

Date: 5 January 2015
 Opposition: Wimbledon
 Competition: FA Cup

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5 January 2015

THE TIMES

Captain fantastic spares Liverpool blushes once more

AFC Wimbledon 1 Akinfenwa 36 Liverpool 2 Gerrard 12, 62

Even on a cold Monday night at Kingsmeadow, even in the final months of his career in England, Steven Gerrard represents the difference between honour and ignominy for Liverpool. This was an evening on which the spectre of embarrassment loomed for Brendan Rodgers's side, only for their captain to dig them out of trouble with two goals to end another chapter in the AFC Wimbledon fairytale. There are few more inspirational stories in English football history than that of the original Wimbledon, whose "Crazy Gang" rose from the Southern League to beat Liverpool in the 1988 FA Cup final. The story of the club's rebirth as AFC Wimbledon, after the abuses of the old model, continued last night as they threatened to pull off an even more remarkable upset at Liverpool's expense, but after Gerrard's matchwinning contributions, thoughts turned from one romantic FA Cup storyline to another. The problem with that particular reverie is that against Wimbledon, mid-table in Sky Bet League Two, only he seemed capable of sparing Liverpool. It is no exaggeration to say that, with a little more luck, Wimbledon could have been 3-1 up before Gerrard scored his second. The 34-year-old always looked capable of inspiring a third Liverpool goal if the need arose, but there was little to justify the club's faith in life after their leader moves to Major League Soccer this summer. Can Gerrard bow out of Anfield at the end of the season as an FA Cup winner? He certainly looked determined to do so last night, opening the scoring with a fine header, restoring Liverpool's lead with a superb free kick after Adebayo Akinfenwa's scrambled goal and generally performing at a level that put him head and shoulders above any of his teammates. It took just 12 minutes for Gerrard to make his impression from an advanced position in support of Rickie Lambert in a 3-4-2-1 formation. Receiving a layoff in the middle of the Wimbledon half, he injected some urgency, spreading the ball wide to the overlapping Javier Manquillo and continuing his run. When the cross came in, Gerrard charged forward, getting there ahead of Jake Goodman and beating James Shea with a downward header from just beyond the penalty spot. At that point, it looked as if the drama was over, but Wimbledon's players appeared inspired rather than downhearted. They had already gone close in the eighth minute, when the lively Sean Rigg found space between Liverpool's central defenders and forced his way into the penalty area, only to drag his effort wide of the far post. That showed Neal Ardley's players that Liverpool's defence was vulnerable -- as if anyone ever doubted it.

Lazar Markovic went close for Liverpool, flashing the ball across the face of Shea's goal from a tight angle, but Wimbledon's attacks were beginning to carry the greater threat. Liverpool's back three struggled to deal with the pace of George Francomb down the right flank, Rigg down the left and Matt Tubbs in central areas, looking to exploit the space between Emre Can and Martin Skrtel. The warning signs were there for Liverpool on the half-hour, when, after a corner had been only partly cleared, the ball dropped in a crowded penalty area for Rigg, who struck an instant shot towards the roof of the net, only to see his effort parried over by a superb reaction save from Simon Mignolet. From the resulting corner, with Liverpool creaking again, Adam Barrett headed over the crossbar. You could feel an equalising goal coming. Wimbledon's players and supporters certainly could. From a more rudimentary attack two minutes later, reminiscent of the Wimbledon of old, Shea did the Dave Beasant bit, punting the ball forward, and Akinfenwa flicked it on for Tubbs to chase. Again Liverpool's defence could not keep up. Again, from a dangerous position, the effort on goal was rushed and missed the target. In the 36th minute, finally, the equaliser arrived. Almost inevitably, it came from a dead-ball situation after Rigg forced a corner down the left-hand side. From Francomb's delivery, Mignolet flung out a fist, punching nothing but air. The loose ball struck Barry Fuller, before looping on to the crossbar and rebounding into the six-yard box. Akinfenwa reacted quickest and prodded home. Game on. The striker was shown a yellow card towards the end of the first half after committing one foul too many for the referee's liking, but his presence -- as much, it seemed, as any technical or even physical threat -- was unsettling the visiting team. Liverpool began to build up more possession as half-time approached, but the incision shown in the opening goal was not there any more. Rodgers looked perturbed as the teams left the pitch at the interval. Whatever Rodgers said to his defenders at half-time, it made little difference.

From another Francomb corner, Barrett sent a header goalwards, only for Gerrard to block it on the line. Liverpool needed to take control of the game. From almost the moment Gerrard had opened the scoring, the match had been played on Wimbledon's terms. For as long as there is Gerrard, though, there is hope for Liverpool. After the excellent Fuller blotted his copybook with a wild challenge on Philippe Coutinho on the edge of the penalty area, the Liverpool captain stepped up to curl a free kick past Shea in familiar style to restore their lead.

AFC Wimbledon (4-4-2): J Shea -- B Fuller, J Goodman, A Barrett, C Kennedy -- G Francomb (sub: F Sutherland, 86min), S Moore (sub: H Pell, 86), D Bulman, S Rigg (sub: A Azeez, 79) -- M Tubbs, A Akinfenwa.

Substitutes not used: J McDonnell, A Bennett, G Oakley, B Harrison. Booked: Akinfenwa, Fuller, Goodman. Liverpool (3-4-2-1): S Mignolet -- E Can, M Skrtel, M Sakho -- J Manquillo (sub: J Enrique, 71), J Henderson, L Leiva, L Markovic (sub: K Toure, 86) -- S Gerrard, P Coutinho -- R Lambert (sub: M Balotelli, 79).

