

TT No.170: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 10th March 2009; **Preston NE** v Sheffield Weds; The Championship; Res: 1-1; Att: 12,381; Admission: £21.50; Programme: £2 (64pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

I imagine everyone has their own rules about revisiting grounds. For my part, if a ground has been completely rebuilt, even on exactly the same site, it's worth another look. Deepdale falls into this category - and what a stunning transformation there has been since work began in 1994. I'm not generally a fan of new stadia, but Preston have done an extremely good job of creating a venue fit for the 21st Century - and, they'll be hoping, the Premier League next season. Sadly, scarcely a trace of the old Deepdale remains. Gone is the barrel-roofed wooden West Stand, gone is the ivy-covered pavilion on the east side, gone is the old Kop, with its tiny shelter perched over the back few rows of terracing. This all had to be bulldozed, I suppose. It was an antiquated, idiosyncratic enclosure; adequate in the mid-1980s when North End were languishing in Division Four, and playing in front of crowds of 3,500. But patently unfit for the purpose of putting the pride back into Preston, and giving the Lilywhites a stage worthy of command performances.

The shadow of the legendary Sir Tom Finney has loomed large over Deepdale for decades, and the part-time plumber who played 433 times for North End between 1946 and 1960 is commemorated lovingly almost at every turn. One of the highlights of Deepdale Stadium (as, inevitably, it is known now) is the breath-taking sculpture of the great man, club president these days, in the north-west section of the site, outside the National Football Museum. It is based on an iconic black and white image - 'The Splash', sports photograph of the year in 1956 - of Finney sliding to trap the ball on a waterlogged Stamford Bridge pitch. The wave thrown up by his movement is backlit, and Finney a partial silhouette. Sculptor Peter Hodgkinson, Preston born and bred, has achieved a similar effect by positioning his bronze on a plinth between vertical fountains and an area of still water, on which, appropriately, Finney appears to be walking.

Behind the sculpted Finney rises the new West Stand. This, along with the adjacent road from the town centre, bears his name. The stand, all right angles and straight lines, sets the tone for a pleasing external uniformity. The use of shimmering silver metal cladding and liberal splashes of white paint gives the stadium, particularly on a glorious afternoon of golden sun and azure sky, a distinctly Mediterranean feel. Two square towers, finished in dazzling white with the crests of the club and its main sponsor at the top of each, flank a boxy main entrance which is glazed from floor to highest ceiling. At the town end of the car park on this side are, if memory serves, the two surviving relics of Deepdale as it used to be. These single-storey brick buildings house the club's offices and souvenir shop. How drab and dowdy they look next to their swish neighbours. The National Football Museum, essentially a concrete bunker, is at the other end of the stand.

Entry is free, and trawling through a fascinating range of exhibits could easily consume three hours of your time, though the wares on sale in the shop are pitifully tacky. An opportunity missed, no doubt. There is a section on the museum's second floor devoted to Preston North End, their rise and fall, and to the development of Deepdale. This area features a viewing platform into the ground above the north-west corner flag. Moor Park, dotted with football pitches, stretches away behind a belt of trees and an unmade council car park on the far side of Sir Tom Finney Way, formerly Deepdale Road. The interesting spire behind the north side of the museum belongs to the Roman Catholic Church of St Gregory the Great. There don't seem to be any plans to rename it St Tom the Great.

The beautiful (and I don't use that adjective wantonly) arrangement of the floodlights is the stadium's distinctive feature. These are positioned in each corner, at the point where the stands meet. Finished in sparkling white paint, they are propped by a series of outriggers, which form triangular shapes, and bear much of the weight of the four cantilevered stand roofs. The lights bow towards the pitch in a nod to the 'drench-lighting' technique as seen at, for example, Palmerston Park in Dumfries and the former Goldstone Ground in Hove. The overall design is modelled on stadia in Genoa and Nimes (Preston's twin town) - hence the continental atmosphere, I guess.

The Invincibles Stand, on the east side, and named after the North End team who dominated the early years of the Football League, was the final piece in the Deepdale revamp jigsaw. It is not quite finished, with the upper deck of executive boxes still to be completed. Apparently, prices per game start at £1,000 for a party of 12. This is the smallest, and plainest, of the four stands, but features the same silver and white cladding, and boasts a boxy, glazed entrance of its own. Much of the stadium's ground floor accommodation is used - rented out, presumably - by non-football organisations. So, there are healthcare suites offering advice on, and I quote from the sign, drugs and alcohol action, worklessness and condition management. Don't you adore jargon? Boomerang-shaped Lowthorpe Road, lined with terraced homes, runs alongside the stand at the north end before peeling away to leave space for even more car parking.

