

TT No.147: Mike Latham - Tues 13 February 2007: Unibond League Prem Div. Fleetwood Town 3-0 AFC Telford Utd. Attendance: 837. Admission: £7; 54pp programme: £1.50. FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

You get an immediate impression on entering a ground if that club is on the 'up' and that feeling was certainly strong on the Fylde coast.

Despite a squally wet evening Fleetwood attracted their best home crowd of the season and ran out convincing winners over the league leaders.

Football in the seaport and fishing town of Fleetwood has certainly had a chequered history. The club folded twice, once in 1976 and then in 1996. In between there were some memorable times like winning the Lancashire Combination in 1924, being a founder member of the Northern Premier League in 1968 and being beaten finalists in the FA Vase final at Wembley in 1985.

The current reincarnation, originally called Fleetwood Freeport after a sponsorship deal with the retail village in the town before reverting to the former name, has enjoyed successive promotions from the North West Counties League and Unibond First Division under the experienced eye of Tony Greenwood, a very well-respected non-league manager in these parts. His assistant and brother, Nigel, was a hugely talented forward, playing for Preston North End and Bury who never achieved what he could have done in the professional game.

The Fleetwood chairman is Andy Pilley, who has revitalised the club since taking over. Highly eloquent and passionate, he gave an impressive interview to BBC Radio Lancashire that was broadcast on the journey towards the ground. His company, BES Gas, was the match sponsor for the evening.

Fleetwood have just completed an impressive covered standing area behind the nearside goal which was used for the second time for this game. Their next stage of development, Mr Pilley explained, was the construction of a 1,000 seat stand with the aim of making the ground Conference compliant in the very near future.

The locals are certainly responding and despite the filthy weather a large and vociferous home support was in evidence for this game. It's highly unusual for a Unibond fixture to have large queues for the turnstiles 25 minutes before kick-off but this was the case for this game- a sociologist's dream it was, too, to observe how the English queue with such patience despite the pouring rain and the frustration of just one turnstile being open for business at the far end of the ground.

Fleetwood, the first planned town of the Victorian era, built its reputation on its fishing port- largely destroyed by the 'Cod Wars' of the 1960s between Iceland and Britain. But it still has a sea-faring tradition and the graphic descriptions of a seaward at the queue, talking to his mate but audible to at least 200 people, of a recent trip to Bergen in a Force Eleven gale helped pass the time.

The ground, known as Highbury Stadium, is a bit of mish-mash but is rapidly assuming the appearance of a proper football stadium with obvious potential. First used just before the Second World War, it once staged speedway, with a crowd of 11,000 attracted for one fixture in 1948 after local football celebrities Stanley Matthews and Stan Mortensen did a lap on a bike. Nowadays it is virtually impossible to discern its former guise as a home for speedway.

The main stand is a curious affair, straddling the halfway line and set well back from the pitch so that sitting in the back few rows it is impossible to see the corners of the field or even the goals. The seats are benches, painted red and white, with nine rows in all. A fenced tunnel area goes in front of the stand to the pitch and the dug-outs are situated either side of the halfway line. To the stand's left is a small covered standing area, though much of this was cordoned off.

On the far side is a social club, heavily fortified from the outside but convivial inside with fans of both clubs mixing happily in its crowded surrounds pre-match. There is also a splendid tea-bar here, frequented by efficient and friendly staff, with the meat and potato pie, peas and gravy coming heartily recommended. Another two-storey structure on this side of the ground houses the sponsors and club rooms and the club shop.

Both ends are covered, one with the legend 'Fleetwood Town FC' painted in red and white on the brick wall behind the terrace. The other end is the new covered standing area, running about three-quarters of the way along the dead-ball line and giving a great view of the action. To the right of the main stand is another social club, called the Highbury Sports & Social Club, though this is a separate entity not under the control of the club and there is no entry from this club into the ground, though a few inhabitants, pints in hand, were peering out of the windows watching the action.

Telford fans had endured a long trip to Gateshead at the weekend only for the game to be abandoned after 15 minutes due to a waterlogged pitch. They must have felt history was about to repeat itself as the rain increased in intensity up until kick-off turning what was a decent, well grassed pitch into a quagmire in parts.

Fleetwood, playing neat and constructive football and with two pacey front men, dominated and took a two-goal lead into the break, extending their lead shortly afterwards before then hitting the bar. Though the visitors responded with a late rally, twice striking the woodwork, they were well beaten on the night.

The good-sized crowd created a tremendous atmosphere and the rapport between the fans- a large contingent travelling from Telford- was friendly and good natured.

The programme is excellent value for £1.50, with several excellent articles, good historical and statistical sections and a most informative chairman's column. Just five of the current Fleetwood squad have made 100 appearances for the club suggesting that manager Greenwood has shrewdly adapted the personnel to the

league in which they were playing. With a superb club website Fleetwood certainly appear to be very community and fan friendly and the happy atmosphere around the stadium suggested that things are really positive here. Not many chairmen at this level, or any come to that, get their name chanted by the fans or are invited to wave to the supporters, suggesting Mr Pilley is doing a great job.

For a friendly, vibrant atmosphere, good football and a positive match-day experience a visit to Highbury Stadium comes highly recommended. Though Fleetwood looks a long way from anywhere the journey from J3 of the M55 is easily negotiated and stress-free if travelling by road. Take a left at the EROS statue by the roundabout going into town and then sixth (yes, sixth) right at the next roundabout about a mile further and the ground is then on your left with plenty of street parking. Alternatively, take the train to Blackpool and then catch the tram.

Fleetwood Town are on the up- quite how far they'll go is unclear but the locals are enjoying the journey and it is fun to catch a part of it. The enthusiasm for football in this part of the world is actually quite inspirational. Catch it if you can.

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