Substitutes not used: D Ward, A Moreno, J Williams, F Borini. Booked: Coutinho. Referee: J Moss.

the guardian

Gerrard ends Wimbledon's fairytale and adds to his own

They did everything except muzzle Steven Gerrard. AFC Wimbledon brought us a nice line in nostalgia in the way they set about trying to dismantle their opponents and they gave Liverpool a genuine fright in those moments when Bayo Akinfenwa threatened to create another piece of history for a club whose officials could be seen getting their pre-match grub in the greasy spoon, Fat Boy's, round the corner. Yet this was a night when Gerrard reminded everyone how much Liverpool will miss him when he leaves for Hollywood at the end of the season. His first goal was an example of his courage and leadership qualities. The second, direct from a free-kick, was a moment of high skill and how Liverpool needed his brilliance bearing in mind the prodigious efforts of the team that is currently 12th in the old fourth division.

Gerrard's 35th birthday happens to be on the same day as the FA Cup final and what a story it would be if his time with Liverpool should end at Wembley. Others might have been distracted by all the publicity that has engulfed him over the last week. Gerrard simply got on with doing what he does best and, in this instance, it involved getting Liverpool out of a hole bearing in mind the way Akinfenwa's goal left them looking ripe for a potential upset.

In the programme a question-and-answer session with Akinfenwa told us in great detail his favourite Nando's meal - "quarter chicken (medium), five wings (medium), chips and corn on the cob," - and that if he had not been a footballer he would have been a security guard. Wimbledon's scorer is the closest there is in football to a human Hummer. Every time he touches the ball here the crowd shout "Beast" and what a moment, after 36 minutes, when he launched his formidable 16-stone frame at the ball to prod it over the goal-line.

Akinfenwa would also have been most people's best bet to flatten a couple of opposition defenders. Yet this Wimbledon team is not like the last one and football has moved on since the days when footballers could get away with tackles like the infamous one Vinny Jones inflicted on Steve McMahon, by way of introduction, at Wembley 27 years ago. Neal Ardley's team were always going to need more refinement if they were going to threaten a side from three divisions higher. At one point Akinfenwa could be seen taking out two Liverpool players with a little drag-back in the centre-circle. If anything, the early impression was that Wimbledon's players seemed too respectful of their opponents, not pressing quickly enough and letting Liverpool control the midfield and show their superiority on the ball. Gerrard's goal was a case in point even if, by that stage, the first real chance of the evening had gone to Sean Rigg. His left-foot shot was wide and within four minutes Gerrard had played the ball out to Javier Manquillo and continued his run into the penalty area. As the cross came in, Gerrard was the most determined player in the penalty area to reach the ball first, bravely stooping down and showing great desire to head the ball past James Shea in the home goal. Briefly, Wimbledon looked rattled. Yet when they did shake their heads clear it was a wonderful response in that flurry of concerted attacking around the half-hour mark. When teams play Liverpool these days they know they are vulnerable in the air and, once again, Simon Mignolet was a danger to his own team. In fairness to the Liverpool goalkeeper, he had made a splendid reflex save in the midst of that spell of Wimbledon pressure to turn away another chance for Rigg, this time on his right foot. Shortly afterwards, Matt Tubbs hooked a shot wide from inside the penalty area. Wimbledon could certainly be encouraged by the frequency with which they were getting behind Liverpool's defence and then came the corner that led to Akinfenwa's goal.

Mignolet, with both arms up, completely missed the trajectory of the ball. Mamadou Sakho was caught by surprise and when the ball ricocheted off the Liverpool defender and against the crossbar it was Akinfenwa who was steaming in to get to the rebound first. Mignolet's attempts to persuade the referee that he had been impeded fooled no one.

On the walls outside there were posters advertising Wimbledon's next three home games: Carlisle, Accrington Stanley and Newport County. Jones's FA Cup medal could be seen in a glass cabinet in the main entrance and the guests of honour included old heroes such as Dave Beasant and Lawrie Sanchez. Yet the television pictures also showed Ardley's half-time team-talk and the remarkable part was how calm everyone looked. They looked like a group who believed they could do it. Gerrard had other ideas and what followed was another reminder about his influence on this team. Early in the second half, Rigg dispossessed Emre Can but could not get his shot on target. Then Barry Fuller conceded a free-kick 25 yards out from goal, otherwise known as Gerrard territory. His shot was curled with expertise into the top corner and Liverpool had the lead again. This time they were not to relinquish it.

AFC Wimbledon 4-4-2

Shea; Fuller-, Goodman-, Barrett, Kennedy; Francomb (Sutherland, 86), Bulman, Moore (Pell, 86) Rigg (Azeez, 79); Akinfenwa-, Tubbs.

Subs not used Bennett, Oakley, McDonnell, Harrison.

Referee J Moss

Liverpool 3-4-2-1

Mignolet; Can, Skrtel, Sakho; Manquillo (Jose Enrique, 70), Henderson, Lucas, Markovic (Toure, 86); Gerrard, Coutinho-; Lambert (Balotelli, 79).

Subs not used Moreno, Borini, Williams, Ward.

