

Goldstone Memories

The Goldstone Ground remembered

by David Bellotti
Deputy Chairman & Chief Executive

My first visit to the Goldstone was back in 1973. Having moved to Sussex to a new job and being mad on football at the first thing I did was buy a season ticket. Sitting in the back row of E block the stadium looked huge. The pitch of course is one of the biggest in the League. The stadium is only relative to others visited, but then I'd grown up at Exeter City!

The first game I watched at the Goldstone we lost 2-0 to Bournemouth. Later that season Brian Clough arrived and we were knocked out of the Cup at home 4-0 by non-League Walton and Hersham and thrashed in the League at home by Bristol Rovers 8-2!

The horrors of those games remain in my memory, however we did get revenge in 1989 beating Rovers 2-1 to secure promotion to the Second Division. My greatest memory was the very first game in the First Division and when we ran out against Arsenal at the Goldstone there were tears of joy all around me in the Stand. We may have lost 4-0 but we were there.

In 1978 there was a crowd of 33,431 for the final game versus Blackpool. It was getting a problem fitting everyone in and later that year the Club announced plans for ground improvements which included a second tier for the Main Stand and 48 boxes, plus a new East Stand. It never happened because of objections from local residents and construction problems.

A 'Lego' stand appeared at the ground next to the West Stand but it only stayed for a period because safety considerations meant it had to come down. It was not a good place to be in a strong wind!

At the end of the 1979-80 season a fire gutted the South Stand. A new proposal from the Club was for a new North and South Stand with a roof for the East Terrace. This scheme was

abandoned when 1926 Covenants were discovered which meant the scheme could not proceed. In 1982 there was a scheme for boxes in a new North Stand but that didn't proceed for financial reasons.

In 1987 the Goldstone saw the introduction of a Membership Scheme and it was Members only in the North Stand and West Terrace. The Club was feeling confined and with financial pressures as well as reductions in capacities forced by the Licensing Authorities the Club approached Corals to see if it could share the Greyhound Stadium. But the idea didn't proceed.

In 1988 the Club was forced to close the crumbling North-East Terrace, the capacity was down to 23,000 by this time. In 1989 the Club announced plans for an extension to the West Stand with boxes but that also didn't proceed.

In 1990 following the Justice Taylor Report the Club knew it would have to become all seater and couldn't do so at the Goldstone unless it was a very low capacity of around 12,000. Negotiations were started with Brighton Council to build a stadium at Waterhall but these were not successful, the Club then looked at Toad's Hole Valley, the Capacity by now had been reduced to 17,677.

In 1995 the Club had been forced to close other sections of the East Terrace and as we play the last game at the Goldstone the safety limit at the ground set by the authorities is under 12,000 - a far cry from the 33,000 crowds of yesteryear.

When thinking of one's own ground you always compare it to others. The stadium at the top clubs are now state of the art. At Old Trafford, Elland Road, Villa Park and Anfield you have examples of clubs having built to the demand of their success. The atmosphere at those

grounds is electric. You always want yours to be that good.

Visiting grounds in the Third Division this season there are some nice small new stadiums as Chester and Scunthorpe. Others have built new stands such as Carlisle, Lincoln and Torquay. But there are still a number that are decaying and perhaps Doncaster and Darlington are venues that come to mind in that category. A visit to the Cellnet Stadium at Middlesboro earlier this year showed me just what can be done in 9 months building time.

Having completed visits to all 92 League Clubs (which took 7 years) with my wife Jo, it would be a surprise if we didn't have a best and worst ground. Old Trafford stands out above all others and when we visited Darlington with the Albion recently we concluded that was really the worst.

The greatest memories of football though for me are at the Goldstone, the skill of Peter Ward and his goals. The sheer class and control of Mark Lawrenson, the determination and leadership of Brian Horton. The crushing tackles of Jimmy Case. For me the Goldstone was for 24 years the backcloth for the players to entertain. The memories are there for us all.



Jo and David Bellotti at Darlington F.C. completing their 92 League Club visit.



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