



PLAYER'S please

TOLKA PARK:

A HISTORY – PART IV

The following article, written by David Wynne,
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Home Farm purchased Tolka Park at the latter end of the 1971/2 season. For £40,000 they received one of the few floodlit arenas in the country, complete with a covered stand which spanned the length of the Richmond roadside of the ground. Its elevated seating provided some distance between spectators and pitch, but only a low wall provided any sort of barrier on that side. The open terraces that stood behind each of the goals, as well as the partially covered terrace of the Riverside, were fronted by fencing, including barbed wire. All of which gave the ground, like most at that time, the austere, imposing look of a prisoner-of-war camp. Yet, it was still one of the premier football grounds in Ireland.

They inherited not just a well-appointed stadium, but the name of the club who formerly owned it and their place in the League of Ireland too. For the coming season, they would compete as Home Farm Drumcondra. Or that was the plan, at least. Confusion reigned, as over the next few weeks and months they were variously reported as Drumcondra, Home Farm, Home Farm/Drumcondra and H.F.D. By the beginning of the 1973/4 season the Drumcondra suffix had been all but forgotten. Of the players that lined out for Drumcondra in 1971/2, only four amateurs were retained by Home Farm, who, even at senior level had decided to eschew professional status.

Ownership of Tolka Park was like taking possession of some cursed artifact. Initially it bestowed success beyond anything experienced, before ultimately damning the holder. This sequence looked to be continuing. The fates dictated the first game on their new ground after the purchase was completed, would be the Castrol Cup final replay between Home Farm and Dundalk. This trophy was played for between sides of the League of Ireland "B" division. The home side won 3-0.

Home Farm's tenancy began in earnest with two friendlies, against Hibs. First the Scottish side began their Irish tour with a 2-0 win at Tolka Park on July 21st. The latest incarnation from Cork, who were also calling themselves Hibernians at this time, were lucky to come away with a 1-1 draw a week later, Home Farm missing a late penalty. The first competitive game in senior football at home for the new management saw the amateurs surprise St. Patrick's Athletic in the Leinster President's Cup. Victory then followed against Bohemians before they fell to Shamrock Rovers after extra time in the semi-final.

The League of Ireland Shield competition provided a further warm-up for the newcomers, who were not outmatched by their more established opponents, but a win and four draws

were not enough to progress. Then, on October 8th, 1972, forty-four years after their founding, Home Farm made their League of Ireland debut away to Dundalk. A 1-0 win capped a landmark day for the visitors and ended the Oriel Park side's recent unbeaten home record. One week later, Waterford were welcomed to Tolka Park for the home side's first league game there. Again, the venue lifted its new masters to greater heights than almost anyone expected, shocking the reigning champions with another 1-0 victory. They found themselves atop the league table.

It was too good to last, and after losing what was then a top of the table clash with Finn Harps, they endured a thirteen-week run without a win. Incredibly, despite conceding sixty goals in just twenty six games, they still finished ahead of three other sides.

Things were not much better for the other tenants at Tolka Park; Shelbourne, who began the season in the midst of a pay dispute between the players and the board. The top players sought a larger pay differential, while the board wanted to offer the same salary to all sixteen first team squad players. A brief holdout at the start of August was settled only after the board issued an ultimatum threatening to transfer list all the players involved. An annual wage bill of around £8,000 was agreed, but chairman Tom Rowan stressed that the income from attendances was falling and would not cover this. Shelbourne's attendances for home games in 1973 were variously described as; "meagre" (Bohemians, Limerick), "small" (Shamrock Rovers) and "very small" (Rovers again).

Likewise, a large following was one thing that Home Farm had not received from Drumcondra in their package deal. Their following was generously described as "a small band of loyal supporters" and not even the presence of character as large as Tommy Docherty, over on a scouting mission, could hide the fact that Tolka Park was "sparsely populated" for a derby with Bohemians. It was clear that attendances would not cover the cost of maintaining the stadium or much needed improvements to the floodlights.

When the league cup was introduced in 1973, controversy arose over the choice of venue for the final. The state of the game in Dublin was summed up by the fact that when Tolka Park won the ballot, it was decided only by the casting vote of the League president. Finn Harps' Fran Fields fumed, saying they would not fulfill the fixture at the chosen venue, while manager Patsy McGowan was more pragmatic, saying the game would go ahead, but speculated the gate wouldn't even reach £500. In the end Tolka Park did host the first league cup final, which was won by

Waterford. The newspapers made no comment on the size of the 'gate'.

Whatever troubles Home Farm and Shelbourne shared, they were unable to resolve their differences about the rent for Tolka Park before the 1974/5 season. In July, Shelbourne announced that they would play their games for the coming season at Dalymount Park. A war of words broke out in the media, with Home Farm telling the papers that they were happy to have Shelbourne as tenants and had sought to negotiate terms, but the proposal Shelbourne made was completely unacceptable to their board and subsequently Shelbourne had decided to move on.

