



# TOLKA PARK:

## A HISTORY – PART V

The following article, written by David Wynne, originally appeared in Shelbourne fanzine, Red Inc. - Issue 71, in November of 2020.

In August 1980 work began on the long-promised new floodlighting system for Tolka Park. An international effort, the system was being installed by Irish company South East Electrical, with assistance from Dutch conglomerate Philips, and installed on pylons made in France. In all, this development would cost £50,000. Home Farm hoped to partially offset the cost of this though glamour friendlies under lights, just as Drumcondra had previously. This was a risky strategy as it had been at least a decade since Tolka had been filled to capacity. A friendly against Manchester United played at Lansdowne Road in 1976 had lost money for Home Farm.

The spirit of optimism that seems to possess those who take charge at Tolka compelled them to persist. The lights would officially be switched on for a game between Home Farm and Manchester United on November 3rd, 1980. That is, if the floodlights were in place by then. A strike by French port workers delayed the arrival of the pylons from the continent. Instead the grand lighting up would take place more appropriately at the start of the festive season, December 1st.

The delay had consequences for League of Ireland too. With the final stages of development now not beginning until mid-November, Home Farm's tenants Shelbourne were seemingly unaware the pitch would be unavailable for their home games against UCD and Cork United. The night before their game on November 16th, they had to hastily arrange with the students to instead play the match in Belfield. Shelbourne believed that this was simply a case of swapping the fixture schedule around and that they would host UCD in Tolka Park later in the season. It just so happened that the students took a different view and insisted that this remained Shelbourne's home fixture. It meant that for one game, at least, Belfield Park was home to the Reds. Two weeks later Shelbourne were due to play their home fixture against Cork United. With Tolka Park out of commission, Belfield was again the preferred venue. However, this time their opponents were happy to accommodate swapping the fixtures instead, and Shelbourne travelled to Cork with an agreement that the corresponding tie would be played back at Tolka Park later in the season.

Better late than never, the new lights were finally switched on as Manchester United honoured their promise and dispatched a strong side to Tolka Park to face a Home Farm selection that included some of the brightest prospects in Irish football; Ronnie Whelan and Kevin O'Callaghan. United strolled to a 3-0 win, but the crowd of more than 12,000, easily the biggest in more than a decade, made the Home Farm board the real winners. The gate of £20,000 and a sold out programme helped them recoup almost half their investment immediately. A malfunctioning public address system sounded the only bum note of the evening. Brendan Menton declared that floodlit football could be profitable, and they intended to arrange more, similar matches. It was enough to convince the FAI that the ground was finally ready for international football.

Manager Eoin Hand was keen to secure a friendly for his international side ahead of their World Cup qualifier in March 1981. With a free date in the international calendar on February 25th and most of the Home Nations also idle, it was just a matter of finding the right opponents and venue. It was a particularly volatile period politically, which may have been the reason that the FAI did not approach England to arrange a game at Wembley, although that would seem to have been the manager's preference. An early Christmas present arrived for the management at Tolka Park when, on December 23rd, 1980, it was confirmed that the Republic of Ireland would face Wales in the first senior international match at the Drumcondra venue. The game would take place under floodlights with a capacity for 17,000 spectators.

The Richmond Road air was thick with optimism as 15,000 fans packed into Tolka Park. Most were standing on the terraces, with only a limited amount of seating. It created an unusually intense atmosphere. Unfortunately, the game itself did not live up to the occasion. The buzz had already died down before the crowd was lifted again as Ireland took the lead just after the half hour. Wales soon deflated the mood by scoring twice before half-time. The visitors completed their victory with another goal in the second half. After the game coverage focused on the debut of Ireland goalkeeper Jim McDonagh,

whose errors had led to the second and third goals. His miserable night made worse as fans turned on him, the jeering inescapable in the tight confines of the almost full venue.

With Dalymount still unavailable, Brendan Menton, who was at this time also President of the FAI, pushed Tolka Park's case to host Ireland's next friendly against Czechoslovakia in April. The Wales game had largely been a success, especially from the fan's perspective. However, the players weren't happy, particularly about the facilities available. A point Liam Brady made clear in his weekly newspaper column. As a result of the players concerns, Lansdowne Road got the Czechoslovakia match.

The need to improve the dressing rooms had already been identified by Home Farm and was on their to-do list, along with adding more seats. To achieve that, they would need to continue to receive dividends from money-spinning matches. Liverpool were identified as the next headline act. The Merseysiders had been frequent visitors to Dublin and agreed in principle to a game in early 1981. They had also signed Ronnie Whelan from Home Farm, who assured reporters that a friendly was not part of the deal, but that Liverpool were keen to "say thanks". An adequate date could not be found before the end of the season, but this delay meant that when the game finally did take place on August 22nd, it was the reigning European Cup winners who ran out at Tolka Park.