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The Mail

STEVIE KEEPS gang at bay; Gerrard to the rescue after The Beast gives Liverpool a real fright

HIS birthday is the same date as the FA Cup final, you know. Don't bet against it, either. You know what. The farewell on the turf at Wembley, lifting the trophy, waving goodbye. We've always wondered who writes Steven Gerrard's scripts. And we've missed the most obvious answer. He does.

The fairy-tale, we thought, would be a victory for AFC Wimbledon. We forgot the other fairy-tale. The one in which Liverpool's talisman bids a glorious farewell with a Final hurrah on May 30. Even if it is not to be, nights like this continue to serve as a reminder of what will be lost to Liverpool the day Gerrard boards that flight to Los Angeles and his new world. Take Gerrard away and, in all likelihood, Liverpool's FA Cup campaign would have ended here, at Kingsmeadow, home of the club whose own story reads like a tale from a comic book. AFC Wimbledon have fought to the last breath just to be here, and they fought to the last against Liverpool, too. They were the better team in the first half and were beaten in the end only because Liverpool's captain doesn't know when to quit, either. He scored both his side's goals, to claim the lead after 12 minutes, and reclaim it after 62 as Wimbledon sought to write another page in a remarkable history. Liverpool have never lost an FA Cup tie to a team from English football's fourth tier, but after Adebayo Akinfenwa had equalised, there looked to be the potential for the tournament's first real third-round shock (Sheffield United's win at Loftus Road was hardly a complete surprise, given Queens Park Rangers' dismal Cup record). That Liverpool survived to meet Bolton in the next round was down to Gerrard. His accuracy with the ball at his feet, his determination not to go out with a whimper. His first goal was all about drive. Gerrard fed the ball to Javier Manquillo wide and powered into the box. In came the cross and it was Gerrard, alive to it, greedy for it, who directed his header past the powerless James Shea in Wimbledon's goal. His second, the winner, was about excellence. Wimbledon captain Barry Fuller fouled Philippe Coutinho and Gerrard stood over the ball, edge of the area, to the left. The wall jumped, but Gerrard aimed high, lifting it, curling it, sending it out of the reach of Shea, and Liverpool through to the next round. Two goals against a League Two side is hardly the stuff of legends, but answer this. If not him, who? Because there were plenty of other red shirts out there, but only one that got the match won.

What Liverpool had discovered long before half-time was that the spirit of the Crazy Gang is alive, well and embodied in Akinfenwa. What other club could find a home for The Beast? A question-and-answer session in the match programme summed up the spirit. He listed his favourite activities as the gym and Nando's -- not necessarily in that order -- and his preferred Nando's order as a medium quarter chicken, five wings, chips and corn on the cob. His favourite film is The Hunger Games. They always had a good sense of humour around these parts. Still, if Akinfenwa terrorises defences in the lower divisions the way he did Liverpool's, he can chomp away to his heart's content. It is a dismal indictment of Brendan Rodgers's back line that dead balls, long balls and decent crosses should cause them such horrendous problems, but that's the way it is. Sean Rigg delivers a good ball, so does George Francomb, and after going behind, Wimbledon dominated using the oldest trick in the book.

They are not a long-ball team, but with a target man like Akinfenwa and with Matt Tubbs, on loan from Bournemouth, playing off him, they would be foolish not to test Liverpool's physical resolve. Not for the first time this season, they were found wanting. There were nine minutes gone when the Premier League visitors lost two consecutive headers -- to Akinfenwa and Tubbs -- before Rigg shot across the face of goal, and Steven Gerrard's intervention aside, Wimbledon had the best of the first half. Martin Skrtel had to be at full stretch to shut out a cross from Francomb after 29 minutes, but from the corner the ball fell to Rigg, whose shot was tipped over magnificently by Simon Mignolet. There were 32 minutes gone when Liverpool's extreme vulnerability to the simplest of approaches was made apparent. It was a straightforward goal-kick that caused the problem, with an initial header won by Akinfenwa, and then flicked on by Rigg. It fell to Tubbs who did well to get his foot over the shot, but steered it just wide of the far post. Within four minutes, however, Wimbledon had erased the Gerrard goal and Liverpool were in more than a match. A set-piece did it, unsurprisingly. Francomb's delivery of a left-side corner was perfect, but Mignolet's handling was anything but -- he missed the ball completely, surprising Mamadou Sakho, who deflected it on to his own bar. The ball popped down and Akinfenwa was quickest to react -- that tells you something -- prodding the ball past the red shirts in disarray on the line. Kingsmeadow erupted. There are a lot of marketing departments claiming to have 'more than a club' these days but AFC Wimbledon don't need slogans to prove their authenticity. When your very existence has been branded 'not in the wider interests of football' by men in suits at the Football Association, it produces a certain attitude.

Half-and-half commemorative scarves were on sale all the way from Norbiton station to the ground, but there were not many takers. Every pre-match tune held meaning -- I Am The Resurrection, Won't Get Fooled Again -- and Kingsmeadow is the one ground where the fans could give the Kop a run for their money as far as banners are concerned. 'Dude,' read a particularly lurid specimen, 'this is one kick ass, cutting edge, hard core, in your face, red hot chilli, far out, almighty mother of a football team'.

Indeed it is. And still crazy. after all these years.