However, fuel was then poured on the flames by Bohemians who suggested that they didn't really want to take Shelbourne in, but understood that the Reds had no other options and would be out of football otherwise. This forced Home Farm to issue a further statement clarifying again they were happy to have Shelbourne as tenants but hadn't wished to see them out of Tolka Park, much less out of football.

To date, the purchase from Drumcondra had brought Home Farm senior football, but little more to realise their ambitions. They no doubt dared to dream that like those who established the ground in 1924 and the Hunters and Proles they might continue the tradition of FAI Cup wins but could hardly have expected it would happen for them so soon.

In February 1975, before a crowd that was mostly made up of away supporters, they beat Dundalk at Tolka Park to go through to the quarter finals. It was the first time they had even reached that stage of the competition. Further victories over Cork Celtic and St. Patrick's Athletic brought them all the way to the final where they would renew hostilities with Shelbourne.

Opting for the experience of the professionals, who had played all their games in their run to the final at Dalymount Park, over the enthusiasm of the amateurs, the papers proclaimed, "It Must Be Shelbourne". Just 9,000 saw history being made as Dave Bacuzzi's players justified his claim that "the only difference between part-timers and amateurs is that one gets paid and the other does not" by winning 1-0 to bring the cup back to Tolka Park.

It was soon followed by the Olympic Games, well an Olympic qualifying match at least. The venue had never hosted a senior Irish international match, but it was seen as suitable for the amateur side representing their country in qualifiers for the Montreal games. Their opponents who lined out at Tolka Park on May 16th, 1975 were a

formidable Czechoslovakian side, who would go on to defeat the reigning World Cup winners West Germany on penalties to win the European Championship, the following year.

The home side took a surprise lead in the 10th minute but were pegged back just 17 minutes later. Some hope was offered when the visitors had Petras, who had scored against Brazil in the 1970 World Cup, sent off just before half time. With just under 15 minutes left, Masny teed up Nehoda to score the winner. That pair would go on to convert the first two Czech penalties in that famous shootout against the Germans. A 1-0 defeat in the second leg meant there would be no further opportunity for qualifiers at Tolka Park, but another important step had been taken on the road to becoming a full international venue.

Home Farm's cup victory meant that European football returned to Tolka Park on September 17th, 1975, after an absence of ten years. Racing Club de Lens, who similarly had celebrated their maiden cup success, were their opponents. The French side were honoured in Dublin by a civic reception from the Lord Mayor. The home team were equally welcoming by not playing the game under the suspect floodlights.

There were few, if any, away supporters after a planned charter flight to Dublin had to be canceled due to lack of interest. The perpetual rain cloud that seemed to hang over Drumcondra's big occasions heaped down upon the ground for more than 30 hours before the game. The 2,000 hardy souls in attendance had to endure a further 90 minutes of the downpour, but again, Tolka Park proved impervious to continental conquest. A creditable 1-1 draw gave some hope for the second leg. Any chance of further European ties for Tolka Park that season quickly vanished as Home Farm were thoroughly outclassed in a 6-0 defeat in the second leg.

Their European adventure was a costly one and even before departing for France, Home Farm had both sought a sponsor for the trip and assistance from Dublin Corporation to try and offset their running costs. Rent and rates were running at about £2,500 per year and the overall running costs per season of the sixty or so teams within their organisation was £25,000. This was the first time the club had sought such a grant. In the interim some upgrades were made to the sub-par lights and the Corporation finally came through with a grant of £10,000 in 1976, to be used for the "continuous development of the club." While grateful, Honorary Secretary Brendan Menton suggested that an additional zero on that cheque was what was really needed. Tolka Park consumed a considerable part of the grant, with the ground receiving a new treatment room and

groundkeeping equipment, at a cost of £4,000.

At this time it seemed that the only games assured to bring a large attendance were FAI Cup semi-finals, yet for the first half of the decade Dalymount had a virtual monopoly on these ties. With Bohemians reaching the semis in 1976, Tolka Park was suddenly as fashionable as a pair of tartan trousers. To date the intimidating fencing around the ground had been largely unnecessary, but Sligo Rovers traveled well, swelling the Friday night attendance to 8,000 and the Bohemian fans were determined to test the crowd control to its limits. As the teams returned to the pitch for the second half with Rovers leading 1-0, the Sligo goalkeeper was pelted with bottles. The game could only resume after a plea from Boh's captain Fullam to his own supporters, and intervention from the Gardaí. Sligo were unsettled and conceded shortly afterwards. Injury was added to insult when a Sligo fan was hit by yet another flying bottle. The game finished 1-1 and a replay was fixed for Wednesday night at the same venue.