The game was put in some jeopardy the night before when the media attention generated proved irresistible to H-Block protesters, who broke into the ground and dug a 20ft "H" in the center of the pitch. The action was not supported by the H-Block Armagh Committee, but nor was it condemned either. Brendan Menton had no hesitation in condemning the act as "vandalism". The political situation was unavoidable. Bomb blasts had shaken Bangor and Belfast that day, and a protest march took place in Dublin city centre. Nonetheless, Bob Paisley was adamant that Liverpool would play. That afternoon's Evening Herald showed the Home Farm players standing on the re-sodded ground, to assure fans the pitch was playable. Over 14,000 turned out to see the European champions do what was expected; winning

easily (0-5), signing autographs and showing off the European Cup.

In November that same year, the gimlet gaze of the FAI again turned to Tolka Park when a friendly against Scotland fell through. With a potential World Cup playoff on the horizon, Hand was eager to get playing time for his fringe squad players, and the association were keen to cash in. An international friendly would mean handing over six percent of the takings to FIFA, but a game for an FAI Selection wouldn't be subject to such tax. Liverpool must have enjoyed their previous visit to Tolka Park as they were persuaded to return again.

Things started to go badly even before the day of the game. Whatever concerns the Irish players had about the facilities at the ground mattered little to the FAI, who were busy trying to bank a sponsorship deal for the game. National Aluminum, who at the time also sponsored Dundalk, agreed to put up £3,000 including rights to shirt sponsorship. No-one from the association had thought to consult the players, who refused to wear the jerseys. Thousands arriving late caused difficulties which were exacerbated by the still malfunctioning PA system.

A new stand had suddenly sprung up on the Riverside for the game, bringing the seated accommodation for 5,000 and the ground capacity to 18,000. Tickets for the 'South Stand' were priced at a hefty £6. For that, punters were given seats on little more than planks of wood added to the existing terracing. There was neither adequate lighting nor toilet facilities. The fence which segregated, what was intended to be a more 'family friendly' area, from the grittiness of the terraces was soon breached. Missiles began to rain down as clashes broke out, followed by worse when the back rows of seats began to be used as a makeshift urinal. With fans forming queues to get their money back and the jilted sponsors unwilling to hand theirs over, Craig Johnston's winner and Steve Nicol's debut were soon forgotten.

Relations with the FAI were further strained in 1982 when the youth side were refused permission to play a practice match with Bohemians under the Tolka Park lights in preparation for an upcoming European Championship game against Northern

Ireland. They were told the pitch was unplayable due to the amount of fixtures that had already taken place. While the press reported this "snub", the side traveled to Dundalk, where the fixture had been rearranged for the following evening, only for the Oriel Park pitch to be equally unplayable. Home Farm issued a terse statement, citing the thousands of pounds they had spent on improving the pitch, which, they said, was not done so it could then be "churned up into a quagmire".

Despite these setbacks, and the home side being perennial re-election candidates, improvements to the ground continued to be made gradually. A new roof on the Riverside Stand and 3,000 seats pointed to a long-term commitment, and in 1983 a further, even more ambitious, development plan was announced. Tolka Park was to become the first fully-covered, all-seater stadium in Ireland. To do this, the terraces had to first be taken care of and it proposed that the Drumcondra End be re-concreted with a view to adding 2,000 seats there, before work could begin at the Ballybough End. Like previous efforts, it would be a largely unfulfilled vision.

The FAI's bipolar relationship with the stadium continued into 1984. A friendly with Poland in May was awarded to Tolka Park. It would also be the appointed venue should a replay be required for the FAI Cup final. After UCD defeated Waterford in the semi-final in April, the pitch, which hosted more than 100 games during the season was well worn and described as "bumpy and grassless", came in for particular criticism. Irish players were said to be appalled at the idea of hosting the side that finished in 3rd place at the previous World Cup there. Just over a week later Home Farm provided a fig-leaf for the association by stating that major redevelopment work would not be completed in time for the international fixture, allowing the game to be moved to Dalymount.

Awkward questions were sure to arise in the event of a draw in the cup final. Why was the pitch at Tolka not considered good enough for a friendly, yet adequate for the game's showpiece event? There was some gnashing of teeth once the final whistle ended a scoreless encounter between Shamrock Rovers and UCD at Dalymount, with officials reported to be unhappy with Tolka Park as the choice

of venue for the replay. Whether it was considered too late to change, or because they wanted to honour their commitments to offer more, higher-profile games in return for Home Farm's investment in the stadium, Tolka Park played host to its first Senior FAI Cup final on May 4th, 1984. An attendance of just less than 5,000 saw UCD cause a huge upset when Ken O'Doherty's goal, deep into stoppage time, gave the Students a famous 2-1 win.