The North and South stands, respectively the Bill Shankly Kop and the Alan Kelly Town End, are, to the casual observer, identical from outside, though the north version contains a fitness centre for use by the community. The North Stand backs on to Hollins Road, more terraced houses, and another car park, while there is a wide alley behind the stand at the south end.

Once up bleak staircases and through uninspiring concourses, in which exposed breeze block and ducted cabling figure strongly, the stadium interior is impressive. Simplicity and uniformity, again, are the watchwords. The single-tier West, South and North Stands could be triplets, though the faces of Finney, Shankly and Kelly picked out in the navy-blue plastic tip-up seats is a novel idea, and adds a welcome hint of individuality. The Invincibles Stand is slightly smaller than the rest, with fewer seats arranged on a tier below what will eventually become two lines of executive boxes. A broad white band runs the length of the stand beneath

the roof and, in the centre, bears the legend Deepdale Preston in bold blue letters. The words are separated by a 'proper' clock. A nice, traditional touch. The players emerge from a retractable canvas tunnel in the south-east corner, while a portion of seats on the halfway line have been set aside for the managers, their assistants and the substitutes. Note the use of translucent panels in the roofs and end screens of each stand. These add to the sensation of brightness and airiness, and help promote the growth of grass on the pitch. A wide concrete track encloses the playing surface. A digital scoreboard is suspended, directly above the goal, from the rafters of the North Stand.

I love this time of year. The play-off system (controversial, but here to stay) comes into its own, with many clubs desperate for points to keep alive their seasons. Before kick-off, Preston occupied the final play-off place, and Wednesday were mid-table, but still in the promotion hunt. The Owls were desperately unlucky not to get the win they and their excellent, noisy away following craved. Preston, after two successive defeats, were tentative, and for big chunks of an end-to-end contest, outplayed and outfought. But you've got to take your chances, and having scored just once, despite dominating possession, the Yorkshiremen conceded an equaliser in the second minute of stoppage time. A travesty. The sense of injustice was felt keenly even by a neutral such as me.

The game was slow to ignite, and chances were limited in a cagey opening 45 minutes. Francis Jeffers put the Owls ahead on the half-hour having just seen Sean St Ledger clear one of his flicks off the goal-line. Unmarked 10 yards out, Jeffers turned a Sean McAllister cross past Andy Lonergan. The Preston keeper then made a spectacular flying save to claw away a Michael Gray drive which was arrowing into the top corner from outside the box before, in added time, North End's Jon Parkin got the jump on his marker to meet a Ross Wallace cross with a fierce header which cannoned back off the crossbar.

Wednesday bossed the opening phase of the second half. Lonergan had to dive smartly to push aside a goal-bound Gray effort from 12 yards, Jeffers fired narrowly over when left unpoliced in the penalty area, and Jermaine Johnson, whose powerful surges from deep were a visual treat, struck the outside of a post with an 18-yard thumper. Lonergan somehow got down at his near post to block a close-range downward header from Jeffers before Preston finally threatened, with effective substitute Youl Mawene's looping back header just turned over by stretching keeper Lee Grant. Wednesday were driven back in a frenetic climax, though Johnson, after another fabulous charge, shot straight at Lonergan in a one-on-one with three minutes left. Just as the visitors looked like holding out, North End man of the match Parkin rammed home the leveller from 10 yards after Richard Wood had got in the way of a Chris Sedgwick volley. The home fans were prepared to concede they had not picked up a luckier point all season. And with just two of the top eight winning on the night, it could prove vital for Preston come the final reckoning. But a draw leaves Wednesday, who lived up to manager Brian Laws' recent promise to attack, with plenty to do.

Preston's superb programme is worthy of mention. It has been voted 'best value' in the Coca-Cola Championship this season by 'Programme Monthly' - and it's easy to see why. The club have eschewed glamour and gloss, and a good, many adverts, for a smaller format issue on recycled paper. A cover price of £2 must be the lowest in any of the four divisions of the Football League. Yet, nothing has been lost by way of content. All the required elements - and much more besides - packed within 64 pages adds up to a great buy. How many times can you say that? As for Deepdale, well, it was a shame to lose some of the elements of the old ground, which had been developed piecemeal, and in recent wrinkled times was showing its age. Deepdale Stadium is the way forward in most respects. It's much more appealing than many new stadia, and, in parts, is recognisably Preston. For that, the grounds enthusiast should be grateful.

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