The Daily Telegraph

Gerrard. shows Liverpool he is still the Don

AFC Wimbledon 1 Akinfenwa 36

Liverpool 2 Gerrard 12, 62 Att: 4,784

Steven Gerrard's 'long goodbye' started in style with Liverpool's captain starring in his first game since announcing he would be leaving the club at the end of this season, scoring twice to steer his side into the fourth round. For those Liverpool fans looking for portents, FA Cup final day is Gerrard's 35th birthday. He opened the scoring with a diving header but Neal Ardley's vibrant League Two side responded well, and were given real hope when Adebayo Akinfenwa equalised, but Gerrard rescued his team again with a second-half free-kick, intensifying the debate over whether he is leaving too soon.

Liverpool built a platform for Gerrard at the Cherry Red Records Stadium, aka Kingsmeadow. For 15-20 minutes in the first half, he was the focus of attention, a heavyweight of the game, before Akinfenwa, the AFC Wimbledon striker almost touching 17 stones, weighed in. How fitting. Akinfenwa, a passionate Liverpool fan, was looking forward to meeting Gerrard, to thank him for all he had done for the club. It had to be all about Gerrard. Again Brendan Rodgers preferred a 3-4-3 system, but this time with Gerrard further advanced, liberated by Lucas and Jordan Henderson, who were doing the defensive duties in central midfield. Javier Manquillo was the right-wing-back with Lazar Markovic on the left, both looking to pick out Gerrard's runs. Gerrard and Philippe Coutinho had free roles off Rickie Lambert and the captain soon made his mark, scoring after 12 minutes. Gerrard accelerated the move, playing the ball right to Manquillo before racing into the box to meet the return, beating Jake Goodman and Adam Barrett and heading past James Shea, who was in the Arsenal FA Youth Cup-winning side over Liverpool. As Gerrard celebrated his 181st goal in 696 appearances for Liverpool, the home fans and players plotted their response. "You're only here for the Wombles" chanted the home fans, particularly enjoying the programme's front-cover picture of Lawrie Sanchez's headed goal in the 1988 FA Cup final victory over Liverpool. Sanchez was present, as was Dave Beasant, who saved John Aldridge's penalty at Wembley when the Crazy Gang beat the Culture Club. Behind Shea's goal, AFC Wimbledon fans had their banner of "We are the resurrection and we are the light", celebrating their club's revival. Their mascot, Haydon the Womble, who had done some crowd-surfing earlier, was stirring up the fans further, banging the lid of a wheelie-bin.

Their team responded, playing good football, using the width, looking to exploit the known flaws in the Liverpool defence. Ardley instructed his players to press higher up the field, trying to dislodge the ball, hounding Liverpool. Pressure built. Martin Skrtel made a sliding interception, clearing a cross for a corner. Simon Mignolet responded to Sean Rigg's volley with a fine tip-over save. Matt Tubbs sent a hooked volley just wide. And then came that moment that Akinfenwa had dreamed of after 36 minutes here. Ardley had been doing work in training on exploiting Liverpool frailties at defending set-pieces. George Francomb curled in the corner, looking to trouble Mignolet. The ball hit Mamadou Sakho and bounced back off the bar. Mignolet failed to take responsibility. Akinfenwa was quickest, pouncing, scoring from close range, embarrassing Mignolet and Liverpool. "Unleash the Beast" beseeched the banner behind the goal. Nicknamed the Beast, Akinfenwa delivered. The home fans went wild. Haydon the Womble punched the air. This was the stuff of dreams. AFC Wimbledon are in League Two, holding representatives of a club who have won the European Cup five times. Was the extended FA Cup third-round weekend finally conjuring up some magic? Liverpool improved after the break but there was still a couple of scares. Gerrard cleared a Barrett header off the line. Rigg shot wide. Liverpool were still unconvincing, still needing their captain and eternal catalyst to drag them back into the lead.

After 62 minutes, he registered his 182nd goal for the club with a classy free-kick. Barry Fuller caught Coutinho from behind, getting a yellow card and gifting Gerrard a free-kick in a position he relishes, left of centre, perfect for a right-footed player. Gerrard stepped up, lifting the ball over the wall and past Shea. As Gerrard calmly celebrated, his fans sang his name with unbridled passion. Liverpool should really have settled the tie within six minutes. Again Gerrard was involved, helping work the ball to Lambert, whose shot was straight at Shea. Liverpool tried to kill the game off, playing a possession game, draining the energy from AFC Wimbledon legs. The ball kept moving between Gerrard and Lucas and Henderson. Gerrard launched another attack, playing one-twos, steering the ball upfield but the cross from Jose Enrique was wayward. Ardley's side continued to pose problems. Following a Coutinho foul after 77 minutes, Fuller swept in a free-kick that Skrtel headed clear. Rodgers sought to live up his attack, sending on Mario Balotelli for Lambert. Gerrard continued to be involved, back-healing the ball to Coutinho, whose shot was saved by Shea. Liverpool still had to negotiate another alarm when the substitute, Adebayo Azeze, sprinted through but his shot deflected wide for a corner. Liverpool survived more set-piece angst. Then Coutinho accelerated after the length of the pitch before sliding the ball left to Markovic, who wasted a glorious chance. He could have easily placed the ball either side of Shea, but placed the ball too close to the keeper who again saved.

Mignolet is oft-criticised, deservedly so at times, but he rescued Liverpool towards the end, saving well at the feet of Azeze, and then

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catching a steeping ball. He then launched a counter-attack, culminating in Gerrard presented with a chance of his hat-trick but Callum Kennedy cleared off the line. The headlines already belonged to Gerrard.



