

TT No.89: Ian Hill - Friday 16th October 2009; **Shelbourne FC** v Athlone Town; League of Ireland Division 1; Score: 0 - 0; Attendance: 1062; Admission: 15 euros; Programme 32 pages 3 euros Match rating: 5*.

Due to the current value of the euro against the pound a visit to the Republic of Ireland is a very expensive trip. Unfortunately, this is also passed onto watching football although I think I found the cheapest beer at Shelbourne's Tolka Park compared to 5 euros a pint at other places.

Tolka Park the former home of Drumcondra FC is a great old-style ground despite attempts to modernise it. The former occupants Drumcondra have moved across the road from the ground to a park pitch with the only facilities being a small changing room block.

Over the years, seven different League of Ireland clubs have used Tolka Park for home league matches on a regular basis. They are Drumcondra, Shelbourne, Dolphin, Home Farm, Dublin City, Shamrock Rovers and St James Gate F.C.

Drumcondra F.C.

Tolka Park was originally home to Drumcondra, who in the 1950s and 1960s were one of the most popular teams in Dublin. The ground hosted its first floodlit game on the 30th of March 1953. However, "Drums" unexpectedly went out of business in 1970, vacating the ground.

Home Farm F.C.

After the demise of Drumcondra, Home Farm moved into the ground. However, Home Farm never drew large crowds and Tolka fell into disrepair (though it did host the replay of the 1984 FAI Cup final).

Shelbourne F.C.

In 1989, Shelbourne, who had played home games regularly in Tolka during the fifties, sixties, seventies, and early eighties, acquired Home Farm's long-term lease from Dublin Corporation on the ground. Home Farm moved to their own ground in nearby Whitehall. Shelbourne invested heavily in the stadium, converting it into Ireland's first all-seater stadium and building a new stand behind the Drumcondra end goal in 1999.

The first ever League of Ireland match to be broadcast live on TV was a fixture between Shelbourne and Derry City, staged at Tolka Park during the 1996/97 season.

Shamrock Rovers F.C.

In 1987, the then owners of Shamrock Rovers, the Kilcoyne family, attempted to move the club to Tolka Park. Rovers played there for a season, but the games were

boycotted by their fans, who were trying to save Glenmalure Park from demolition. Rovers were later on to return to the ground which they shared for a time with Shelbourne before eventually moving into the Tallaght Stadium in 2009. Rovers' home tie against Sligo Rovers during the 2009 season was moved to Tolka Park amid safety concerns to due construction onsite at Tallaght before the club friendly against Real Madrid.

Other Uses

Tolka Park has staged two full internationals for the Republic of Ireland. Both matches were friendlies against Wales. The stadium hosted the first Setanta Cup final when Linfield defeated Shelbourne. The Irish Rugby League Team has also played home games at the ground. In recognition of the improvement made to stadium, a Republic of Ireland senior international match against Wales was played there in 1993, as were youth, League of Ireland XI and Republic of Ireland B games. From 1999 to 2002 it hosted the FAI Cup final, until the fixture was shifted to Lansdowne Road. The ground has also appeared in the fictional football drama Dream Team when Harchester United were drawn to play Shelbourne in the UEFA Cup.

Future

Over the last number of years, Shelbourne have been planning to relocate to a new ground especially since the Tolka River flooded at the start of the decade and caused extensive damage to Tolka Park and the surrounding areas. Plans for a new stadium in Finglas and Swords have come to nothing, as has the FAI-backed proposed groundshare with North Dublin neighbours Bohemians.

Report Today - For the game against Athlone Town only two sides of the ground were open. The barrel roofed main stand and the concrete block stand which covers half of the side of the ground behind a goal. The barrel roof stand also has an old bar underneath with a few grumpy locals who thought "strangers" were pushing into the queue for drinks. The concrete block stand is ok for looking down one half of the pitch but you struggle to see one of the goals due to the dirty glass on the side panel. It also looks to have an unfinished look to it at the back where there is a sort of VIP area which only has a few chairs in it and no other facilities.

Shelbourne were founded in Dublin in 1895. In 1904 the club joined the Irish Football League, which was then an all-Ireland competition, before becoming founding members of the League of Ireland in 1921. Shelbourne have won the league 13 times and are one of three clubs to have won both the IFA Cup and the FAI Cup. In recent years, Shelbourne have become Ireland's most successful club in UEFA's club competitions.

In the 2004/2005 European season, Shelbourne became the first Irish club to reach the third qualifying round of the UEFA Champions League. Their performances in European competition and former striker Jason Byrne being capped for the Republic of Ireland whilst with the club, gained Shelbourne international exposure. The club lost their Premier Division license for the 2007 season due to the club's

huge debt. Since then, Shelbourne have played in the second tier of the League of Ireland.

Today's game was a vital one for the Shels in their aim to win promotion to the Premier Division. Originally, I had planned to go to St Patrick's but this game was rescheduled and it was just down the road from my hotel on the Drumcondra Road. This is one of the main roads into the city from the airport. Also located on this bus route is the Santry Stadium (home of Sporting Fingal) Whitehall (home of Home Farm) and not too far from Duncondra Road is Croke Park.

Played in drizzling rain this was a great game despite no goals. Shelbourne gave it their all in this one-sided contest but a series of desperate defending, great saves and a missed penalty kept the Athlone goal intact. You had to feel sorry for them and it proved to be a big dent in their promotion hopes.

Tolka Park is a great ground to visit and for this fixture there were quite a few European Hoppers in attendance. The admission charge of 15 euros is a bit steep and the programme was not worth 3 euros. Football programmes, are sold inside the main entrance of the ground and there is also a small club shop selling various souvenirs.

Overall a Shelbourne game is highly recommended and even more so if you like old grounds.

06/20