

**TT No.72: Mike Latham** - Sat 18 Nov 2006 FA Vase 2nd Round. **Salford City** 2-3 FC United of Manchester (at The Willows, Salford City Reds RLFC); Admission: £7; 28pp programme: £2; FGIF Match Rating: 3\* and NWCL Division 2: **Ashton Athletic** 2-2 Darwen; Attendance: 63; Admission: £2; 28pp programme: £1.50; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

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The Willows is one of Rugby League's traditional grounds and has hosted Salford games since 1901. Situated in Weaste amidst Coronation Street style terraced housing the ground has an atmosphere and feel of its own.

Sadly, the ground will host Salford games for just two more years before their move to a magnificent new stadium at Barton, in the shadow of the M60 flyover over the Manchester Ship Canal, is completed. The Willows, which hosted a Great Britain-Australia test match decider in 1922 alongside a host of memorable games and whose turf was graced by greats of the game such as Lomas, Risman, Watkins, Fielding, Nash and Richards will be developed for housing.

The Willows reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the club's enterprising chairman Brian Snape built The Willows Variety Centre behind one end and developed the cabaret and entertainment attractions at the club, hosted alongside a game played on Friday nights under floodlights. Salford was the place to be at this time with marvellous entertainment on the pitch, provided by a host of big money signing, matched by that off the pitch. Manchester United stars of the era such as George Best and prominent show business types were often to be seen at Salford games.

These days Salford compete in the Super League though their ageing ground has fallen behind their competitors, hence the need for a new stadium in a new location. What a fitting way for their much-respected chairman, John Wilkinson OBE, to celebrate 25 years at the helm than to announce that planning consent had been granted for the exciting new development at Barton.

The chance to see soccer played on the hallowed turf attracted a host of groundhoppers from far and wide on a sunny but chilly winter's afternoon for a noon kick-off. The added attraction of a second game elsewhere doubtless added to the appeal of an already appetising fixture.

Salford City had already hosted FCUM in a league game at The Willows on a Tuesday evening in early October, scoring two late goals to inflict a 2-1 defeat before a crowd of over 4,000. When the teams were drawn against one another in the FA Vase, The Willows was again a natural choice as Salford City's Moor Lane ground would have been unable to accommodate the anticipated crowd.

Salford City, a good footballing side and clearly a club on the up, produced a well-printed 28-page programme to mark the occasion and gave a good account of themselves in an entertaining game.

But FCUM, who have won all their league games apart from their reversal against Salford, showed a resilience to win a closely fought cup-tie despite Salford scoring first and last.

With a magnificent cantilevered stand, with authentic steep terrace in front, opposite the club-house, a covered terrace down one side and seated stand, with an upper tier in the middle on the other, The Willows could be easily developed into a good soccer ground and it seems a huge pity that a facility of this quality will soon be bulldozed. The playing pitch is renowned as one of the best in the Rugby League but for this game the grass was longer than for most soccer games and the pitch seemed unusually bumpy which counted against both teams' passing styles.

A large police presence and equally large number of stewards made this an experience out of the ordinary for those used to usual non-league fayre but the game passed by peacefully enough and the atmosphere created by the FCUM fans gave the occasion a real sense of occasion.

Sat 18 Nov 2006: NW Counties League Division 2: **Ashton Athletic 2-2 Darwen**. Attendance: 63; Admission: £2; 28pp programme: £1.50; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

After The Willows experience, the groundhoppers dispersed to the four winds, some to Flixton, some to Woodley, some to Bamber Bridge and some to Ashton Athletic, newcomers to the NWCL Division 2 this season.

Ashton Athletic's ground, is situated just off J25 of the M6 motorway south of Wigan and must be passed by thousands of cars and lorries each day.

After being effectively fast-tracked from the Manchester League this progressive club has erected floodlights, built a new small seated stand, extended its standing cover and generally tidied up its ground which, despite its close proximity to the motorway, is in a semi-rural location and, according to the locals I spoke to at least, located in Bryn rather than Ashton.

The directions from the NWCL website are excellent and much-needed for the route is far from straightforward from the motorway. A neat new sign welcomes visitors old and new to Brocstedes Park and there is plenty of car-parking.

The club official on the gate was friendly and welcoming and, obviously appreciating he had a number of newcomers to the ground, directed them to the facilities on offer- a smart, well-appointed clubhouse with a good array of refreshments and frequented by smiling club officials.

The playing pitch, which has a small slope, was in excellent condition and Darwen took full advantage, establishing a 2-0 lead with some clever approach play. But Ashton, who missed the best chances of the game, never gave up and deservedly gained a share of the spoils with two goals both from substitutes.

The 28-page programme was a superb full colour production and clearly a labour of love for its compiler, Steve Halliwell. With excellent background information to both of the competing clubs and statistics, together with some stunning photography, it is an outstanding effort.

With a range of youth and junior teams Ashton Athletic are clearly a community club in the truest sense of the word and a visit to this friendly and progressive club comes highly recommended.

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