Gerrard's touches of enduring class tame The Beast

When Steven Gerrard arrives in the US, and is asked who else might be worth luring Stateside, he just might volunteer the name Adebayo Akinfenwa. "The Beast" may look more like a linebacker than a footballer but the Wimbledon No.10 is a cult hero wherever he goes who can play a bit too.

"Unleash the Beast" demanded the banner behind the goal. Wimbledon did and but for a two-goal performance by Gerrard that rolled back the years this third-round tie would have stood alongside Leeds '75 and Wembley '88 in the Wombles' legend.

In the 27 years since Lawrie Sanchez headed the Crazy Gang into history much has changed for both clubs, but especially Wimbledon. It may have sometimes felt like purgatory being a Liverpool fan in the Sir Alex Ferguson era but they have merely lost status, slipping from England's dominant team to part of the chasing pack. Wimbledon fans have had their club stolen away to Milton Keynes, started a new one, won five promotions in nine years, and are now back where they were in the early 1980s.

It is an incredible achievement but, just as the first time around - when they went from Southern League to Premier League - the Dons have ambitions far beyond the bottom tier. In their first season back in the Football League they stayed up only on the final day, but under Neal Ardley - a former Dons player in the top-flight days - they have become established in the division and are now eyeing the play-offs. Wimbledon are also hoping to go places in a more literal way: back to Merton, and their previous Plough Lane home. The old ground is now flats, but Wimbledon have a planning application in to convert the adjacent greyhound stadium, which is for sale, into a [pounds sterling]16m, 11,000-seat stadium with capacity to extend to 20,000. To date that is the only application submitted, but a rival consortium is seeking to refurbish the dog-track and maintain racing.

That they need to move is undisputed. Kingsmeadow originally belonged to Kingstonian, once a non-league force but now Wimbledon's tenants and in the Ryman League. Though the Dons have spent significantly to upgrade the facilities, it remains a non-league ground in many respects. Last night there was temporary scaffolding everywhere - conveniently a scaffolding company is one of the club's main sponsors. Television crews and cameras were perched upon stand roofs and the print media were tucked away in a corner above the burger van. Had the burgers caught light there would have been an almighty scramble for the only available ladder back to terra firma. As it was the main danger was of the whole structure tipping over as reporters tried in vain to glimpse the goal at the Surbiton end of the ground. More comfortably seated were a gallery of former Dons players. All the 1988 winners had been invited and Sanchez, Dave Beasant and John Scales were chewing the cud pitchside with a relaxed Ardley less than an hour before kick-off. With all the expectation on Brendan Rodgers and his team, Ardley had reason to be calm. Indeed, he could even be confident. Fan-owned Wimbledon have scraped together enough cash to enable Ardley to put together one of the division's best front pairings in Akinfenwa and Bournemouth loanee Matt Tubbs. Given Liverpool's defensive problems, the home support fancied their chances of scoring at least once.

However, when the teamsheets came out it became clear keeping a clean sheet would be tough. Kingsmeadow is an unpropitious venue for the first leg of Gerrard's farewell tour but the skipper was included in a very strong Liverpoolside. Raheem Sterling was rested, and Adam Lallana injured, but the other two changes Rodgers had made to the XI that threw away a two-goal lead at home to Leicester City on New Year's Day strengthened the team with Martin Skrtel and Lazar Markovic returning.

The fourth-round draw, shamefully allowed by the Football Association to be made before this round had finished, offered up a home tie against Bolton and the prospect of a reunion with Emile Heskey for Liverpool.

First, though, Wimbledon had to be dealt with and the visitors were quickly warned that this could not be taken for granted when Sean Rigg broke down the left and drove a shot past the far post. Liverpool, however, already dominated possession and in the 12th minute a sweeping passing move penetrated Dons' well-drilled defence. Having strung several passes across the

back, Liverpool advanced through Lucas Leiva, then Gerrard, who fed Javier Manquillo on the right and maintained his run into the area, neatly meeting the cross and directing a header inside the far post. It was his 181st Liverpool goal. A Markovic cross-shot flashed across goal soon after but Liverpool then seemed to sit back and Wimbledon grew in confidence. On the half-hour George Francomb forced a corner from which he and Adam Barrett had shots blocked before Simon Mignolet had to smartly turn over Rigg's close-range shot.

Three minutes later a long ball from James Shea, and Akinfenwa's muscular presence, caused problems and Tubbs hooked a volley just wide. Suddenly Liverpool were wobbling. "The Beast" moved in for the kill. From another Francomb corner, Mignolet flapped as Barry Fuller nudged the ball against the bar, Akinfenwa and Mamadou Sakho fought for the rebound and the ball rolled in.

Dons continued to press after the break and from another corner Barrett headed goalwards, only for Gerrard - who else - to head off the line. Captain Marvel's next trick was even more spectacular. Fuller ploughed through Philippe Coutinho 20 yards out and Gerrard beautifully curled in the free-kick. Chances continued to flow with Dannie Bulman shooting over, Shea saving well from Ricky Lambert and Coutinho and Adebayo Azeez going close before a post denied Gerrard his hat-trick. A different result then, but a fitting coda to 1988 and all that.



CRAZY FOR YOU STEVIE; The Dons were brave, the Beast intimidating... but the irreplaceable Gerrard is a different class of hero

FOR a while, at least, it looked as though the Crazy Gang might have beaten the Vulture Club.

During an improbable half-hour either side of half-time, Brendan Rodgers was on death watch as AFC Wimbledon threatened a shock to dwarf the 1988 FA Cup Final success of their forebears.

