

TT No. 128: Mike Latham - Monday 28 December 2009: Blue Square North: **Fleetwood Town** 4-2 Vauxhall Motors; Attendance: 1,170; Admission: £10; Programme: £2.

Boom and bust is a phrase that applies to many seaside towns and particularly applies to Fleetwood, a town built upon the prosperity of its fishing fleet which has seen many hard times in between.

I remember in the 1970s queuing up at the Highbury Stadium and listening to the person behind me in the queue graphically telling his mates about the realities of deep-sea fishing in Icelandic waters- during the so-called Cod Wars that ultimately spelt the end of Fleetwood as a deep-sea fishing port.

Many people in this town of around 30,000 people earn their living the hard way and can hardly be said to be born with a silver spoon in the mouth. It's an unglamorous town but one with a soul and a community sense of spirit and Fleetwood Town FC's recent revival has given the whole area a new sense of purpose.

Fleetwood's ground has changed beyond comparison since my last visit three years ago and with further changes planned will soon be up to Football League standard- an amazing revival considering they went bust in the mid-1990s and started again at the lowest tier of the NW Counties League.

It must be a huge embarrassment to their neighbours Blackpool that their game against Sheffield Wednesday was frosted off while up the coast the self-styled Cod Army turned out in numbers to help with the newly purchased frost covers and ensure their favourites' game went ahead. Many stayed behind afterwards to help with putting back the frost covers to ensure next Friday's game with Southport will not be beaten by the frost.

Fleetwood FC originally played on a field next to the North Euston Hotel and moved to their present ground adjoining the Memorial Park in 1934. They were Lancashire Combination champions in 1923-24 and had the future Manchester City legend Frank Swift in goal when they lifted the Lancashire Combination Cup in 1926. Swift joined City from Fleetwood in 1932 and though the war took six years out of his career still managed nearly 400 league and cup appearances during a 17-year career. Blackpool born Swift was tragically killed in the Munich Air Disaster in 1958 while accompanying the Manchester United party in his second career as a newspaper journalist.

Fleetwood later became founder members of the Northern Premier League in 1968 but folded in 1976 due to financial difficulties. Re-forming as Fleetwood Town, the club joined the Cheshire County League and became founder members of the North West Counties League in 1982. Three years later they reached the final of the FA

Vase, losing 3-1 to Halesowen Town at Wembley Stadium. However, in 1996 this re-born club also folded.

Page 7 of the colourful match-day programme has a 'What Happened Next' feature. Determined not to see football die in the town club stalwarts Jim Betmead, Brian Cartmell and legendary ex-Fleetwood player Percy Ronson were among those that helped form a new Fleetwood club one year later, beginning at the lowest level of the North West Counties League. The trio are pictured alongside former England World Cup winner Alan Ball at a sportsman's dinner in 1997. Sadly, of the four only Jim is a survivor of that occasion.

In recent seasons Fleetwood Town have risen through the ranks, driven along by ambitious young chairman Andy Pilley, who made his fortune in a commercial power company. Pilley seems to have his head screwed on and has avoided the pitfalls of many aspiring club chairmen who concentrate solely on building up a club's playing strength.

The ultimate folly of that course of action was that Colne Dynamos who rose through the ranks, reaching the FA Trophy semi-finals and winning the Northern Premier League two decades ago while doing little to improve their Holt House stadium. Promotion to the Conference was rejected on ground-grading grounds and the club soon folded despite having invested in a full-time playing staff.

Fleetwood's success is built on facilities that already rival many Football League clubs and will soon be brought up to Conference National standards when the proposed new east stand is built. The floodlights are already up to Football League standards and the playing pitch with its revamped drainage system ranks among the best in the country.

Two magnificent standing terraces, one running the width of the pitch and named the Memorial End has Jim's Bar underneath- a tribute to Jim Betmead, currently the Club President. Opposite is the Percy Rowson End that runs two-thirds of the width of the field. The main stand has been re-built and is a smart, modern structure that runs from the halfway line to the Memorial End with half-a-dozen rows of seating.

After their 5-0 drubbing at leaders Southport on Saturday Fleetwood started tentatively and were flattered by their interval lead earned through Rogan's 38th minute goal. But a second half Adam Warlow hat-trick saw the self-styled Cod Army march on. In second-place at the turn of the year they could be in Conference National in eight-months-time, and may even soon be rubbing shoulders with Blackpool before very long.

I always like to visit a new ground when I can and though I failed on this occasion, due largely to the dreadful weather, a visit to a venue that felt like a new ground was the next best option. Over 1,100 spectators saw a fluid, entertaining game on an immaculate playing surface and with a real sense of community spirit around the club I am sure that the current Fleetwood club will go from strength to strength.

