

TT No. 135: *Mike Latham* - Saturday 9 January 2010: Coca-Cola League One: **Leeds United** 1-1 Wycombe Wanderers; Attendance: 24,383; Admission: £23; Programme: £3; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

The Big Freeze had well and truly taken root and even Holyhead, normally the groundhopper's safe haven in troubled times, had fallen to the ravages of the worst sustained spell of winter weather for more than a generation. Desperate days indeed and, with something of a heavy heart I decided to rescue something from the day and make my way to Elland Road.

I must admit to having mixed experiences of visiting the ground in the past. I well remember Bolton Wanderers playing an FA Cup fifth round second replay there in February 1976- an epic struggle against Newcastle United ending in a 2-1 win for the Geordies before a crowd of over 42,000 after a classic 3-3 draw at Burnden and a 0-0 draw at St James's Park in the first replay. I've watched Bolton there several times over the years against the home team and always found the experience somewhat intimidating. But with so few games on here was a chance to visit the ground as a neutral and appreciate the place through different eyes.

As well as football Elland Road has been home to many rugby-league games, most recently Leeds Rhinos' World Club Championship encounters against the Australian champions. I remember seeing Hunslet play at Elland Road and also at the now demolished greyhound track, with its unique 'tuning-fork' style posts nearby.

Elland Road was originally home to Holbeck rugby club, who played there in the early days of the Northern Union (late re-named the Rugby Football League). Holbeck's closure in 1904 opened the door for the soccer code to take root in Leeds.

Leeds City AFC took over the lease of the ground from Holbeck and, with the Football League authorities keen to establish a foothold in Northern Union strongholds, were effectively "fast-tracked" into the League in 1905 after playing their first season in the West Yorkshire League.

Holbeck's original home, incidentally, the Recreation Ground, off Top Moor Side and Brown Lane, was also a major cricket venue, staging the Roses Match in 1868 when Lancashire were routed by an innings and 186 runs, mustering a total of only 68 runs in their two innings. Two further Yorkshire first-class fixtures were staged there, the home county maintaining their winning record, but the venue was considered less than ideal and the development of Headingley, opened in 1890, proved a major blow to the Holbeck club. They eventually left the Recreation Ground in 1897 and the site was developed for housing.

The present-day road names bear witness to the old ground, being named Recreation View, Place, Row and Street respectively. Holbeck moved half-a-mile down Elland Road to take over the cricket and rugby grounds of the "Old Peacock"

public house, purchasing the site for £1,100. They built a 70-yard long stand on Elland Road but the stand on the opposite side, behind which lay the disused Beeston pit was much smaller. Though the rugby section did not last long, resigning from the Northern Union after losing to St Helens in the Second Division Play-Off game in 1904, the cricket club, to the east of the rugby field, survived until the 1960s. The cricket ground is now covered by road developments.

During Holbeck's years at Elland Road the rugby pitch ran from east to west. But Leeds City made numerous ground improvements, re-draining and re-turfing the pitch and then, in 1906, turning it at right angles so it ran from north to south. The grandstand at Elland Road then became the popular stand behind the goal. Soccer's growing popularity in a previously rugby stronghold was demonstrated when 22,000 saw a league game against Bradford City in December 1905, with 35,000 attending the corresponding fixture in 1908.

City stayed in the League until 1919 when they were sensationally thrown out after playing eight league games after a furore over alleged illegal payments to players. Port Vale took their place and inherited their record and fixtures. This draconian act could have spelt the end of soccer in Leeds but Leeds United was formed almost immediately and took their place in the Football League in 1920.

Elland Road had been used for occasional Rugby League games, the 1938 Championship Final the highlight and twenty years on from that Hunslet played Leeds there in the first game to be played under modern floodlights in the city, running out 15-8 winners. But it then became a regular "big match" venue for the game, hosting cup finals, semi-finals and test matches, due largely to the extra seating capacity available. For the 1982 Challenge Cup Final replay between Hull and Widnes, for instance, 19,626 of the 41,171 crowd were seated, five times the number any traditional RL ground could seat. Capacity crowds of 32,500 and then 39,468 saw the third and decisive tests against Australia in 1990 and 1994.

