the front foot and then the crowd will roar you home".

Dean admits that he is 'so grateful' to have the opportunity to work his magic at the Vale after such a difficult year - a year that began with him and Stuart looking forward to their seventh year in charge at Hemel Hempstead with the backing of chairman Dave Boggins.

They had built Hemel up from a team that should have been relegated from the Southern League Prem (rerieved by another club's facilities not being up to scratch) to a team that won that division by ten points - the same season, funnily enough, that

Wealdstone were winning the Ryman League by a similar margin. Then they established Hemel in the Conference South and got to the play offs in 2018.

"Last season kicked off with us fully expecting us to be at Hemel for ten years, and we had a contract that would have taken us there, but for one reason or another we never got around to signing it. We had an offer to manage a National League club, which we turned down, but then in September Glenn Tamplin at Billericay got in touch and impressed us with his ambition. It was a mistake to go there but, to be honest, Glenn is a good guy, with a lovely wife and kids and he has some honest and straight-talking people there with him. He just has some personal demons.

"He wanted to be team manager but never came out and said it. The salaries were astronomical, unsustainable... so much so that Stuart and I asked to have it written into our contracts that the wage bill would come down, and that's what basically Glenn's aim was until the end of he season.

"We had to be ruthless. We moved players on, however we could manage it. Glenn then went off to the States for rehab and then, a week after he came back (the night we beat Southend United in the County Cup) we were sacked. Just like that!"

He and Stuart (pictured right with Dean) were quickly approached by Kingstonian to fill the Surrey club's vacant management slot but within a few weeks Dean's four year old son Brogan was knocked down by a car (thankfully, not too seriously) and football took a secondary role.

Stuart was unwilling to take up the reins on his own and the pair were effectively made redundant midway through the season "Which, in hindsight, was probably one of the best things that ever happened to us" said Dean

"I believe player recruitment is 80% of the manager's job at this level, and being freed

for those few months allowed to us to get out and watch dozens and dozens of matches, not just midweek but on matchdays which was unthinkable just a few weeks earlier.

"We managed to get over 100 targets in our little black book - players from the local area we believe are talented and good enough to be successful at this level and above. It's a life you have to be committed too, and my partner Sophie says I should be committed after getting home night after night after watching some game in a freezing football ground!

"You don't always see a gem, but it's worth it for when you do uncover someone. And it can take months, even years - Dennon Lewis, for example, is someone we've tracked since his Watford

academy days and now he's finally signed for us. He's been criticised for taking up the Love Island opportunity but people don't see the sacrifices he's made just to get to this point - he's not getting paid to play football until August so why not go for it? He's been forking out of his own pocket to get to training and matches and deserved this opportunity so we're not going to deny him the chance".

One of Dean's best discoveries was Ollie Hawkins (the Portsmouth target man) who he saw come off the bench for Northwood half a dozen years ago and immediately have an impact with his tall, gangly style. Dean snapped him up for Hemel and he was an

integral part of his championship-winning team a couple of years later. Ditto Jordan Parkes, who Dean had tracked since his Watford Youth days.

"Jordan came to us as a full back but you could see in training that he was better suited to midfield. His finishing was extraordinary, so we moved him further up the field and within months he was the best attacking No.10 at that level - he got 30 goals from midfield when we won the

'As a manager you have to be committed .. and my partner Sophie reckons I should be committed with all hours I put in watching games'



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league!" said Dean.

I don't think Hemel appreciated what they had in the Brennan-Maynard management team. They were first hired by the club when Dean - who started up a wine import business soon after leaving the pro game and was managing Dunstable Town - happened to deliver a few crates to the home of Dave Boggins, the Hemel chairman. They fell into conversation and Boggins quickly pleaded with him to take over the vacant job at Vauxhall Road.

"It was a step up from Dunstable but there was no money. Me and Stuart wanted to succeed though, and pretty much put our jobs on hold to get out and about scouting players and building the club back up. It took some real sacrifice, not just from us but from our families.

"But it was worth it to see the club winning that title and getting promoted and that's something we can look back on with real pride".

Dean is now 39, one of the youngest managers in Wealdstone history (almost exactly the same age as Gordon Bartlett when he took charge in 1995) but his career has been chequered.

Brought up in the centre of Dublin and playing for Lourdes Athletic, he was part of the Republic of Ireland Under-18 squad when they won the European Championship in 1998 - featuring household names like Richard Dunne, Robbie Keane and Gary Doherty. "About 60 of the best Irish talent at that time was shipped over to English clubs and I was one of them - signed up by Sheffield Wednesday" recalls Dean.

"I was there three years but never played for the first team, but got ever so homesick and came back to Dublin in 2000 to play for Bohemians. Then the man who'd coached me at Sheffield Wednesday, the former England player Ricky Hill, got the manager's job at Luton in League One and signed me for the Hatters".

