

# **SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL**

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## **Saffron Walden Town Football Club History of 'The Meadow'**

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Having played on the Common in Saffron Walden for 18 years since their formation in 1872, where their only means of raising funds was to take a voluntary collection box around the pitch and request a donation from spectators, the Saffron Walden Town Football Club sought a new ground where they would be able to charge an admission fee. When Arthur Smith was appointed headmaster of the Boys' National School in Castle Street in February 1890, he saw such a piece of land from his school window. Later that year when he became secretary of the Town Football Club, Arthur Smith negotiated the use of the present field in Loft's Lane, which became known as 'The Meadow', for which the club paid Lord Braybrooke a rental of £3 per annum.

The pitch had two natural barriers, a hedge behind the goal at the Loft's Lane end, and the slade on the northern side of the pitch. Behind the Church End goal some 70 yards or so back was a timber fence, but the south side of the ground facing the school was open to spectators. In order that a charge for admission could be made, committee members went down to the ground an hour or so before each match to hang up some brown canvas sheeting on fixed wooden posts to complete the enclosure of the ground. When the canvas sheeting was up, duck-boards were laid along the top side of the ground behind the rope which was erected a yard or so from the touch-line. There were no stands or shelters for spectators, and when it was windy or wet the spectators would hug the canvas and stamp on the duck-boards to keep their feet warm.

Entrance to the ground used to be from the south-east corner, in a similar position to where the entrance is now, and Fred 'Fibs' Bowtle and Fred Green collected the gate money. From the entrance gate down the lane towards the Slade, Tom Start used the triangular roadside waste area for

pigs, poultry and for stabling his donkey. For a long time a caravan stood behind the hedge and goal, and the chimney of that old caravan was hit and missed many, many times when shots at goal would not go into the net. At the turn of the century, Loft's Lane became known as Caton's Lane when William Caton lived and farmed at the big house further down the lane. The lane has still retained that name today, although the house is currently owned by the Ketteridge family.

A meeting was held in the committee room of the Town Hall on Wednesday 6 August 1919 for the purpose of resuscitating the Saffron Walden Town Football Club, which had been in abeyance during the First World War. The proposal to do so was duly carried, but the main talking point of the meeting was the acquisition of a more suitable ground for playing football than that at Caton's Lane which has a slope of 15 ft.1ins from one corner to its diagonal opposite. The new ground under question was situated behind the Gas Works; it consisted of about eight acres of land, was flat and ideally suited for a sports field. Mr Charles Downham, the tenant, and captain of the Cricket Club, was ready to give up the piece of land at once, in the interest of sport, and the meeting agree that every effort should be made to purchase the ground in question.

A fund was set up, and the club continued to play their football on the 'Meadow' at Caton's Lane, but the funds never reached the amount required to purchase the new ground, and after several years it was decided to use the money raised to improve the facilities at Caton's Lane. An 'Iron Club' was started to replace the temporary canvas sheeting with a corrugated iron fence which would encompass the whole ground. The fence was erected during the summer of 1927 by club members, and was financed to a large extent by a novel idea which consisted of townfolk being asked to pay 2s.6d. to join the 'Iron Club', Each half-a-crown paid for a corrugated iron sheet, and in this way the entire cost of £286 was raised with a small balance left over.

Not long after completing the corrugated iron fence, a certain amount of protection was afforded to the spectators by the erection of a corrugated iron enclosure on the top side of the ground. There was a determined drive to make the Caton's Lane ground one of the best in Essex, and on Saturday 29 November 1929, a new dressing room was opened to give the players better facilities for changing on the ground. This was followed by the erection of another shelter behind the Caton's Lane goal within the next year. The club's motto at the time was 'Good football under the best conditions', wit the winning of trophies taking second place in its ambitions.

