



THE RETURN OF DAVE KITSON

Dave Kitson last wore on an Arlesey shirt in a competitive match as a member of our Isthmian League Division Three winning side in 2001. In a playing career that took him from Non League to Premier League in just a few seasons, Dave scored over 140 career goals in league football across 8 clubs.

He retired from playing in 2014.

Just a few weeks ago (April 2021) Dave Kitson agreed to come back to where it had all started for him at Arlesey Town this time in the role of Chairman.

Eventually, I finally had a chance to sit down and have a quick chat with him about his playing days, his return to Arlesey and his role in the future of the club.

Hi Dave, Welcome back to Arlesey Town, what are your feelings of being back here?

Thank you, it's great to be back.

The club remains very familiar to me, I grew up a mile or two over the Herts border in Letchworth and aside from a little more housing here and there not much has changed in the 20 years that I've been away. On the one hand, that familiar feeling of home can be very comforting, but on the other hand we have an opportunity to improve and develop what we have here in the interests of the club and the community that we serve.

You played here for one season (2000-2001) and it was a successful one. What are your memories of that league winning year?

I was a young man, 20 years old, and I was extremely fortunate to play with exceptionally talented players that provided me with the tools to become a striker. When I signed for Arlesey I played left wing back and only a terrible injury to our striker, Greg Pike, in a pre season match against Stevenage, gave me the opportunity to play up front. I must credit the manager Nicky Irlinton with having the faith in me to make that move because at that time Arlesey were one of the best non league teams in the country and a lot of top players wanted to come here. But Nicky saw something in me. It was a tough school though, Nicky and the senior players were ruthless with me, they were born winners all of them, and I owe each and every one of them a debt of gratitude for helping me to become a professional player and for playing a part in turning me into the man I am today.

You signed for Cambridge United the following season scoring 40 goals in 2 seasons. Obviously there was a gulf in the level of football between Arlesey and Cambridge but what was the biggest differences in say training, how a game was approached and the whole experience in general?

The biggest difference for me was adjusting to full time football. I struggled with that for a while. I learned very quickly that you need to be dead or dying to take a day off. That was the

mentality. Once I got my head around that I was OK but for some brutal gym sessions that my body wasn't used to. I suffered with a few injuries but was fortunate to benefit from John Taylor taking over as manager in my second season. John was all out attack and he put two excellent wingers and a second striker around me. Everybody in the front four worked hard and scored goals. Then ITV digital went bust and I was sold to Reading.

And were there any similarities at all?

I suppose the banter in the changing rooms never changes. But what struck me was that the difference in standard between the Cambridge team that I joined and the Arlesey team that I left was wafer thin. In training I thought the professional players would be able to do what they wanted with the ball, but many of them struggled to do the basic things and I took so much confidence for my own game and my own ability just from watching that. I knew that if I got my head down and scored goals I could go a bit further and a bit further.

Moving onto Reading (signing for them in 2003) this is where everything took off for you and Reading (getting promoted into the Premier League with a record 106 points). What are your biggest memories of your time at Reading?

Well we had three seasons of building first. It took Steve Coppell three full seasons to clear out the dead wood and bring in young, hungry players that were desperate to make a name for themselves. The result was a team that broke the Championship points record and cost about £3m. It was an extraordinary season, especially as we lost the first game at home. It was very enjoyable but it was an incredible amount of hard work. Every single one of us dedicated everything we had to that season and it paid off.



2000-01 In our League Winning season



Image Credit : Peter Else

Wearing the Blue of Arlesey Town again for a Charity Match in 2013

And what about your favourite Match?

When I arrived Alan Pardew had just left Reading to become West Ham manager. He'd done an interview saying that he'd left for a big club. The Reading fans never forgave him for making that comment. When he bought his West Ham side back to the Madejski the fans were out for his blood, it's without doubt the most hostile atmosphere I've ever seen at the Madejski.

If you're going to pick a game to write yourself into Reading folklore and become an instant hero, then this was the game. The entire team left everything they had on the pitch trying to win that game, which we did 2-0. I got one in the first half and one in the second half and I never had to buy another drink in Reading ever again.