The League Two club unleashed The Beast - their 17-stone, seemingly-inflatable striker Adebayo Akinfenwa - whose equaliser was the least they had deserved.

Yet Steven Gerrard is not in the fairytale business these days. Having devastated Liverpool fans on Friday by announcing his decision to leave Anfield, he wrecked the last remaining chance of a genuine third-round shock with a brilliant double.

As a warm-up for his future life in Major League Soccer this was perfect. Carrying a team of journeymen against a side from the lower leagues is what beckons.

How Brendan Rodgers will cope without his skipper remains to be seen. Last night he certainly took the pressure off his manager.

A clinical early header and a second-half free-kick earned Liverpool a fourth-round home clash with Bolton.

They are hoping Gerrard will have a dream send-off at Wembley on his 35th birthday in May - but they will have to improve substantially on this showing.

After weeks of misty-eyed remembrance of the Crazy Gang and 1988, the grim realities for the re-formed club is their ground makes Plough Lane look palatial - while Milton Keynes exist in relative splendour on their stolen league position. It was Liverpool's first fixture since Gerrard's announcement, which only made eyes mistier still. And while Rodgers rested his skipper at the Bernabeu, he did no such thing at Kingsmeadow.

The Dons had been in decent league form and Neal Ardley's men are supposed to be substantially less violent than their predecessors, yet Sean Rigg did a decent Vinnie Jones impression on Javi Manquillo's ankle.

Rigg, though, was soon breaking through the inside-left channel and shooting narrowly wide.

The optimism was short-lived - Manquillo crossed from the right and Gerrard netted with an artful stooping header.

Akinfenwa was putting himself about. The Brazilian Lucas Leiva, in particular, seemed to be regarding the big fella with wonderment. He had never seen a footballer who looked anything quite like that before.

The match soon threatened to descend into an extended keepball session for Liverpool but the locals, roused by a man in a Womble costume hammering on the lid of a wheelie bin, willed on their team.

When Martin Skrtel failed to fully clear a corner on the halfhour, Rigg let rip with a blazing shot which was brilliantly tipped over by Simon Mignolet.

Matt Tubbs was narrowly off-target after being sent clear soon after and on 36 minutes the Dons were level.

George Francomb swung in a corner, Barry Fuller crashed a header against the bar and The Beast stabbed home from close range, sparking bedlam.

Akinfenwa then beat Mamadou Sakho with a balletic piece of skill. It was becoming dreamlike for the home side.

After the interval Sammy Moore had a 20-yarder deflected wide and from the resulting corner, Gerrard made a goal-line clearance from an Adam Barrett header.

Rigg went for glory when he ought to have squared for Tubbs - and at the opposite end Philippe Coutinho shot wide across goal.

But when Fuller fouled Coutinho 20 yards out, Gerrard stepped up with a curling which punctured Wimbledon's bubble of belief.

Dannie Bulman flashed over soon after and sub Adebayo Azeez had a late effort blocked.

But Gerrard had done enough to spare Rodgers. Call off the vultures.

AFC WIMBLEDON: Shea 7, Fuller 7, Barrett 8, Goodman 7, Kennedy 7, Rigg 8 (Azeez 79), Moore 8 (Pell 87), Bulman 7, Francomb 7 (Sutherland 87), MOTM Akinfenwa 9, Tubbs 7.

LIVERPOOL: Mignolet 6, Can 5, Skrtel 6, Sakho 5, Manquillo 6 (Enrique 71, 5), Lucas 6, Henderson 5, Markovic 5 (Toure 86), Gerrard 8, Lambert 4 (Balotelli 79), Coutinho 6. REF: Jon Moss ATT: 4,784

match stats 30% POSSESSION 70% 3 SHOTS ON TARGET 9 6 SHOTS OFF TARGET 5 6 CORNERS 5 0 OFFSIDE 2 18 FOULS 10 3 0 CARDS 1 0

