



# TOLKA PARK:

A HISTORY – PART VI

The following article, written by David Wynne,  
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At the end of 1988/89 season, Tolka Park was a ground that it seemed nobody wanted. Home Farm had made their intention to return to Whitehall clear and were trying to find a new suitor as it was obvious that Shamrock Rovers fans were happy to pitch their tent anywhere but beside the river Tolka. The GAA might purchase it, but only to give it away to Belvedere College. The FAI eventually stepped in simply to avoid the embarrassment of losing yet another venue to a rival association and didn't know what to do with it once they had it. The old venue's future was more uncertain than ever.

Its saviours were found in Tony Donnelly and Ollie Byrne. Donnelly arrived late to football, having grown up as a GAA man. He had done well for himself importing fruit and having seen the dedication of the volunteers who kept the club afloat, was inspired to join the board of Shelbourne. He brought with him a nose for business, his wallet, and a book of contacts that was crucial in delivering both sponsorship and lines of credit.

The living embodiment of the enthusiasm that attracted Donnelly to Shelbourne in the first place; Ollie (like all the greats, he would come to be known by just one name) was pugnacious, passionate, and sometimes pugilistic. From his nominal role as club secretary, Ollie directed operations, but in many instances was the operation, He worked around the clock, fulfilling multiple roles and badgering others into doing whatever he couldn't. All he wanted was for Shelbourne to be successful.

Still, in 1989 buying Tolka Park was beyond even Ollie's wildest dreams. When the board considered renting the ground from Home Farm for the 1989/90 season, Donnelly, who by now had stepped up his involvement and taken on the role of chairman, suggested purchasing it from them instead. Like the other owners of Tolka Park before him, his instincts were to ask why not? rather than how much? This is not to say he wasn't pragmatic, and while working together, Donnelly and Byrne would usher in a period of rapid development and success. Men of vision seemed irresistibly drawn to the banks of the Tolka.

It was a period of musical chairs for League of Ireland clubs and grounds. Shamrock Rovers

had left Tolka Park the previous year and would play this season in Dalymount Park before moving to the RDS the following season. Shelbourne still had a number of years left to run on their lease for Harold's Cross greyhound stadium. St. Patrick's Athletic needed to move out of Richmond Park, so it made sense for them to go to the dogs when the Reds moved into their new home on the northside.

Behind the scenes it was not so simple. Tripartite negotiations needed to be concluded before the keys could be handed over. In the meantime, Home Farm retained the deeds, amid rumours that Home Farm didn't want to sell to Shelbourne. For the Reds, who had been so down at heel over the past few decades, there would surely have been an impatience to finalise arrangements before some new misfortune struck. When it inevitably did, the timing suggested if anything, their luck was changing for the better.

In the early hours of the morning of September 23rd, 1989 a fire broke out below Tolka Park's main stand. There was extensive fire and smoke damage done to the dressing rooms and offices situated beneath, but even more ruinous was the water required to douse the flames. It had turned the floodlights into expensive ornaments by taking out the electrical systems, rendering them useless. It was feared that it would be early 1990 before evening games could be played again.

The damage was estimated at £50,000, but as Shelbourne had only paid a deposit while the whole transaction was being worked out with the FAI, it was Home Farm or their insurers anyway, who were on the hook for the repairs. Not only had the lights gone out, but the waterworks too, with no showers for either the players or match officials for that Sunday's game against Bohemians. The landlords offered the use of their venue at Whitehall, but Shelbourne made arrangements with the nearby Tivoli health complex, so the players could cleanse the Tolka mud away in comparative luxury there after the game.

The lights came back on at the end of November, and as if determined to make up for lost time, a series of nocturnal friendlies were arranged for early in the New Year. David Pleat's Leicester were dispatched 3-1.

Leeds United arrived two days later, much to the surprise of the local Gardaí who claimed not to have been notified of the game and were even less prepared for the 12,000 fans who converged upon the area than the club themselves, who eventually were forced to open the gates and let the remaining crowd in for free to avoid a crush. A 2-0 defeat mattered little when offset against the unexpected windfall of a £10,000 profit. A further, no doubt less lucrative fixture, against the Swedish side Halmstad was cancelled the following week when it became clear a further 90 minutes of football at this time would likely render the surface unplayable for the next league fixture. Those friendlies had been intended to mark the purchase of Tolka Park; however they were a little premature as the transaction had still not been made official.

