

**TT No.46: *Mike Latham*** - Wed 1 September 2010, East Lancashire League Division Two: **Peel Park FC 0-8 Burnley Belvedere**; Att: 20 (h/c); No admission or programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

It can be a strange and rather eerie experience to visit the site of an old football ground, particularly if there are obvious remnants of a once proud stadium still easily visible.

A visit to Cathkin Park in Glasgow, erstwhile home of Third Lanark is particularly recommended. Located just a few hundred yards from Hampden Park the pitch is still there, used for amateur games, marked out and with goal-posts, many of the original terracing still extant though covered in weeds and shrubbery and the old-style stanchions rusting away on the crumbling steps. A sign denotes the entrance to the ground.

In a very similar way a visit to Peel Park in Accrington, once home to Accrington Stanley in the Football League can be recommended. It was a pilgrimage I had long meant to make and an early season midweek game in the East Lancashire League afforded the opportunity.

When making this type of trip it's essential to take along a copy of Paul and Shirley Smith's wonderful book, *English & Scottish Football League Grounds 1888-2005* (Yore Publications). The level and depth of research is simply astonishing. Particularly useful if visiting the site of an old ground is a map showing the layout of each ground.

Peel Park, the book explains, was purchased by the club in 1919 for £2,500 being former grounds for the adjacent Peel Park Hotel, which remains to this day, an imposing building with a splendid selection of real ales and from the evidence of my visit a large and appreciative clientele.

The ground is to be found on the south side of Burnley Road heading north east out of the town centre.

Stanley joined the Football League as founder members of the Third Division (North) in 1921 by which time a covered seated stand had been erected on the south east side of the pitch, which must presumably have blocked out some light from the hotel. Banking was constructed at the north east end which remains to this day, though now heavily covered, as at Cathkin Park by dense vegetation and shrubbery.

'Later the terraces were concreted all around the ground and a covered enclosure constructed at the south west end,' the book informs. 'In 1958 the Aldershot Military Tattoo grandstand was acquired by the club and constructed on the north-west side of the ground. This provided cover for 4,700 spectators, both seated and standing and brought the capacity up to 24,600'.

The school behind the goal at the south end of the ground, from Alice Street remains and walking around the site it's easy to envisage days when Stanley's Peel Park ground hosted league football. The old ground concrete fences at the north end behind the banking remain, so too the site of the long-demolished pavilion.

Stanley's record crowd was 17,634 for the visit of Blackburn Rovers on 15 November 1954 to mark the inauguration of the floodlights. That must have been a great occasion and doubtless many quaffed their thirst from the walk up from the town centre with a pint in the Peel Park Hotel.

League football was played here from 1921 until March 1962 when Stanley resigned from the Football League Division Four in mid-season due to financial problems. 'The club immediately attempted to rescind their decision but the League was adamant that it was obliged to accept their resignation,' the Smiths explain. A new all-amateur Accrington Stanley was founded and used the ground, playing in the Lancashire Combination until folding in January 1966.

I also took along with me a copy of Phil Whalley's excellent book 'Images of Sport, Accrington Stanley Football Club' (Tempus, 2001). 'The school playing field to the north of the town centre will always echo with the ghostly cries of a club that was allowed to die,' Whalley writes.

Peel Park had been bought by a local scrap dealer who charged the club £7 per week rent and this combined with other overheads meant that it was simply not a viable proposition on the gates attracted by non-league football. Whalley includes a wonderfully evocative photograph (page 85) of the dismal, sad scene of Stanley's final game at home to Glossop. 'Peel Park was once at the heart of the town's being,' Whalley explains, 'as important in its way as the market and the Town Hall. This once-thriving place should not have been left to crumble before the eyes of the townsfolk'. Lancashire County Council later bought Peel Park and spent £25,000 landscaping the ground, with the last remaining stand being demolished by a fire.

These days the playing pitch is rather rough and ready, undulating in parts and with a dense covering of grass. Early evening kick-offs can be a rush for all concerned but a full complement of players had assembled for the 6-15pm start, together with a referee and club linesmen and about twenty spectators. Several more watched from the elevated position of the beer garden from the Peel Park Hotel. Between the hotel and the ground is the last surviving structure of the old stadium, a red brick building that was once a small block of changing rooms with a stone plaque that acknowledges the work of the Supporters' Club in its construction in 1937. The weather was glorious, warm and without a hint of a breeze, though darkness was falling quickly by the time the game ended around 8pm.

The landmarks are easily spotted, particularly the distinctive hill that rises above the Peel Park Hotel that can be seen on several old photographs of the ground in its League days, and the streets of neatly ordered stone terraced houses.

Peel Park FC were no match on the day for their opponents from Burnley. The visitors dominated the game and ran out convincing winners. But I had seen a game of football on the site of an old Football League ground and I was happy.

Accrington Stanley's revival in 1970 playing behind the Crown Hotel on the Whalley Road is covered by Whalley's splendid book, as they started on the long and successful journey to bring league football back to the East Lancashire town. So, too are the original 'Owd Reds' who played in the Football League from its formation in 1888 until 1893 at the Accrington Cricket Club Ground. That venue remains and is a delightful venue to visit in summer to watch Lancashire League cricket, again the site of the football pitch on the vast playing area outlined in the Smith's book. A visit there would have to wait for another day.

07/20