For football fans Elland Road is best remembered for the success of the Don Revie era and there are plenty of reminders of that time. The North Stand has been re-named the Revie Stand and the Billy Bremner statue pays a lasting tribute to one of the club's most iconic figures. One of the club bars is named after Peter Lorimer. Highlights from Leeds games of the past are shown on the big screen before games and help whip-up a real atmosphere. History and tradition are important here- the giants of the past are revered and will never be forgotten. Elland Road is still a massive stadium, modernised in part and with some impressive catering and hospitality areas but retains much of the atmosphere and aura that I remember from over 30 years ago.

The Leeds United ground-staff had done sterling work to get this game on; not only was the pitch in superb condition, but the surrounds of the ground were well-gritted with snow cleared from walkways. I booked a ticket for the John Charles Upper (main stand) where the lady on the other end of the 'phone was very helpful and gave an up-to-date weather report and helpful advice on where to park. Often, in my experience, the person manning the telephone at a ticket office is

the first and often only contact you make with a football club and what a pleasure it was to speak to someone so helpful- it doesn't half make a difference to one's perception of a club.

The M62 was eerily quiet, the Pennines hills covered in deep snow and I reached Leeds ridiculously early at 1pm, parking at an industrial unit just off Elland Road for the sum of £4. With just one left turn afterwards it was easy to get back onto the main road to the M621 after the game and I was in the Crown at Horwich by 6pm. There is plenty to while away the time at Elland Road and I chose one traditional way, sampling some simply fantastic fish and chips at Graveleys opposite the ground- it was well worth waiting in the long queue. I then picked up my ticket at the collection point easily and spent half-an-hour reading the excellent match day programme while sipping at a coffee before taking my seat.

Going to Leeds United feels like going to a proper football ground and the fans tend to arrive early and have a pre-match pint in the Peacock, visit the club shop or meet friends by the Bremner statue. After the win at Old Trafford they were in buoyant spirits, especially as they look odds-on to win League One by a mile. It's also very much a family affair with several generations of families united in their support of the club. Nearly everyone wears Leeds United merchandise of sort as well- and with pride.

The main stand gives a great view of the game though the seats are rather old and wooden. I much prefer these to plastic, though. The people around me were very knowledgeable and very committed to the cause but appreciated Wycombe's contribution to what I thought was an entertaining game. The massive East stand opposite is an impressive structure and while the upper tier remained closed the lower tier was well filled. Leeds' most vociferous supporters congregate in the Revie Stand, many standing throughout the entire game. The away fans are housed in the south-east corner and there was a good turn-out of visiting fans for the first-ever league meeting between the sides at Elland Road.

After Wycombe 'keeper Shearer (who I remember seeing play for Albion Rovers) made a hash of dealing with Howson's fourth-minute 25-yard daisy-cutter for a gift opener the league leaders looked on course for another three points. But Wycombe belied their league position- and backed by that impressive turn-out of fans- took the game to Leeds. Jon-Paul Pittman hit the post and a bizarre incident from a right-wing corner- the ball swerving to skid off the nearside post and then rebound off the far post before being cleared- left Leeds fans anxious.

I expected more from Leeds- their passing wasn't sharp or incisive enough and they were second best to the excellent Doherty in midfield. It was no less than the visitors deserved when the outstanding Pittman- who outshone the heralded Jermaine Beckford in the home ranks- scored an equaliser just after the hour-mark, collecting a long diagonal pass and drilling a low cross-shot past Ankergrén. The visitors kept their shape, Shearer recovered from his gaffe to look solid and, without making a substitution (Leeds made three) looked the more likely side to win what was a fluid game superbly refereed by David Webb.

Leeds' programme is an outstanding 72-page effort with the photographic content particularly noteworthy; the game was well presented and a huge screen replays the major incidents. This was one of only seven league games played and I'm glad I made the effort to attend on a bitterly cold afternoon. It was certainly a different experience attending the game as a neutral- it felt like an occasion, there was a terrific atmosphere and the Leeds fans certainly raised the roof in the last ten minutes as they willed their side to victory. It was easy to see why, even when they are not playing well that Leeds can snatch games late-on through the energy generated by their supporters.

Leeds are obviously on the way back, especially under the guidance of their astute young manager Simon Grayson. But this wasn't one of their best days- perhaps a hangover from the events at Old Trafford. I had initially approached the game with some reluctance, as desperate as I was to salvage something from the wreckage of a football programme decimated by the weather. But it turned out to be a rewarding afternoon and one that made me appreciate the intense loyalty and pride of the Leeds United supporters in their team. They have had some dark days but are putting those firmly behind them.

06/20