On March 16th, 1990 the Evening Herald led with the news that the final battle in the war for Milltown was lost. Planning permission to build houses on Shamrock Rovers' old ground had been granted. On the same day, in Merrion Square, Shelbourne signed an agreement with the FAI and Home Farm completing the purchase of Tolka Park. The final deal, for a price of around £250,000, avoided the duplication of legal fees and stamp duties that would have been due if the purchase via the FAI had proceeded as originally intended the previous summer.

Like those before him, Donnelly had big ambitions for the venue, not least of which was a proposal for an All-Ireland floodlit league. The lease on the land was for 99 years and was retained by the Donnelly family. Shelbourne meanwhile were granted a 35-year sporting lease, a security of tenure that was the envy of many rivals. Ollie told the Irish Press "Now that we have bought the premises, we are working towards major improvements to make it more comfortable to watch football at Tolka Park." If there was any doubt that Shelbourne were the de facto owners, the investments they would make over the next decade would silence any doubts.

Change was coming and quickly. The colours of the former residents were washed away and replaced by the rufescent tones of a bright future being imagined in the boardroom. This red-shift was, in hindsight, indicative of the pace at which the old stadium would rise and

fall. Over the next decade, many of the unfilled dreams for the ground, aspirations that had been thwarted for generations, would finally be realised. The work of the previous seventy years was first built upon and then laid to waste, in the space of little more than ten.

Immediately work began on relocating the dressing rooms to newly converted facilities in the house beside the Ballybough end. At the same end, a new emergency exit from the Riverside stand was opened. Ollie took particular joy in the provision of 2,500 bright red, plastic "tip-up" seats, which provided that modern, comfortable experience for spectators in the main stand, where below deck, there was now increased space for hospitality. Around the pitch new security fencing was added, while on it, the never-ending task of resodding the playing surface continued. All this was completed in just a few months, mainly through that spirit of volunteerism and funded in part by a £20,000 national lottery grant.

The venue's makeover was launched with a 'Festival of Football' as a focal point of the 1990/91 pre-season. Friendlies were crucial to repaying the investment in facilities and Shelbourne hoped to capitalise on the football frenzy that had swept the nation during the national side's run to the Quarter Finals at the 1990 World Cup. During the first two weeks of August, Tolka Park hosted seven friendlies in just two weeks. A capacity crowd was on hand to see superstars such as Gazza and Gary Lineker kick off the festival with the standout fixture. Another World Cup star, Ireland's own 'Captain Fantastic' Mick McCarthy, led his Millwall side. Leeds, Manchester City, West Brom and Huddersfield also enjoyed the hospitality in Drumcondra.

Shelbourne even gave up one of their games to allow Everton and Swindon face each other at the venue instead. The 4,000 punters who clicked through the turnstiles, and a rest for the Redsmen who were in danger of being burnt out even before the season had even begun, meant the unusual sight of two English First Division sides playing each other in Dublin, was a worthwhile one for Shelbourne.

Back in 1984 the Toffees began their victorious European Cup Winners Cup

campaign at Tolka Park. For FAI Cup winners Bray Wanderers, who in 1990 were employing the ground for the home leg as they competed in Europe for the first time, the ambition extended solely to breaking even on the fixture against Turkish opponents Trabzonspor. The game would be a litmus test of whether the good feeling from Italia '90 would trickle down to the national league. It turned out that for the Irish football family, it was about as attractive as a pre-season knockabout between two yellow-pack English sides.

4,000 would have been a healthy turnout for the seaiders at any other time, but this was a huge disappointment in the circumstances. Bray Wanderers needed at least 7,000 paying punters to avoid a crippling financial loss. Some of those who had paid were less than impressed with their accommodation, as the Turkish TV setup on the riverside obstructed the view. Any sort of permanent broadcast gantry was still a few years away.