Date: 5 January 2015
 Opposition: Wimbledon
 Competition: FA Cup

Times	Telegraph	Echo
Guardian	Mirror	Standard
Independent	Mail	BBC

5 January 2015



A bitter-sweet start to Steven Gerrard's long goodbye
 It was a bitter-sweet start to the long goodbye.
 Steven Gerrard added another rescue act to his bulging collection to drag Liverpool into the fourth round of the FA Cup at Kingsmeadow.
 The Reds skipper struck a classy double to see off the threat of AFC Wimbledon and book a home tie with Championship outfit Bolton.
 Gerrard spared the blushes of Brendan Rodgers' side, who got away with an error-strewn performance against plucky minnows AFC Wimbledon.
 The 34-year-old opened the scoring with a brave header early on and then after Adebayo Akinfenwa had deservedly equalised for the hosts, Gerrard delivered the killer blow with a curling 25-yard free-kick for his ninth goal of the campaign.
 For Kopites still coming to terms with the news that he will bring the curtain down on his illustrious Reds career this summer there was a heady mix of emotions.
 Joy at the long-serving midfielder's heroics came with a painful reminder about what a giant void he will leave behind. Liverpool's immense loss will be LA Galaxy's gain.
 As the debate rumbles on about whether Liverpool did enough to keep hold of their talismanic captain, Gerrard kept alive the dream scenario of his final game for the club being the FA Cup final at Wembley on his 35th birthday on May 30.
 The seven-time winners looked composed and assured as they controlled the opening half hour but then the wheels threatened to come off.
 Predictably, it was Gerrard, flourishing in an advanced role just behind Rickie Lambert, who silenced the home fans' taunts early on when he stooped to nod home Javier Manquillo's 12th minute cross.
 But the longer the first half progressed, the more Neal Ardley's Dons grew in confidence and they preyed on Liverpool's defensive frailties.
 Sean Rigg's shot was brilliantly tipped over by Simon Mignolet before Matt Tubbs blazed just wide.
 Nine minutes before the break they were level with a set-piece proving the Reds' undoing once again.
 Mignolet, who is fighting for his Anfield future, was stuck in no man's land as Liverpool failed to deal with George Francomb's corner.
 Barry Fuller nodded against the bar and 16-stone Akinfenwa, nicknamed 'The Beast', was the first to react to the rebound.
 It was a soft goal to concede and suddenly Liverpool looked rattled as simple punts into the penalty box sparked panic.
 Early in the second half Gerrard was called into action to clear Adam Barrett's looping header off the line before Rigg pounced on Emre Can's error but sliced wide.
 Liverpool's anxiety levels grew when Jon Moss waved away appeals for a penalty after Fuller appeared to handle in the box.
 The Reds were in desperate need of inspiration and Gerrard provided it in the 62nd minute. After Philippe Coutinho was upended, he whipped an unstoppable free-kick beyond James Shea.
 Lambert and Lazar Markovic wasted golden chances to put the tie beyond doubt as Liverpool survived some nervy moments late on.
 The first steps on the road to Wembley have been taken. Gerrard is on a one-man mission to depart clutching that trophy.



Steven Gerrard hits brace as Brendan Rodgers' men labour past League Two Dons
 AFC Wimbledon could not emulate the Crazy Gang and pull off an FA Cup shock against Liverpool.
 Neal Ardley's plucky side were beaten 2-1 in their third-round tie at Kingsmeadow.
 Steven Gerrard scored twice for Liverpool in his first game since confirming he will leave Anfield for the MLS when his contract expires at the end of the season.
 Gerrard headed the Premier League side ahead after 12 minutes. But Wimbledon grew into the game and, with Adebayo Akinfenwa causing problems to the Liverpool defence, they came close to equalising through Sean Rigg and Matt Tubbs.
 The Dons deservedly levelled on 36 minutes when Simon Mignolet flapped at a corner and, after the ball was deflected onto the bar by Mamadou Sakho, Akinfenwa prodded home from close range.
 Gerrard won it on 62 minutes when he curled a brilliant free-kick past James Shea from 20 yards and despite knocking at the door in the final moments, Wimbledon didn't have enough to force a replay at Anfield.

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Full time Match ends, AFC Wimbledon 1, Liverpool 2.
 90:00+3:06 Full time Second Half ends, AFC Wimbledon 1, Liverpool 2.
 90:00+2:35 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Jake Goodman.
 90:00+1:50 Attempt blocked. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from the right side of the six yard box is blocked. Assisted by Mario Balotelli.
 90:00+1:48 Attempt saved. Mario Balotelli (Liverpool right footed shot from very close range is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Emre Can.
 90:00+1:07 Corner, AFC Wimbledon. Conceded by Simon Mignolet.
 90:00+1:04 Attempt saved. Adebayo Azeez (AFC Wimbledon right footed shot from very close range is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Matt Tubbs with a through ball.
 90:00+0:40 Foul by Mario Balotelli (Liverpool.
 90:00+0:40 Jake Goodman (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 90:00+0:12 Attempt missed. Emre Can (Liverpool right footed shot from the right side of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.
 89:36 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Callum Kennedy.
 88:00 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Barry Fuller.
 85:46 Mamadou Sakho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 85:46 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 85:29 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Kolo Touré replaces Lazar Markovic.
 85:15 Substitution Substitution Substitution, AFC Wimbledon. Harry Pell replaces Sammy Moore.
 85:05 Substitution Substitution Substitution, AFC Wimbledon. Frankie Sutherland replaces George Francomb.
 84:13 Attempt saved. Lazar Markovic (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the bottom left corner. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 83:40 Corner, AFC Wimbledon. Conceded by Martin Skrtel.
 83:37 Attempt blocked. Adebayo Azeez (AFC Wimbledon right footed shot from the left side of the box is blocked.
 82:55 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool).
 82:55 Sammy Moore (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 82:12 Attempt blocked. Mario Balotelli (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 81:17 Attempt saved. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the bottom right corner. Assisted by José Enrique.
 81:00 Attempt saved. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
 79:16 Lucas Leiva (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 79:16 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 78:55 Substitution Substitution Substitution, AFC Wimbledon. Adebayo Azeez replaces Sean Rigg.
 78:45 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Mario Balotelli replaces Rickie Lambert.
 78:14 Foul by Emre Can (Liverpool).
 78:14 Matt Tubbs (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 78:09 Attempt blocked. Martin Skrtel (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Jordan Henderson with a cross.
 77:25 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Adam Barrett.
 76:00 Booking Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 75:57 Foul by Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool).
 75:57 Matt Tubbs (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 74:38 Attempt saved. José Enrique (Liverpool with an attempt from the left side of the box is saved in the top left corner. Assisted by Rickie Lambert with a cross.
 72:26 Offside, Liverpool. Philippe Coutinho tries a through ball, but Rickie Lambert is caught offside.
 70:52 Attempt missed. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the left from a direct free kick.
 70:34 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. José Enrique replaces Javier Manquillo.
 69:50 Booking Jake Goodman (AFC Wimbledon is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 69:41 Steven Gerrard (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 69:41 Foul by Jake Goodman (AFC Wimbledon).
 67:41 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by James Shea.
 67:38 Attempt saved. Rickie Lambert (Liverpool right footed shot from the right side of the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
 67:12 Foul by Javier Manquillo (Liverpool).
 67:12 Sean Rigg (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 65:54 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Lucas Leiva.
 64:08 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
 63:00 Delay in match Martin Skrtel (Liverpool because of an injury.
 62:34 Attempt missed. Dannie Bulman (AFC Wimbledon left footed shot from the centre of the box is high and wide to the left. Assisted by Sean Rigg with a headed pass.
 61:26 Goal scored Goal! Goal! AFC Wimbledon 1, Liverpool 2. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool from a free kick with a right footed shot to the top left corner.
 60:30 Booking Barry Fuller (AFC Wimbledon is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 60:23 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 60:23 Foul by Barry Fuller (AFC Wimbledon).
 59:35 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 59:35 Foul by Matt Tubbs (AFC Wimbledon).
 53:59 Javier Manquillo (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.
 53:59 Foul by Callum Kennedy (AFC Wimbledon).
 52:53 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Rickie Lambert with a through ball.

