

The Search for a Stadium

The Oxford of the 1880s had few proper facilities for football. The University club played in the Parks until the Iffley Road ground was opened in 1900, and most of the college teams had some sort of playing field which was used for various sports. Some colleges used a field at Holywell, which by the 1890s was being used by several local clubs.

Oxford City's first known home ground was a farmer's field off the Botley Road, but as they played most games against the colleges and other local teams there was little incentive or funding available to develop their own ground.

Curiously one early City match, which was briefly reported in the local press, was actually played on what later became the White House Ground, on 13 February 1886, against Cygnets FC. This paddock behind the Old White House was prone to flooding in winter, and was also of irregular shape and size, with the result that it could not be used for official FA-directed competitions. It is also thought that the local Rugby Union club also used this ground.

In the period after 1893, when there is more information available, the club made use of 'Mr Archer's Field', situated in Grandpont but on the far (western) side of the GWR line. It was not ideal because of the terms of the letting arrangement, which favoured farming uses and prohibited football until the end of September. There was no pavilion, changing rooms or stand, and the playing area would be simply roped off. Teams changed in a nearby public house and walked over to the field along Archer Lane, the continuation of the present-day Whitehouse Road.

As Oxford City FC became more ambitious towards the end of the 1890s, they began to look for a more permanent site, capable of development. The White House Ground offered the most in the way of potential, and was noted as being used for practice sessions by September 1898. Negotiations were held with Morrell's Trustees, who held the land under lease from Brasenose College. The College had owned the site since 1562, and the original Old White House was earlier known as West Wyke Farm. In medieval times, like other holdings in the area, it had formed part of the estates of Abingdon Abbey. A three-storey building with a courtyard and outbuildings, it must once have been an impressive and important building, but by 1897 was almost derelict. A new public house, the building most of us are familiar with, was sited nearer to the Abingdon Road and opened in 1898.

The remains of the old building, still used for storage and stabling, was taken over by The City club in 1900, and gradually converted into a rudimentary pavilion. Nevertheless the team would normally meet and change in the Three Cups in Queen Street or the Railway Hotel on the Botley Road. A new stand and dressing rooms, together with a club room were built on the site of the old building in 1931.

The main concern was the playing surface, which needed improvement in the north-west corner. A ditch meandered across this low-lying area: this had to be culverted and then covered over, in order to create a playing area which would satisfy the FA rules. The overall ground level also had to be raised to help guard against flooding, which affected the site almost annually. This work meant that the club was unable to use the ground for matches until 13 October 1900, when the Reserve XI played Abingdon in the Oxford and District League. The First XI made their first appearance on the new ground in a friendly fixture against Balliol College on 17 November, winning 5-2.

At first the rental arrangements were more or less on a weekly basis, then by 1906 the City FC were paying £25 per annum to Morrell's Trustees. The Amateur Cup success of that year led to a modest increase in financial security, and the club entered into a lease with Morrell's, now paying £35 a year.

Grandpont was steadily developing during the late Victorian period, and St Matthew's Church was built in 1890. The Infants' School, on the other side of the new White House Road (previously a muddy lane), was opened in 1896. There had been an earlier phase of development as far back as 1844 when the Great Western Railway brought a line through from Didcot to a terminus opposite the end of Western Road. This broad gauge line was in use until 1872, although passenger traffic had used the new through line and station from the early 1850s. The old track bed was later built on by the houses on the west side of Marlborough Road. Other roads and more house building followed.

The success of 1906 also encouraged the club to think about expanding the capacity of the ground, now that there was a large following of supporters and an increasing membership. In the months after the Cup win Organ Bros. brought in 1,000 cartloads of earth to form banks of terracing along parts of the north and east sides of the ground; this cost £80. The terraces were later lined with old railway sleepers, still there into the 1950s.

A covered stand, no more than a shelter and probably only about 20 yards long, was built along the south side, and shows up on the 1921 Ordnance Survey plan, and some time later a similar stand but with more terracing was erected on the north side, and the south stand was extended. The more ambitious North Stand as many of us knew it was not built until 1953. The Marlborough Road terracing dated to the late 1940s.

As to the playing surface, flooding continued on occasion, and caused many important Cup matches to be relocated or postponed. Successive rounds of ground surface-raising before the First World War were largely ineffective. In February 1912 some chickens invaded the straw bedecked ground at one corner during a match with Dulwich Hamlet! It was not until large scale drainage improvements were carried out on the Thames and its local tributaries that the problem (almost!) disappeared.

Two other features date from the late 1940s or early 50s. The Tea Hut from which many a steaming cuppa, bottle of ginger beer or Wagon Wheel was dispensed, was built by members of the flourishing Supporters' Club and opened on 12 November 1949.

It was still there some years after the club was evicted, and is visible on an aerial photograph. Another photograph of about this time shows a prototype 'Hooped Hut' near the Whitehouse Road entrance, possibly an extra refreshment booth.

The Supporters' Club was responsible for raising thousands of pounds for ground improvements.