

**TT No.120: *Dean McClean*** - Tues 16th January 2007. Football League Division 2: **Accrington Stanley** v Mansfield Town. Res: 3-2; Att: 1,234; Admission: £5 (cons), £10 (adults); 48pp Programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4\*.

On a wet and cold Tuesday night in mid-January I decided to take the opportunity to visit the famous Accrington Stanley and watch League Football at the Crown Ground for the first time.

For the third time in 120 years the small town of Accrington is playing host to Football League. Stanley are not, as many believe, founder members of the FL in 1888. That honour belongs to an entirely separate team, Th Owd Reds. The club spent five seasons in the FL, but upon relegation to Division Two, opted to withdraw from the league and join the Lancashire League. Th Owd Reds played their home matches at Thorneyholme Road, which is still the home of Accrington CC, and one of six of the original twelve FL venues still in use today. After two seasons in the Lancashire League, Th Owd Reds joined the Lancashire Combination but folded after only five matches and were confined to the annals of history.

The present club was formed as Stanley Villa in 1891 and took the name of the town in 1893. After 20 years or so of competing in the local league, the people of Accrington were again hungry for FL to return to the town and by 1921 Stanley had a ground (Peel Park), team and support capable of entering the FL. As the League was expanded, Stanley were founder members of Division 3 North and League football made a welcome return to Accrington.

Unfortunately, by 1961 poor displays on the pitch and falling gates resulted in financial hardship and ultimately lead to Stanley handing in their resignation. And on 3 March 1961 the town of Accrington had once again lost its FL status.

After years of hard work steadily rising through the lower echelons of non-league, Stanley are back and the town now hosts FL for the third time.

It may be premature to say but history does seem to repeating itself for Accy, as the team bobs its head above the relegation zone, sells its best players and sees gates dwindling, you can't help but fear for Stanley's future.

In my opinion poor gates must be attributed to the facilities on offer at the Crown Ground. There are very few decent vantage points around the ground and two ends are uncovered, while a dark and muddy car park welcomes you along your walk to the turnstile. In the main stand the view is reasonable on the back row, but with subs and stewards constantly walking in front, the view on the front row is constantly obstructed. Opposite the main stand is what can best be described an over-sized bus shelter.

The biggest faux pas on Accy's part is the failure to sell pies! Its's official: No pies at a Lancashire Football Ground!

It would be unfair not to mention or forget the hard work that has been done on and off the pitch here. It may have taken 40 years, but Stanley's achievement of returning to the FL is quite an incredible one. And were it not for a dedicated group of individuals who stuck by them after the club's demise in 1961 then the town may not even have a team now, let alone one on the FL.

The one thing that would encourage me to return here is the quality of football Stanley play. They are a very good footballing side and try to play the right way. The match was high on quality, attacking football and could easily have been 5-5. I haven't enjoyed a League match as much for a long time.

An evening generally endured rather than enjoyed I'm sorry to say. Let us hope history doesn't repeat itself.

06/20