On the pitch, there were some signs that Tolka Park's European magic had returned as Pat Devlin's side managed to secure a 1-1 draw. Martin Nugent's overhead kick simultaneously became one of the most acrobatic, yet least elegant goals ever seen there as it snuck across the goal line at the Ballybough End.

A return to Europe was still a mere dream for the Reds, but the incremental improvements around the ground were being matched on the field of play too. The first phase of re-development had cost in the region of £150,000 and it would take at least another £250,000 to create the planned 12,000 all-seater stadium capable of meeting UEFA standards. It seemed that the directors were in no position to turn down an offer of a £1.2m investment, however that is exactly what they did.

Elio Malocco was a solicitor who had made waves with some high-profile cases and quickly became a household name. When not on the steps of the High Court, he was seen stepping out in the gossip pages. His firm looked after libel cases for the Irish Press and he sat on the board of the newspaper. His bid to take over Shelbourne was a big deal. He proposed to buy Tolka Park for £400,000 and spend half a million building a clubhouse and

executive boxes. The players and business were valued at £100,000 and it was all topped off with a further £200,000 in promised sponsorships. It sounded almost too good to be true. It was.

Behind the facade, there was little of substance. Malocco's deal was to be 'self-financing'. Corporate boxes, concerts and expanding the roster of friendly matches to include Europe's top teams, were amongst the schemes mentioned. His business history had a touch of Del Boy about it. A restaurant investment had been a disaster and was wound up with debts of more than £300,000. Malocco's offer was politely declined, but he was offered a seat on the board, which he accepted. It would be handy to have a legal eagle around. That decision would soon lead to some embarrassment when Malocco was charged with fraud. Though the case against him was related to his legal work for the Irish Press, articles about him never failed to mention his bid for Shelbourne. He was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison. Tolka Park once again had a narrow escape.

Shelbourne's upward trajectory continued as player/manager Pat Byrne led his side to fourth place at the end of the 1990/91 season, their best league finish in a quarter of a century. The Stakhanovite work around the ground now surpassed even the previous season's efforts.

A further 4,750 seats were installed on the resurfaced terrace of the stand by the river. Though it had been widely referred to as such for years, it was only at this time that it was formally christened the Riverside Stand. A new watering system would make the difficult job of pitch maintenance just a bit easier. Out of sight, the club's offices above the dressing rooms in the house beside the ground were revamped and in the bowels of the Main Stand work began on the member's bar.

A festival of friendlies was again the showcase for Tolka Park's makeover. Tottenham Hotspur, Nottingham Forest, Leeds, Aston Villa and even a Mexican side; Pumas UNAM, would ensure plenty of bums on the new seats. The main attraction was Glasgow Celtic, whose newly appointed manager Liam Brady had used his newspaper column to condemn the below-par facilities at Tolka

Park when the FAI had staged matches there a decade earlier. His side emerged from the new dressing rooms to banks of seating that mischievous newspapers compared favourably with the very best, modern, British stadium; Ibrox.

A further 2,200 seats were added to the Ballybough end in time for the start of the 1991/92 season. With another 1,000 planned for the Drumcondra end, the ambition of a 10,000 all-seater stadium, the first in Ireland, would be completed faster than imagined. Income from these friendlies was now even more crucial. The project was now expected to cost £600,000 in total. Shelbourne said they could generate £75,000 themselves through a development fund. A sponsorship deal with HGW paints, would make the Dulux brand an integral part of some of the Reds most iconic kits, helped too. The FAI awarded a £25,000 grant, but the club had hoped for a far greater capital injection. The association's promise of staging more B Internationals and Under 21 matches at the venue, offered little compensation. Though there was some talk of Ireland's proposed friendly with Denmark being staged at Tolka Park, Ollie already had his eyes on a different prize, hosting the final of the 1994 UEFA Under-16 Championship.

A far greater victory arrived before that. Shelbourne ended the 1991/92 season as champions. The win was their first league title in 30 years. They had played their home fixtures at Tolka Park then too. It had returned to Tolka Park only once more in that time when Drumcondra last won it in 1964/65, but while that title had heralded the demise of a great League of Ireland club, Shelbourne's triumph began a wild and wonderful decade and a half.



**SAVE  
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