Match programmes were issued for the first time during the 1929-30 season, and were a complete success, raising £41, and contributing over half of the cost of building the changing rooms in the south-east corner of

the ground. A changing room for the referee and linesmen was built near the entrance to the ground in 1933 in preparation for the club's move into the Spartan League. During the 1935–6 season the honorary secretary, Herbert Lewis, left the town after a period of service with the club lasting over ten years. It had been his ambition for the club to own the ground at Caton's Lane, but although this was not realized, he did make a significant contribution to the excellent facilities there.

In 1935 the owner of the 'Meadow' died, and in his will left the football ground in trust to the Town Council for the use of football and other sporting activities. A new lease was drawn up to this effect. The 1937–8 season emerged as one of the most eventful in the club's history, with the first team being promoted to Division One of the Spartan League and astonishing everyone by winning their first nine games, and heading the league table by Christmas. A new grandstand on the northern side of the ground was also opened on Boxing Day, 27 December 1937, during the interval of the Spartan League game against Polytechnic, by the Mayor Ald. Ellis Rooke. The stand, with seating accommodation for 200 people was packed to capacity for the match which was attended by a crowd of almost 1,000 who saw the 'Bloods' win 4-1.

In December 1947 the American servicemen who had used the local airbase at Debden Aerodrome, the 65<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing of the United States Air Force, decided to show their appreciation to the town of Saffron Walden, which had looked after them so well during the war years, by making a donation into what was named the Anglo-American Playing Field Scheme. The Americans donated £5,500, a considerable sum of money at that time, when an average wage was less than £500 per year. The idea behind the scheme was that the Saffron Walden Town Council would match the sum of money, pound for pound, donated by the Americans, and that the land around the football ground would be turned into a sporting and recreational area for the town, in memory of the servicemen who lost their lives during the war.

In the early 1950s the land on the other side of the Slade was levelled for a cricket ground and hockey pitch, although it took two or three years to persuade the Cricket Club to move from the Common where they had played for over a century. The move had considerable financial disadvantages for the Cricket Club, as all village buses used to depart from the Common, it was a popular pastime watching the cricket while waiting for the buses, and a collection box passed around the often sizeable gathering of spectators provided a welcome income.

The Football Club generously gave us some of their land behind the Church End goal, where the Guy Fawkes Night bonfire and firework display is held annually, and this land was levelled for hard-court and grass tennis courts, but nearly 50 years later it has yet to be used for

this purpose. The line of seven poplar trees which have now reached maturity, were planted at this time just inside the new fence position .The Anglo-American Playing Fields area was also planned to have a bowling green and a clubhouse where refreshments could be served adjacent to the Bridge End Gardens. Unfortunately the Town Council did not honour their part of the agreement and to this day the Anglo-American Playing Fields are a shadow of the original proposals.

When the American servicemen arranged a return visit in 1953, there was nothing of substance to show them: the cricket pitch had been levelled but no one was using it, the tennis courts had been levelled but had not been built, and the proposed clubhouse and bowling green were not in existence. To help the Town Council out of an embarrassing situation the Saffron Walden Town Football Club offered to stage a parade in front of the main grandstand at the 'Meadow' under the pretence that the money from the Anglo-American Memorial Playing Field fund had been spent on this project. In return for this favour the Football Club received a donation of £600 from the Town Council to pay for the cost of the bricks required to build new changing rooms behind the grandstand. Over the next few years as finances permitted, the football club built with voluntary labour from players and club members the present changing rooms which were opened in 1958. The original changing rooms became a committee room, although they were still used for changing on occasion when two matches were played at home on the same day, such as cup finals. In the latter 1970s and 1980s the building was converted into the club shop, selling programmes and other memorabilia, before it was demolished in 1992.

Other than the building of a tea hut, the ground changed very little until during the summer of 1970 the club embarked on its first major project for some time when they demolished the dilapidated corrugated iron fence along the south side of the ground, and with voluntary labour erected a pre-cast concrete fence in its place. Two years later the club took the important decision to build a clubhouse, which was officially opened by England international, Martin Peters on 9 May 1973. The main structure of the clubhouse was a timber band hut from Bassingbourn Aerodrome, and again with voluntary help from club members, to keep down the costs, a bar, toilets and porch were added to the building, the total cost of which was little more than £1,000.

