

18/12/05 TT No.135: Mike Latham - Holker Old Boys (NWCL 2) at Craven Park, Barrow.

Sat 17 Dec 2005, NWCL Division 2, Holker Old Boys 0-2 FC United (at Craven Park, Barrow). Attendance: 2,303; Admission £6; 36pp programme £2; FGIF rating: 3*.

Barrow Rugby League Club's Craven Park saw a little bit of history on a biting cold winter's afternoon just before Christmas. The ground staged its first ever soccer game as Holker Old Boys switched the venue from their hilltop Rakesmoor Lane ground for the eagerly awaited visit of the league's new boys.

Home to the rugby league code since its opening in 1931 Craven Park saw its best days in the 1950s when local hero Willie Horne inspired the team to some memorable triumphs. Horne, Barrow's favourite son, has his memory kept alive by the splendid statue on Duke Street, overlooking the ground, and by the naming of the impressive main stand after him.

The record attendance at Craven Park was 21,651 for a pre-war game against Salford. The capacity for this game was fixed at around the 3,000 mark. The all-ticket restriction was lifted a couple of days before the game and a crowd of 2,303 saw history in the making.

In many ways like a traditional soccer ground with cover on all four sides, including covered terracing on three, Craven Park looked in good order. There was the unusual site of the goalposts being erected just in front of the rugby posts at both ends- the first time the writer has ever seen this. Surely it would make sense for the rugby and soccer codes in the town to come together and for Barrow FC to quit Holker Street and move in at Craven Park but petty local rivalry and history will probably stop this ever happening.

Holker Old Boys normally play in front of crowds of 50 or so at their friendly and well-appointed ground. They have an enviable junior set-up with help from a great number of volunteers and are a shining example of a grass roots club. They made a big effort for the game, attracting a range of sponsorships and putting out a 36-page colour programme, priced at £2. Though containing 17 full pages of adverts and another four given-over to the RL club there were some interesting articles, including a history of Craven Park, a piece on the Willie Horne stand and a well-written two-page welcome from the chairman. Though there were pen pictures of the home players there were, disappointingly, none on the opposition. Admission was £7 for the stand, £6 for the terracing with concessions available.

FC United's large, noisy and good-humoured following made the occasion. They travelled in numbers and gave their side fantastic backing throughout. There was also a good turn-out of travellers, including some of the best-known faces on the circuit, for what may well prove to be a "one-off" occasion.

What the spirit of non-league football and the community feeling engendered by FC United does not deserve is the kind of aggressive policing in evidence on this occasion. With segregation in place the FC United fans were prevented from going behind the goals at the Duke Street end for the second half by a line of stewards and police. In the first half two police officers walked around the touchlines filming the entire crowd- an act which decent minded people, aware of their civil liberties in a supposedly free society, will take great exception towards. The age of Big Brother is getting ever nearer. At the end of the game a mobile police video van took pictures of everyone leaving the ground- again an insult to decent people and an action that riles the most mild-mannered.

Despite the heavy-handed police presence there was not a hint of trouble inside or outside the ground but the “in your face” style of policing took the gloss off what should have been a pleasant occasion. When one lady complained to a police officer that this would not take place in Bury, FC United’s home, she was told curtly: “Madame, this is Barrow not Bury.” If this was the norm for following FC United away from home it would certainly put off me and my fellow travellers for it is anathema to the spirit of football at this level.

Clearly playing above themselves, considering their recent dismal performance at Daisy Hill witnessed by a trio of traveller’s present, Holker Old Boys had two great early chances but gradually the visitors exerted their influence on the game. Those travellers who have to see a goal to christen a new ground were put out of their misery in the 64th minute and with a second goal two minutes FC United clinched victory on an interesting occasion. A good day, but with reservations.

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