51:36 Attempt blocked. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Lazar Markovic.
 50:54 Attempt missed. Sean Rigg (AFC Wimbledon left footed shot from the left side of the box is close, but misses the top left corner. Assisted by Adebayo Akinfenwa.
 49:34 Lucas Leiva (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 49:34 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 48:14 Foul by Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool).
 48:14 Sammy Moore (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 46:35 Attempt blocked. Adam Barrett (AFC Wimbledon header from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by George Francomb with a cross.
 46:14 Corner, AFC Wimbledon. Conceded by Lucas Leiva.
 46:12 Attempt blocked. Sammy Moore (AFC Wimbledon right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
 45:00 Second Half begins AFC Wimbledon 1, Liverpool 1.
 45:00+1:12 Half time First Half ends, AFC Wimbledon 1, Liverpool 1.
 45:00+1:00 Attempt missed. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high. Assisted by Rickie Lambert.
 45:00+0:50 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.
 44:14 Attempt blocked. Lucas Leiva (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 43:01 Foul by Lazar Markovic (Liverpool).
 43:01 Barry Fuller (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 40:00 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.
 38:45 Booking Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon is shown the yellow card.
 38:29 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 38:29 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 35:39 Goal scored Goal! Goal! AFC Wimbledon 1, Liverpool 1. Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon right footed shot from very close range to the centre of the goal following a corner.
 35:05 Corner, AFC Wimbledon. Conceded by Lucas Leiva.
 34:08 Emre Can (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 34:08 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 32:45 Attempt missed. Matt Tubbs (AFC Wimbledon left footed shot from the centre of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Sean Rigg with a through ball.
 31:54 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 31:54 Foul by George Francomb (AFC Wimbledon).
 31:15 Foul by Javier Manquillo (Liverpool).
 31:15 Sean Rigg (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 30:28 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
 30:28 Foul by Barry Fuller (AFC Wimbledon).
 28:50 Attempt missed. Jake Goodman (AFC Wimbledon header from the centre of the box is just a bit too high. Assisted by George Francomb with a cross following a corner.
 28:28 Corner, AFC Wimbledon. Conceded by Simon Mignolet.
 28:27 Attempt saved. Sean Rigg (AFC Wimbledon right footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the top centre of the goal. Assisted by George Francomb.
 28:25 Attempt missed. George Francomb (AFC Wimbledon right footed shot from the right side of the box is high and wide to the left. Assisted by Adam Barrett following a corner.
 28:22 Attempt blocked. Adam Barrett (AFC Wimbledon header from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by George Francomb with a cross.
 28:01 Corner, AFC Wimbledon. Conceded by Martin Skrtel.
 20:00 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 20:00 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 19:17 Foul by Emre Can (Liverpool).
 19:17 Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 18:45 Attempt missed. Lazar Markovic (Liverpool left footed shot from a difficult angle on the left misses to the right. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 16:45 Mamadou Sakho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 16:45 Foul by George Francomb (AFC Wimbledon).
 16:02 Offside, Liverpool. Lucas Leiva tries a through ball, but Lazar Markovic is caught offside.
 11:17 Goal scored Goal! Goal! AFC Wimbledon 0, Liverpool 1. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool header from the centre of the box to the bottom left corner. Assisted by Javier Manquillo with a cross.
 9:53 Lucas Leiva (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 9:53 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 8:27 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 8:27 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 7:57 Attempt missed. Sean Rigg (AFC Wimbledon left footed shot from the left side of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Matt Tubbs with a through ball.
 6:44 Foul by Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool).
 6:44 George Francomb (AFC Wimbledon wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 4:00 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the box is blocked. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.
 3:40 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 3:40 Foul by Adebayo Akinfenwa (AFC Wimbledon).
 2:36 Hand ball by Jake Goodman (AFC Wimbledon).
 1:54 Hand ball by Sammy Moore (AFC Wimbledon).
 1:33 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
 1:24 Delay in match Javier Manquillo (Liverpool because of an injury.
 0:00 First Half begins.
 0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.