That victory granted UCD entry to the Cup Winners' Cup and a home tie against the English cup winners Everton was a prize draw. With Belfield unsuitable as a venue for such a fixture, Lansdowne Road and Milltown were considered before UCD decided not to risk a big financial loss and to return to the ground that had been good to them before; bringing European football back to Tolka.

In a move reminiscent of its heyday as a multi-purpose venue, spectators were enticed to arrive early for a "spectacular karate display" by the Irish Karate Control Board. The movie 'The Karate Kid' had opened in Irish cinemas just a few weeks previously. Just in case this wasn't enough, the first 3,000 spectators into the ground could purchase a ticket for the Riverside stand for the same price as a terrace ticket. It all hinted at difficulty selling the game.

Perhaps those early arrivals were the lucky ones, as the match itself provided little in the way of action. What was predicted to be a cakewalk for an Everton side at the peak of their powers, turned out to be a dull stalemate with UCD struggling to get out of their half, but again 'Fortress Tolka' held. The crowd of 10,000 started to diminish long before the final whistle. The Irish Press reported that "The best one can say about the game is that there was no crowd violence." This was a real fear after clashes the night before when Glasgow Rangers had played Bohemians at Dalymount. The visiting Everton supporters waited until the return journey, when a "riot" on board delayed the docking of the B&I ferry in Holyhead for over an hour.

UCD were narrowly beaten in the second leg at Goodison Park and with it Tolka Park's relevance for the next few seasons was reduced mostly to junior cup finals. Derry City may

have brought more than 3,000 fans, including a stalker, for a League Cup game, but those days were exceptional and attendances of just 100 for the visit of Athlone in 1985 and barely 50 for a game against Shelbourne in 1986 posed questions about the stadium's future.

A final flourish in the Home Farm era came with the visit of Spain for an Olympic qualifier in February 1987. Although a 2-2 draw effectively ended the hopes of a trip to Seoul, the players left the field to a standing ovation from the crowd of 8,000. The Irish side made up of League of Ireland players had performed "heroics" against the highly rated Spaniards.

There was no similar heroics for Home Farm, who were now in serious danger of being relegated to the First Division. In late March came the first whispers of Shamrock Rovers leaving Glenmalure Park in Milltown for Tolka Park. These were immediately denied by both clubs, but by April 14th Dr. Brendan Menton sat beside the Kilcoyne brothers at a press conference in the Mansion House to announce precisely that.

Big plans accompanied the deal in an attempt to sugar-coat the bitter pill that Shamrock Rovers fans were being asked to swallow. The capacity would be increased to 20,000 with the pitch to be made 3 yards longer and wider. Milltown's floodlights were reputed to be stronger, so would be brought to the Northside to replace the ones at Tolka Park. While the pitch was improved, Milltown would host the junior games that would usually take place at Tolka Park. A new holding company would be formed to administer these plans, but in the meantime, Rovers would be lodging under a 2 year lease.

Appropriately, the season finished that evening at Tolka Park where Rovers beat, the by now, relegated Home Farm side. At half-time the disgruntled Hoops fans repeated the scenes from Milltown's last game, which took place the previous Sunday, by invading the pitch in protest against the move, and calling for a boycott of Tolka Park. This had in effect already begun, with scarcely 50 away fans in the ground.

For Home Farm this was an arrangement that made sense. They would have another club to share the costs of maintaining the ground for

two years. Having made no secret of their desire to concentrate on developing their Whitehall base instead, having a ready-made buyer in the form of Shamrock Rovers was ideal. Both clubs had failed to count the cost of supporters' anger towards the Kilcoynes and the move.

By July Tolka Park was up for sale. Although this was news to the Home Farm delegate at the FAI's AGM, a quick consultation with his chairman confirmed that indeed this was the case. The owners of Shamrock Rovers were having their bluff called early. The asking price was reckoned to be around £250,000. The Kilcoynes were behaving as if they already owned the ground, which was far from the case. The groundsman from Milltown was brought in to enlarge the pitch, and Louis Kilcoyne told RTÉ news that they would "own and manage the ground equally with Home Farm".

Shamrock Rovers' tenancy at Tolka Park began with a comfortable 4-1 win against Athlone Town, but with fewer than 300 spectators in the ground. The Keep Rovers At Milltown boycott campaign asked fans to attend away games only in a bid to financially starve the owners, while raising funds to try and buy the club and freehold at Milltown.

The success of this movement could be seen immediately. The European Cup tie against Omonia Nicosia saw less than 2,500 pass through the turnstiles and an ignominious defeat for the League of Ireland champions as the Cypriots inflicted a first defeat upon the home side in a European fixture at Tolka Park. That there were more Rovers supporters at the away leg in Cyprus, than would typically pass the picket for a home game, starkly demonstrated the impact the campaign was having. By November, there was talk of a financial crisis at the club. Average attendances amounted to barely half those of the previous year.

