

TT No.206: Mike Latham - Thurs 30 Mar 2006. Northern Counties East League Cup Semi-Final. **Sheffield FC 3-1 Selby Town**. Admission: £4; 56pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

Sheffield FC lay claim to be the oldest football club in world. They were founded in 1857 at a time when the game was a rough mixture of several codes with many different versions being played across the country.

One of the first tasks of the founder members was to study the existing sets of laws and lay down its own code in a succinct set of rules. At that time the numbers per team and duration of play differed enormously and there were also vast discrepancies on what was allowed in the game. The club's rules later became the cornerstone on which the modern game was built.

In 1860 a rival club was set up in the city, at Hallam. They still play at Sandygate, a ground they share with the local cricket club. On entering the ground there is a big sign informing the visitor they are entering the oldest football ground in the world. The pitch is sloped and has a natural boundary with the cricket square on one side. Legend has it that it was at Hallam that two rules were made- the changing of ends halfway through the game because of the advantages of kicking downhill and the width of the field was set according to the Hallam pitch.

By 1862 there were 15 senior clubs in the Sheffield area. Two of those, Sheffield FC, known locally as 'The Club' and Hallam still regularly oppose one another in the Northern Counties East League. They were both founder members of the Football Association, formed in London in 1863. In 1866 the Sheffield clubs played the London clubs in the first representative match and gradually a standardised set of rules was adopted.

The Sheffield club is credited with several innovations into the game, including heading of the ball (this was unknown in London prior to a representative game at the Oval in 1875 between Sheffield and London), the adoption of a solid crossbar (previously a length of rope was strung between the uprights), free-kicks for fouls, the use of corner kicks, throw-ins and the first floodlit football match.

Early members of the Sheffield club were the brothers, Charles and William Clegg. Both were later knighted for their services to football and the former played in the first international, between England and Scotland in 1872 before becoming a referee.

Though the introduction of professionalism and the growth of Sheffield United and Wednesday FC saw the strictly amateur Sheffield FC fall down the pecking order, they did win the FA Amateur Cup in 1904. After playing early games at Bramall Lane, Sheffield set up home at Abbeydale Park, also a venue for county cricket. They later moved to a ground next door to Wednesday's Hillsborough ground and in 1991 moved to the newly built Don Valley Stadium in the city, ground-sharing with

Sheffield Eagles RLFC. But in 2001 they took the big step of developing their own ground in Dronfield, situated just off the A61 that links Sheffield with Chesterfield.

A pleasant venue, situated behind the Coach & Horses pub and recently renamed the Bright Finance Stadium, the ground has undergone vast improvements since opening as a rather basic venue with a neat new stand behind one goal, a small covered terrace and excellent floodlights. In 2007 Sheffield FC will celebrate their 150th anniversary and with a go-ahead board, hard-working supporters and committee members and a host of junior and women's teams under their banner can look forward to the future with confidence. And if you get the chance to see a Sheffield v Hallam game you know you are witnessing a true piece of football history brought to life.

For this game against Hallam the wet weather of the previous week at least relented in time for the game to start though a second half downpour cast doubts as to whether the game would finish. Mercifully, the rains stopped just in time, allowing the pools of water on the pitch to subside.

Sheffield played some excellent flowing football and established a 3-0 lead, two of their goals from headers. The third goal effectively took the sting out of the game though Selby's efforts were rewarded with a late penalty.

Admission was only £4 and the 56-page programme, from which a lot of the information in this article has been derived, was outstanding value for £1. Beautifully printed, and with a host of interesting articles and statistics it is one of the best around. The club officials were friendly and welcoming and the club's supporters are clearly a very committed and dedicated band and take pride in being involved in a club with such a rich history. Several told me they formerly supported Wednesday or United before becoming hooked on the non-league game and how they would never go back to league football.

The tea bar is well stocked and within a minute of the game finishing you can be sampling a hand-pumped pint of bitter (three types were on offer) before contemplating the journey home. A visit to Sheffield FC is very civilised and comes highly recommended.

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