Pardew bought West Ham back the next season and we beat them 3-1, I scored a hatrick. The season after that he tried again and we beat them 6-1. Unfortunately I was injured!

And favourite goal?

Any of those West Ham goals are enjoyable to remember. The overhead kick against Bradford is technically the best goal I've ever scored. But the most important goal of my career for so many reasons was the first ever top flight goal scored by Reading. I was absolutely fixated on being the player that scored that goal. It can only be done once and there are only so many professional teams to play for. Being the player to score the first top flight goal in a clubs' history, and doing it for a club that you love, it doesn't get any better than that.

A lasting memory?

For everything that I've said above, the professional game is tough, physically and mentally. It left its scars in both those areas and so I don't often go back to memory lane because invariably it isn't long before you have to confront memories that you'd rather forget. You just have to accept your career for what it was and try to pass on the good things about football to the next generation.

After Reading came Stoke City then a loan move back to Reading, moving on to Middlesbrough, then Portsmouth, Sheffield United and lastly Oxford City. How was it for you moving to different clubs around the country and was it easy to settle in?, in terms of playing and living

They all have their pros and cons. This is when football began to get tricky for me. When you become a Premier League player you become a commodity more so than before. I don't want to put anybody off but a lot of the fun went out of the game for me once I got to the Premier League.

You weren't simply allowed to play football anymore, there was all this other stuff that had to be done contractually that didn't interest me in the slightest. I may well go back in to professional football again in some capacity, but for me it's always best to start at a level where you know you can make a difference and then go up the leagues, exactly the same as I did as a player.

You're back at Arlesey but this time as Chairman, need I say the huge differences that there are between playing and holding the position of Chairman at a football club. What made you come back and take up the position of Chairman?

I like this level of the football pyramid. I believe that football clubs should serve their communities. At the elite end of professional football that simple truth has been eroded and in some cases, lost completely. We exist to provide entertainment to our community, we want the community to be proud of us and to be proud to say that their local team is a successful team.

I Know you are only a couple of weeks into the job, what are the / your short term plans for the club?

We haven't refurbished the club house and bar area since I was here as a player, before that even. We must update our facilities to the point where families can feel comfortable to come down, have a bite to eat and a few drinks, and enjoy the entertainment provided in a safe and clean environment. As a football club we operate at the heart of the community, it is absolutely imperative that the community feels a part of the club, and that as the country opens up again, they can enjoy seeing friends and family in a fantastic setting.

The plans for the club house are state of the art and a huge investment in being made to upgrade every single aspect. Thanks to the hard work of our incredible committee, I am absolutely confident that we will succeed in creating a venue that serves as the premier matchday experience anywhere in the area, as well as catering for events throughout the week.

And any long term plans?

It is vital that we create a revenue model that sustains the football club in the long term. We cannot hope to exist on handouts and good fortune, or exceptional cup runs and occasional player sales. We have big plans to create such a model, but it has to sit within our values, namely that it provides a service for the community which in turn helps the club to thrive in the years to come.

There are lots of conversations that the committee and I need to have to realise our goal and as soon as we have some concrete news, you'll be the first to know!

What ideas do you have that you hope will help the club?

Without digging a hole for myself, we must secure sponsorship. That is an immediate objective. The clubhouse and bar area will be given a state of the art upgrade and we have a new kit to look forward to for next season. But I must reiterate that the long term future of the club depends on the decisions we make in the short to medium term.

I am extremely confident that our plan to ensure the clubs immediate survival and ability to grow its revenue is the right plan, with the right people executing it.

And lastly, like all of us you must be itching to watch some competitive football here next season

Absolutely! It's been a very stressful and turbulent period for so many people, but sport has at least been able to provide a modicum of respite. Sport, and to me at least football in particular, is a great escapism. We look forward to welcoming everybody back to Arlesey Town F.C just as soon as it is safe to do so!

Thank you so much for your time Dave and I wish you all the best in your new role as Chairman



Image Credit : Warren Gunn

Playing for Cambridge United 2001-02



Image Credit : Getty Images

Playing For Stoke City vs Valladolid