

16/10/05 TT No.70: Mike Latham - Wigan Athletic (The Premiership)

Sat 15 Oct 2005, Premier League- Wigan Athletic 1-0 Newcastle United (att.- 22,374)

Wigan Athletic fans of long standing must constantly pinch themselves and feel they are dreaming as they survey their incredible rise through the divisions. Ten years ago Latics played in an old decrepit stadium in the third division with average crowds of 1,832- second worst in the Football League. After the demise of the old Wigan Borough club in the 1930s that resigned from the old Third Division (North) during the season history could well have repeated itself.

In a town dominated by rugby league Latics, who gained League status in 1978, always faced a hard battle for support and their Springfield Park ground- ageing, crumbling, windswept and lacking in even basic facilities was one of the worst in the League.

The intervention of Wigan's richest man, Dave Whelan, and the metamorphosis in the town's sporting outlook has been well chronicled. Whelan financed the construction of the JJB Stadium in 1999 on an old wasteland site and Springfield Park and Wigan rugby's Central Park grounds were sold for development. The two clubs now groundshare a modern stadium on the outskirts of town.

About a 20-minutes-walk from the railway station, if you know your way down the canal bank, takes you near Wigan Pier, the central piece of George Orwell's famous book of the '30s that highlighted the squalid living conditions then existing in the old coalmining town. There are 2,000 carparking spaces around the stadium but many Latics fans chose to park in the vicinity of the old Springfield Park ground and walk over the canal bridge to the ground, avoiding the inevitable traffic bottlenecks after the game. The JJB Stadium must be one of the most 'walked to' grounds around its proximity to housing.

The four stands are virtually identical with good sightlines and a feeling of being close to the action wherever you are in the stadium. The visiting fans packed the north stand behind the goal and virtually to a man and woman remained standing throughout the game. Both sets of fans created a tremendous atmosphere as Wigan continued their incredible start to life in the Premiership with a 1-0 victory, courtesy of a well-worked Jason Roberts goal five minutes before half-time. The work-rate and application of the home side was outstanding but they have many skilful players in their side, too and are obviously well coached and organised.

Latics operate a two-tiered pricing strategy depending on the opposition. This was a category A game and so admission to the main, west stand was £25 adults and £20 juniors (£25 and £12 in the east stand opposite). The club has built up a successful JJ's matchday club in the south stand encouraging young supporters and tickets for U16s are £10 in this section. It was noticeable just how many families

formed part of the Latics support and the atmosphere outside and inside the ground was friendly.

A full colour 72-page programme packed with interesting articles sold for £3. Best feature was a four-page look-back to 1954 when non-league Latics played Newcastle in the FA Cup third round, drawing 2-2 away before losing the replay 2-3 before 26,500 at Springfield Park. In a nice touch the Latics goalkeeper that day, Bert Lomas, was guest of honour at the game and was introduced to the crowd at half-time. Despite the early kick-off for television purposes (12-45) there was no let-up in the atmosphere or sense of occasion and the Wigan fans are clearly relishing their first taste of the Premiership. An enjoyable game and occasion. Match rating: 4*.

03/20