Much work went into improving the appearance of the ground during the summer of 1974, as the club prepared for entry into the Eastern Counties League. A concrete path, extending from the main stand to the main entrance in Caton's Lane, was laid. The corrugated iron fence at the Caton's Lane end of the ground was pulled down and replaced with a new concrete fence and a new stand was built behind the Caton's Lane goal, incorporating new terracing, to give the club one of the best grounds in the league.

During the summer of 1978 there was a great deal of activity as members of the club set about making further improvements to the club's facilities. Within the space of a month, the final stage of the concrete fencing along the Church End of the ground was erected. The stand at the top of the ground was also completely rebuilt with a more sturdy brick and concrete construction, and a new hot water system was installed in the changing rooms. An Improvements Fund was also started with the eventual aim of providing floodlights at Caton's Lane. A lottery was started in the town, and the club held very popular weekly dances in the clubhouse when the hall was often full to bursting point. Although a great effort the fund-raising was so successful that the money for the floodlights was raised 'up-front', and they were completely paid for when installed in early October 1979, a rare feat in the football world.

David Argent, the club's most experienced player, took over the managership in a caretaker capacity for four games, while the committee chose a successor, and he had the honour of taking charge of the side for the first team's first game under the club's new floodlight against Royston Town on Tuesday 9 October 1979, in the first round of the East Anglian Cup. Triumphantly the Bloods' celebrated the occasion with a 4-0 victory over the well placed South Midlands League side. The following week Norwich FC sent their first team squad to Caton's Lane to officially open the floodlights, and before a crowd of over 1,500 people they predictably outclassed their hosts, and won by 10 goals to 1 in an entertaining match. With the appointment of John Ryan as manager in 1980 the 'Bloods' began their most successful period ever in their long history, by winning the Eastern Counties League Championship in 1982-3 and the Essex Senior Trophy three times in succession from 1983-5.

During this time the clubhouse was extended with the provision of a committee/boardroom, and a vice-president's lounge with a bar, which was opened for the AGM of the Eastern Counties League in June 1981. This was all constructed with voluntary labour, and cost less than £3,500. Further improvements were planned to the clubhouse, and the hall was virtually doubled in size to provide a lounge and new bar area. Once again much of the work was done with voluntary labour, and the new building was opened in 1985.

With an application made for entry into the Isthmian League in 1984, the club had to meet very few ground requirements to gain acceptance, a protective tunnel for the match officials and players being the most major item. However, after playing in the competition for 12 years, the Isthmian League changed their ground criteria, and deemed that all football pitches in the league must be virtually flat, and cannot have a slope of more than metre. As a result one of the oldest football clubs in the world had to resign from the Isthmian League, before being expelled, and was in effect

demoted two divisions in the 'pyramid system'. As the Football League do not have the same rule, there is the anomaly that the 'Bloods' would be able to play in the Football League with their existing slope, but not in the Isthmian League. If the club wanted to progress from their present position, they had to level their pitch, in order to do so.

From a personal point of view I feel that 'The Meadow' is a piece of football history, as one of the oldest football grounds in the world, and should be preserved as a museum piece. Being situated in a valley, and overlooked by the tallest church in Essex, the ground has a unique atmosphere, and the slope of the pitch is an important part of its character. The rules of the game fairly deem that at half-time both teams change ends, therefore any advantage gained in the first half by one team, is given to the other team in the second half. It would be a world indeed if every football pitch was flat, and as custodians of the game in this country the Football Association should ensure that competitions such as the Isthmian League are not allowed to introduce such unjust and inappropriate regulations.

**Note:** Paul Daw is author of *The History of Saffron Walden Football Club 1872-1980*, and the article above brought the history up to date to 2001. The author has discovered that the Town FC was the 24th football club to be founded in the world.