Dean, a midfielder/winger with a wicked dead-ball delivery, played nine games for Luton, but then it was off to Hitchin Town (47 goals, 20 goals) and big-money moves to Conference clubs Stevenage (17 games) and Grays Athletic (45 games, 9 goals). He won the FA Trophy while at Grays, scoring



The game was barely into its second minute, the Wealdstone fans having yet to take up their position at the far end when the home side took the lead, Gareth Price bombing down the right before skidding a shot off the surface, which the heavy drizzle of the previous hour was still clinging to, and through the wet gloves of keeper Sean Thomas.

Ten minutes later, with the Stones still trying to find their feet on the drying, but still dewey, surface and their eye for a decent pass in the swirling wind, Aylesbury scored their second from the penalty spot [see below]. Dean Brennan had been felled in the box by Alan Massey, going over his leg as though having been shot out of a cannon, allowing Craig Henney to step up and double the advantage. "Well, I never saw that coming" said one day-tripper as though having just watched an episode of Midsomer Murders which had essentially been an hour of John Nettles firing indiscriminately into a crowded pub whilst laughing maniacally.

Stones (in yellow) on the attack at Aylesbury ten years ago and (left) a blog describes Dean Brennan winning that penalty kick!

his penalty in the 6-5 shoot-out win over Hednesford Town at Villa Park (while the new Wembley was being built).

Then it was on to the upwardly-mobile SFC Wimbledon under Dave Anderson; Lewes, Cambridge City, Chesham, Hemel and Halesowen Town (32 games, 22 goals).

'Me and Stuart wanted to succeed at Hemel so much ... we put our jobs on hold and it took real sacrifice from us and our families'

Both he and Stuart Maynard played for Aylesbury against the Stones in that memorable FA Cup 4th Qualifying Round tie ten years ago, when the Buckinghamshire minnows led 2-0 in the first half and a real shock seemed on the cards. "I took a bit of a dive for the

penalty and it should have been 3-0 but we had a shot blocked on the line!" Dean remembers. "It was a big, big crowd, packed with Wealdstone of course and in the end we got beat 4-2. Keiron Forbes was the difference that day, but that was about the first time my paths crossed with the Stones".

Dean first met Stuart back in 2002, playing for Hitchin against Stuart's Enfield side at Borehamwood (where the Es were groundsharing). "I actually scored a hat-trick in that game - one left foot one right and one header! - so I remember it well. But everyone noticed what a good player Stuart was, and after the game I managed to get

his phone number in the bar, and we persuaded him to come across to Hitchin the following season. And we've been mates ever since. He's bubbly, always smiling and we make a good team.

"I always wanted to get into the management side of football and I was only 28 when I stood in temporarily at Hemel. Then briefly at Aylesbury, picking up the financial and background stuff, and then permanently at Dunstable Town where I was player manager in my early 30s. We had some money to play with there, but it's always recruitment, recruitment, recruitment with me and I like to see players with my own eyes. I can't understand managers who don't go out and watch players two, three, four times because how else can you judge them?"

Assessing players is at the very core of Dean and Stuart's thinking and he's excited by the players they've lined up to wear the blue (and amber) shirts this season.

"Ross Lafayette was a key signing. He's a leader and a very positive personality - a real battering ram of a striker who'll hold the ball up, bring others into the game and provide a focal point. He lives locally and at this stage in his career (he's 34) it's the perfect move for Roscoe.... he's not motivated by money and really wants to play in this side.

"Dejon Noel Williams has got pace and power up front, still a bit raw but he's very young and will learn a lot from Ross. And

Reece Beckles Richards from Wingate & Finchley really excites me, a real talent who'll do well. Jacob Mendy has been tracked by us for a long time and we're delighted to bring him to the club as he's very, very good! He can play left back, right back, left wing and up front and he scores some cracking goals. So does Connor Smith, he's been really impressive in training and we've also signed Jacob Cook and Kavan Cotter who're technically excellent and can run all day.

"Nick Arnold and Ryan Sellers are two great, experienced signings and then of course you have Jake, Jerome, Connor, Northy and Greenie from last season who are all top, top players.

"There will be still more faces coming in but, for now, that is a good mix to be going on with."

Fittingly, for a man labelled 'Mr Recruitment' Dean runs a small maintenance recruitment business from his home in Leighton Buzzard. He moved to Eaton Bray, near Dunstable when he signed for Luton Town and has always lived in this area, now bringing up little ones Brogan and Alba with partner Sophie while he also has a 16-year-old daughter Morgan.

"Football and family is not a good mix but I try to keep Sundays free. Even then the phone is always ringing! Everyone knows what a commitment football management is but you have to give it maximum effort... and that's what I promise to do for Wealdstone.

"At the recent 'Meet the Manager' evening I was asked a very good question: "If you had a straight choice between managing Hemel Hempstead, Billericay or Wealdstone, which would you choose?"

"Well there is no doubt in my mind which is the bigger club with the most potential - Wealdstone. I have fond memories of Hemel, of course, but they are smaller by far while Billericay... well, our experience of managing that club will stand me in good stead.

"I'm genuinely excited by what we can achieve at Wealdstone and there are some terrific people here. The secretary, Fingers is an unbelievable character; Rory the chairman is very straight and supportive; the fans are passionate and vocal. Together we can do great things".