

TT No. 115: Mike Latham - Sunday 14 Jan 2007: Barclays Premiership. **Everton 1-1 Reading**. Attendance: 34,722; Admission: £31; 72pp programme: £3; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Though I first visited Goodison Park in the late 1960s my visits there have been infrequent since, so an early afternoon kick-off on a gloriously sunny winter's afternoon offered a good opportunity to sample a Premiership game at an authentic football venue.

Home of Everton since 1892, when they moved across Stanley Park from Anfield, Goodison is hemmed in by narrow residential streets and the famous St Luke's church in one corner but has been sympathetically redeveloped into an impressive 40,000 capacity all-seated stadium. Though showing signs of its age the ground is an impressive theatre of football with the crowd very close to the action.

The drive in from the end of the M58 motorway and down the A59 past Aintree Racecourse and close to Bootle's new ground was trouble-free and secure parking was available just five minutes' walk away at a cost of £4. There are many shops selling hot and cold food around the ground and numerous pubs in the vicinity.

Having never been on the top tier of the main stand before, I decided to take the opportunity, paying £31 at the ticket office and alighting up a lung-bursting climb to the skies. The effort was well worth it because the view, not only of the pitch below but also across Stanley Park towards Anfield is breath-taking and the view of the action outstanding.

About 10 percent of the seats at Goodison have obstructed views, I was told, with many stanchions supporting the stand rooves in some parts of the ground but there were no complaints here- the view was one of the best I have ever had for a football match, though those suffering from a fear of heights would be well advised to try a seat lower down.

The programme is a good effort, with an excellent colour design and contained a fascinating 12-page pull-out on the career of the great Dixie Dean. January 22 marks the 100th anniversary of Dixie's birth and several members of his family were introduced to the crowd before the game. In 431 career appearances for Everton Dean scored 377 goals. "Enough said," remarked the programme. Indeed.

The Hollywood actor Sylvester Stallone was also, like me, taking advantage of the chance to watch the Toffees. He is over for the film premiere of his latest Rocky film in London on Tuesday and is a friend of the new major shareholder at the club. By contrast next Tuesday I hope to be at Irongate watching Bamber Bridge where the ambience of the club house, with its three real ales on tap and terrific tea bar beats anything London has to offer. Though not up to Bamber Bridge standards, the coffee and cheese and onion pie here, served piping hot from the oven, were at least far better than most Premiership grounds and the cost, £3.40 is

about on par from this level. After being introduced to the crowd before the game Stallone got a terrific welcome and by the time the teams came out to the strains of 'Z Cars' a good atmosphere had built up inside the ground.

The fans around me, many of them family groups, were very friendly and knowledgeable and eager to impart opinions and pointers about their team. They struck me as real football fans, almost from an old-fashioned era, immensely realistic about their own team's shortcomings yet proud to support Everton. With Reading soon settling into the slick passing style that they have carried on successfully in the Premiership after waltzing through the Championship the Everton fans were also appreciative of the visitors' efforts.

It wasn't the best game, to be honest, but my third Premiership game of the weekend wasn't the worst either- the 0-0 stalemate between Bolton Wanderers and Manchester City winning hands down. On the Friday night I had visited one of my favourite grounds to see NEWI Cefn Druids draw 2-2 with Caersws in the Welsh Premier League. For £5 admission I had parked my car inside the ground, a highly readable programme was a further pound and a cup of tea served in a pot mug just 50 pence. Even after purchasing a sausage roll and raffle ticket it had proved impossible to spend a tenner.

Far better value in retrospect than this trip to Goodison but, in truth, I had enjoyed the afternoon. It was hassle-free, easy to park and buy a ticket and it felt like going to a proper football ground. The fans were friendly and, so too, the stewards- a far cry from some top grounds I have visited. One day soon Goodison Park may be no more if Everton's plans for a new stadium come to fruition- I wouldn't necessarily like to go every other week but would certainly recommend splashing out for an afternoon on the top tier of the main stand to sample this historic ground at its best.

06/20