As the calendar turned over to 1988 Home Farm were comfortably settled in the middle of the First Division, the amateurs content to focus instead on the schoolboy teams and insist that they were willing to listen to offers for Tolka Park. Their tenants meanwhile struggled to pay their professional players. To no-one's surprise, planning permission to develop property on Milltown was sought,

effectively putting an end to any hopes the Rovers supporters had of returning there.

Although they were still in contention at the top of the Premier Division, the crowds had not returned. They surrendered their FAI Cup title to UCD before a pathetically low attendance at Tolka Park in February and lost vital points at home against Galway United in March, again in front of a dismal crowd.

By the time the season ended in April the move to Tolka Park had cost Shamrock Rovers Glenmalur Park, their league and cup titles, their manager - when Dermot Keely resigned after the final whistle- masses of goodwill, and tens of thousands of pounds. The fans wanted the owners out, the owners themselves wanted out, and the club itself was on its way out before a consortium led by chartered accountant John McNamara bought the club in July 1988. The deal was contingent on supporters ending their boycott. Leaving Tolka Park would be the price of bringing the supporters back on board, however the club still had one year left on its groundshare. Brendan Menton Junior assured the new owners that, even though Home Farm would be required to raise an additional £10,000 to make up the shortfall, they would not cause problems if Rovers wished to leave. With Dalymount Park, Belfield Park and Harold's Cross all ready to take Tolka Park's place, Shamrock Rovers ill-fated residency on the Richmond Road was at an end. For the time being, at least.

As the 1988/89 season began, the prospect of Home Farm abandoning Tolka Park for Whitehall still hung in the air, but they chose to remain on the Richmond Road. St. Patrick's Athletic were the latest side to pitch up by the banks of the Tolka, nominating the ground as their home venue for a UEFA Cup tie against Hearts. Manager Brian Kerr was of the opinion that Tolka could offer a better atmosphere for his players than Dalymount Park.

The visitors brought with them 2,000 supporters, and, in captain Gary Mackay, the man who had scored the goal that secured the Republic of Ireland's qualification for Euro '88. With the home support supplemented by a couple of hundred Celtic fans looking for trouble, it all added up to a lively atmosphere and a crowd of about 8,000. The Scots came

away with a 2-0 win, but the front page headlines the following day were about the incidents of bottle throwing, flag burning and sectarian chanting within the ground and violent clashes between the rival supporters away from it.

Home Farm marked their 60th anniversary with a game against Tottenham Hotspur on October 18th. The national side were due to play Tunisia in a friendly the following day, but the FAI were clearly unconcerned about any effect upon the attendance at Lansdowne Road, granting permission for the fixture. Spurs were without big names Chris Waddle and record signing Paul Gascoigne, however Paul Stewart, for whom Spurs had paid a record fee for a second division player, was among the goalscorers in a 4-0 win. The FAI were right not to be worried with the Londoners only attracting a couple of thousand to Tolka Park.

The sale of Milltown for property development was confirmed, and it seemed that one of the stadia on Dublin's Northside might be the next to fall. Bohemians had recently rejected a £600,000 offer from the FAI for the ground and were putting it up for sale. With a £1m bid said to be on the table, rumours of a move to Richmond Road began to take hold. Such a move might not necessarily be to Tolka Park though, with Stella Maris' facility also presented as another potential option. In December, when that seven-figure bid failed to materialise, the FAI's offer was reconsidered by Bohemian members and accepted.

As the season came to a close, it appeared that now, more than ever the end was in sight for Tolka Park. Home Farm's debts made a sale inevitable. Their League of Ireland season ended by March 19th. The only question that remained after their 3-1 win over Sligo Rovers at home, was who, if anyone, would buy the stadium? With Bohemians and Shamrock Rovers no longer interested, the GAA sensationally entered the race, looking to purchase the ground so rugby could be played there!

The GAA's plans for an extension of the Cusack Stand required the use of grounds owned by Belvedere College. The Jesuits were open to a land swap, if a suitable playing field could be provided in its place. When the Irish

Press reported news of this coup on May 20th, it sparked the FAI into action immediately. Cork's Flower Lodge had been lost to the GAA the previous summer, after a secret bid pulled the ground from underneath Cork City's feet at the last moment. The football authorities were now able to even the score. By June 10th an agreement had been made to purchase Tolka Park. The FAI's general secretary Tony O'Neill told the Irish Independent at the time "(We) had to move quickly to stop this happening. We approached Home Farm and ironed out a deal to our mutual satisfaction."

£150,000 up front, with a further £100,000 to be paid in installments over four years, was the price. The ink hadn't even dried on that deal when another bidder entered the fray. Shelbourne, who had, for so many years been tenants at the ground, were now going to buy Tolka Park.



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