

TT No.89: Keith Aslan - Sun April 6th 2014; Cambridge University v Oxford University; **Varsity Match**; Venue: @ **FULHAM FC**; Kick-Off: 14.59; Result: 0-0 (4-2p to Cambridge); Admission: £10; Programme: Free; Official Attendance: 3431.

This was my kind of Sunday, a leisurely breakfast at my favourite trattoria in Hammersmith's famous Latin quarter, then back home to watch Andy "I hate the English" Murray lose in straight sets. I would imagine there was a mass turn off of TV sets when John Inverdale uttered the frightening words "Great Britain's Davies Cup hopes rest with James Ward" which is the tennis equivalent of saying "England's World Cup hopes rest with Andy Carroll". This was my cue to stroll down the Thames (well the footpath alongside) to take in the annual Varsity football match, which after an absence, is back where it belongs, and as a curtain raiser for The Boat Race.

It was held at Fulham throughout the nineties before a fall out with the owner, hard to believe anyone could fall out with Al Fayhed! There's a new regime down by the river and while on the downside the statue of Michael Jackson has gone and Fulham are going to get relegated, the upside is the Varsity match is back. The last one of these games I went to was 1997, it was 0-0 and one of the worse games I've watched. Still haven't seen a goal, but this match was much better.

While most Premier grounds have change beyond all recognition, Craven Cottage hasn't. It is a museum piece, thanks to large chunks of it being under a preservation order. The terraces behind the goals now have seats on them but the rest of the ground is largely unchanged. The Riverside Stand, built in the seventies, has had a lick of paint and that's it. The "Johnny Haynes Stand" opposite is untouched. The outside can still be used for a "Hovis" advert, the stand is wooden (how many of these are left) with the wooden seats being the original ones from when Archibald Leitch built the ground. Surprisingly, they are no less comfortable than the modern-day plastic ones, but anyone taller than Ronnie Corbett might find the leg room a bit cramped.

Craven Cottage has many memories for me. I saw my first ever League football match here, Fulham 1 Chelsea 2 in 1965. I sat in the same Stevenage Road stand as I did today. It has been renamed after one of Fulham legends and I can vividly recall when Fulham announced that they were making Johnny Haynes Britain's first £100 a week player, my Dad saying "A hundred pounds a week just to play football, where will it all end?" I think we've got a pretty good idea of the answer to that one.

If a tenner to get in was a tad on the pricey side that was more than made up for by a brilliant 44-page glossy programme which astonishingly was free. Many of the crowd arrived late with people still streaming in 20 minutes after kick off, but in fairness, as they were all students, it must have been a bit early for them. No goals, but this was about as good a 0-0 as you're ever going to get. Of course, we

had to have a spurious penalty competition to find a "winner" and Cambridge's resulting success means both teams have had 50 victories apiece in this fixture. All to play for next year.

Next on the agenda was the quintessentially English Boat race. Broadcast live in over 60 countries, nigh on a million people gather Thames-side to watch and I bet not one in a hundred either cares who wins or has any knowledge or interest in rowing. If you want proof of how big this event is, just mention the boat race to anyone and nobody will ever ask "Which one?" I got myself an A4 glossy programme, which at a fiver was a bit more expensive than the one for the football and settled down to watch the race (or more accurately the five minutes of it you could see from my vantage point). Oxford got their revenge for the football, with one rower almost falling into the water early doors not proving to be a race winning tactic for Cambridge.

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