That game began in an acrimonious atmosphere with minor scuffles and tit-for-tat arson attacks on the opposing supporters' emblems. Sligo were overawed on the pitch, going down to a 5-0 defeat. However, this time they were not going to be outfought on the terraces. Shortly after kick off, fighting broke out at the Sligo end. Calm was restored for a time before another bottle was thrown at the Sligo 'keeper. As the players made their way off at the end of the first half, Bohemians supporters attempted to seize the Sligo fans' end. More brawls and a hail of bottles from both sides followed as Gardaí attempted to separate the factions. The lop-sided game and full-time whistle did little to calm matters. Further clashes took place outside the ground and in all six people were treated for head injuries that night. The violence carried on to Connolly station where passers-by were harassed and the emergency cord was pulled on a train, delaying its departure by over half an hour and ensuring the Gardaí kept a close eye on the train along its route, as it finally departed Dublin. The involvement of members of Sligo's management committee in the disorder at Tolka Park made that club's AGM later that summer a rancorous affair.

Hooliganism was becoming an increasing problem throughout the country. History wouldn't quite repeat itself when Tolka Park hosted Dundalk and St. Patrick's Athletic for the 1977 semi-final, but only in the sense that the "action" took place away from the ground. After a dour 1-1 draw, supporters went on a rampage, beginning in Drumcondra and continuing all the way to city centre. Premises on Dorset Street had their windows broken, car headlights were smashed and attempts made to overturn vehicles.

A stone was thrown through the window of the number 12 bus, whose driver made the sensible decision to continue driving through the mayhem. The trail of destruction led to O'Connell Street, where the new council offices, restaurants, and even the GPO were vandalized. The press appear to have apportioned blame equally to both sides.

Home Farm were just about managing financially year-to-year. Its fundraising draw was rivalled only by the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes, but their debt burden was climbing. A new fundraising drive offered 10-year bonds at £100 each, which included stand seats for holders and their family at Tolka Park. This was an unnecessary benefit as with the League of Ireland team having to apply for re-election for the first time at the end of the 1976/7 season, home crowds were more miserable than ever. Rumours that they were planning to sell Tolka had to be publicly denied. Instead, the club insisted they were committed to re-applying to the league and would undertake further reconstruction work on Tolka Park to bring it up to UEFA standards. They had a golden jubilee year to look forward to for the 1977/8 season and revenues would be helped when Shelbourne returned to Tolka Park as tenants once more.

Referee Kevin O'Sullivan had a somewhat troubled relationship with Waterford. He had been banished from the League of Ireland list shortly after taking charge of a game between the Blues and St. Patrick's Athletic. His performance in that game was, at least according to the local newspaper, "a bad job". On his return he was into the action straight away at Tolka Park. After just forty seconds Shelbourne conceded a penalty, when one of their defenders handled the ball. Approaching half-time, he awarded Waterford another, more contentious penalty, further agitating the home support. Just moments later, as he brandished a yellow card to Shelbourne's Vinny McKenna, all hell broke loose.

An official sprang from the home bench and grabbed hold of the referee. Assistant manager Eric Barber stepped in to play peacemaker, pulling his colleague away and escorting him from the field. They hadn't even reached the touchline when a fan vaulted the low wall in front of the main stand and made for the unfortunate O'Sullivan and unleashed his assault. Striking first with a punch that felled the referee, the aggressor continued his assault with his feet, before he was tackled by a Waterford defender and bundled from the pitch by the players. An off duty Garda in the crowd arrested the attacker. In spite of the disturbance, O'Sullivan and the game carried on. Shelbourne overcame the dramatic events of the first half to score twice for a share of the points.

The following day a thirty-three year old nightclub owner was charged with unlawful assault, and threatening language likely to lead to a breach of the peace. His name, Oliver Byrne. At his trial two weeks later, he entered a guilty plea and apologised to the victim and various football associations. In mitigation he told the court he was concerned for his brother, who had been the official who had originally begun the schmozzle. He claimed he had never got uptight at a Shelbourne match before and undertook not to any further Shelbourne games, a particular hardship given his ties to the club. He was sentenced to six months in prison and fined £2.

The incident at Tolka Park had taken place just two weeks after Finn Harps player Peter Hutton had headbutted referee Pat Kelly. Given that the FAI handed down a five-year ban to Hutton, it was no surprise that Byrne was given the same sentence by the association. The names Ollie Byrne and Peter Hutton would appear again in the story of Tolka Park.

Home Farm did not have to worry about such disruptions at their games. There were now weeks when the volume of games at the venue meant that more players took to the pitch in a weekend than watched a League of Ireland game at the venue on Sunday. At one game against Cork Celtic there were as few as eight spectators on the terraces as the match kicked off. A development plan had been drawn up, but the initial solution was to install an all-weather pitch at Whitehall so more of the underage fixtures could take place there. Tolka Park would immediately benefit from the playing surface not being quite so overworked and installation of a mini gym under the main stand, but the major infrastructural improvements would not arrive just yet.

As the seventies ended it seemed that Tolka Park was a stadium that was too big for the games that did take place there but could not attract the sort of high-profile fixtures that were needed to make such a venue viable. On the occasions those games did visit Tolka it was not immune from the terrace troubles of the times. Rather than echoing past glories, those terraces mostly just reverberated with emptiness. Nevertheless, no-one can say that those in charge at Tolka Park were not tenacious and some recognition for their hard work was to come.

PLAYER'S please

SAVE TOLKA PARK

