

23/09/05 TT No.54: Mike Latham - Burton Albion (Nationwide Conference)

Tues 20 Sep 2005, Nationwide Conference, Burton Albion 0-4 Morecambe (att. - 1,352)

The Staffordshire town of Burton-on-Trent is known worldwide for its brewing industry but it also boasts a rich sporting heritage.

Sadly, one of the great traditional remaining soccer and rugby grounds is set to soon disappear under the bulldozer and be transformed into yet another supermarket.

Peel Croft is a wonderfully atmospheric rugby ground, home to Burton RFC (founded 1870). They played their first match there in 1872, defeated the New Zealand Maoris in 1888 and, after playing elsewhere, returned to the ground in 1910, buying the freehold in 1953.

At the turn of the 19th century, however, Peel Croft was better known as a soccer ground. During the formative years of the Football League Burton boasted a total of three clubs - Swifts, Wanderers and United - who all played League football.

Burton Swifts were founder members of Division Two in 1892 and after finishing bottom of the table in 1901 amalgamated with Burton Wanderers to become Burton United. At the time the defunct Wanderers club was claimed to be the fourth oldest football club in England. The new merged club failed to gain re-election in 1907 and folded in 1910, allowing the rugby club to reclaim the ground.

The first Football League game played at Peel Croft resulted in a 7-1 win for Swifts over Crewe Alexandra on 3 September 1892 and the last match was a 2-0 win against West Brom on 27 April 1907. The highest attendance recorded was 5,000 against Newton Heath (forerunners of Manchester United) in 1894.

The grandstand at Peel Croft was built in 1907 as a successor to the one destroyed by a fire earlier in the year. Unfortunately, this impressive structure, which still exists today, saw very little Football League action.

Burton Wanderers, meanwhile, originally played at Derby Turn, a ground located further north of the town centre between Derby Road and the railway sidings. They vacated the ground after amalgamating with Swifts in 1901 and the site was taken over and developed by the Midland Railway Company. Wanderers were elected into the Football League in 1894, two years after Swifts, and failed to gain re-election in 1897. It is amazing to think that a town the size of Burton (with a population of around 40,000 one hundred years ago) boasted, for three years, two Football League clubs. The highest crowd at Derby Turn was 5,000 for the Burton derby game against Swifts on Christmas Day 1896.

A visit to Peel Croft, located next door to Asda supermarket on Lichfield Street, is a rewarding one. It is easy to imagine the days when it was a Football League

venue. The main stand, built in 1907, still looks an imposing structure and the banking at the Litchfield Street end is also almost certainly unchanged, as is the railway sleeper and ash terracing on the south side. Peel Croft is definitely one of the best-preserved old grounds in the country - at least for the moment.

The present-day Burton Albion were founded in 1950 in a bid to revive professional soccer in the town following a meeting at which 700 local people attended. Albion moved from their original ground at Wellington Street to Eton Park in 1958 and this stayed their home until the end of the 2004/05 season.

An atmospheric, if cramped ground with a capacity of around 4,500 that could give a claustrophobic feel, the site of Eton Park has since been developed by Fairclough Homes who advertise in the club programme: 'Once the home of Burton Albion FC. Now you can make it yours.'

Albion's new home is just across the way at the Pirelli Stadium. If you've been to the new grounds of Chester City and Scunthorpe United, you'll know what to expect: sanitised, bland, boring. Just like the faceless retail parks that blight Burton like many other places in the UK, you could be anywhere.

To be fair to Albion, the staff and stewards are friendly and they do have decent catering outlets (run by the club not outside franchisees - other clubs take note) and bar facilities. The three standing sides of the ground gave good sight-lines of the action and the pitch and floodlights were excellent. The main feature of the stadium is a spectacular glass-fronted main entrance which is the only part of the ground that gives it some individuality.

With Morecambe looking a class apart and strolling to a 4-0 victory Albion's problems in the bottom three intensified. They looked a long way off emulating their three predecessors who brought Football League status to the town. But the hapless home performance was greeted with great equanimity by the home fans in a 1,300 crowd whose reaction to an embarrassingly inept display was surprisingly muted.

With admission £12 adults (£14 for the main stand), £10 concessions and £3 under-16s, the Pirelli Stadium is not a cheap place to visit. A decent 48-page programme with good use of colour and one or two interesting articles sold for £2. There is plenty of free parking around the ground and it is a stress-free if rather unexciting place to visit. But couple it with a visit to Peel Croft and the day becomes very worthwhile.