

**ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL
IN
WIGAN**

1883-1900

The first recorded match under Association Rules in the Wigan district was between Wigan A.F.C. and Hindley A.F.C.. It was played on Wigan Cicket Club ground on Saturday 16th October 1883. For the Wigan club, G.H.Souter captained a losing side, losing 1-0 with "...several handling offences in the match." In their second match under the new rules, Wigan played Chorley. The "...rules have only been adopted by neighbours this season and as Wigan have done the same, there is much interest in the two teams."

While Rugby Football remained the dominating ball game in the town, Wigan High School formed an Association Football team in the season 1883/84. In their first recorded match, the High School drew with Chorley Rovers at Chorley, two goals each. Apparently, "The passing skills of J.Gibson, the High School captain was highly creditable." In a match the following week, the High School beat Up Holland Grammar School by three goals to one with Gibson scoring two and W.Gamble the third. J.McGrath replied for the Grammar School.

The popularity of Association Football as a spectator sport continued to increase. In a front page advertisement, the London and North-Western Railway were due to run "fast special trains" for the Semi Final cup ties at Birmingham and Nottingham on Saturday March 1st 1884. The fixture in Birmingham was between Blackburn Rovers and Nottingham at Aston Lower Ground. The match in Nottingham saw Blackburn Olympic take on Queens Park. A month later, the advert read that the "final tie of the English Association Challenge Cup at Kennington Oval would be between Blackburn Rovers and Glasgow's Queens Park." Mr. Sharpie's of Blackburn was organising a train for spectators and that it would pass through Wigan at 1:40 a.m. The cost of the rail fare would be 10 shillings for a three day valid ticket or fifteen shilling for a six day ticket. It is not recorded how

many spectators travelled from Wigan.

In a local derby match, the Wigan High School played Wigan Grammar School (2nd Team) under Association rules. The Grammar School scored the only goal three minutes from time.

In a letter to the Editor, 'Spectator' wrote

"As an admirer of the dribbling game... has the Association Football Club broken up... understood it b be connected with the cricket club but nothing was said at the cricket club annual dinner recently ...myself and a few friends are under the impression that it has broken up"

In reply to the above, three letters were printed the following week in the Wigan Observer. 'Pedestrian' commented that there had been no explanation for

"...were.it not for the apathy shown towards it by the more prominent members of the Cricket Club, who though avowing their preference for it, showed no interest in it and would do nothing to further the Association game in the town."

Fred. Baldwin (Hon.Sec of Wigan A.F.C.) said that time at the annual dinner was limited and that:"the question as to the future connection of the Association Football game with our cricket club is down for final discussion and decision a fortnight hence."

George Souter, Captain of Wigan A.F.C., supports Baldwin's view of lack of available time but goes further suggesting "... gentlemen having the interest of the dribbling game at heart would kindly communicate with me. I cannot see but that we ought to raise a team worthy to uphold the credit of our town."

A General Meeting was called for members of Wigan A.F.C. on July 8 1884 at the Royal Hotel. In reporting the meeting, the Wigan Observer wrote:

"The association game was played a little last year on the Cricket ground, but owing to the then bad approach, combined with the very wet season experienced, the attendance of spectators was not very numerous, and consequently it can

hardly be said that the game has had a proper introduction."

The question of professionalism arose and the management decided that the club shall continue to play under the Lancashire Association Rules and remain amateur. The Cricket Club had decided that "great harm had been done to the turf" but that the football club would remain under the umbrella of the Cricket Club. A subcommittee had already been formed and had considered the possibility of "taking ground in Greenough Street for one year.."While the club had no funds, subscriptions to the value of £20 were due and would be used for putting the ground in order. Subscriptions for honorary members were ten shillings and sixpence while ordinary members paid four shillings.

Due to lack of playing members and poor facilities it was decided to hold a "joint meeting held on Monday of the committee of this club (Wigan A.F.C.) and the Wigan Parish Church Club - who last year played the rugby game - it was decided to amalgamate for the ensuing season." With a strengthened team, the club arranged fixtures which included Blackburn Rovers, Darwen, Preston North End, Blackburn Olympic, Liverpool Rovers and Everton. All home fixtures were to be played on the large ground behind the Rectory. The committee also arranged an exhibition match between Darwen and Blackburn Rovers which "... should prove a great treat to those who can appreciate scientific.

The exhibition match was played on the Cricket Ground on Saturday 20 September 1884 between Blackburn Rovers, the holders of the English Challenge Cup and Darwen who were previous semi-final candidates. The fact:"that these two teams were going to visit the town caused some excitement in football circles, and was the chief topic of conversation among lovers of the favourite winter pastime for some considerable time before the match."

The arrangements for the match were left in the hands of F.J.Baldwin, Hon.Sec. of Wigan A.F.C.. It was estimated that the crowd numbered some 2000 spectators

"who marvelled at the accurate way in which the ball was sent speeding along, sometimes by feet, and often by the head. The spectators evidently did not understand the points, but taking this into consideration a good impression of the sterling qualities of the dribbling code was left on their minds."

The final score saw Darwen run out winners four goals to nil with interestingly the match being judged by Umpires: J.Wolstenholme and P.P.Barton. The Referee was Mr.Gregson of the Lancashire Football Association.

With Wigan A.F.C. playing Heywood a week later in a Lancashire Cup Tie, one would have thought that after the successful display of association football in the exhibition match, the crowd would have been quite large. However, "..attendance was meagre by spectators .. Wigan gained easy victory by 4 goals to 1."(1)

In the Saturday edition (7 March 1885) of 'Football Field', a letter appeared from P.Rainford, the Hon.Sec of Haydock Cricket, Bowling and Football Club. He asked "Cannot any Wigan and District Association friends raise a cup competition... Why not have a little association of your own." Mr.Rainford suggested that while there was great success with cup competitions in the 'Rugby game',there was no such equivalent in the 'association game'.

A reply to the letter was printed the following week from Fred.J.Baldwin, the Hon.sec. of Wigan Association Football Club. He argued that such a proposal had been raised some time ago but that there were insufficient clubs in the district. However, now that the game was more popular in the town, his own club was prepared to take the initiative and form a cup competition. Support for Baldwin's proposal came from Geo.Hunt, Hon Sec.of Haydock Temperance Football Club and T.Hodgson, Hon.Sec. of New Springs Football Association Club.

At the first A.G.M. of Wigan Association Football Club, G.H.Souter was

"..voted to the chair, ..F.J.Baldwin voted in as Hon.Sec. and Treasurer1) In their first full season, the club had acquired a debt of £30, while "..some subs were still owing and there was £6 in hand... The expenses of the first season of any club are always heavy and this club is no exception in this respect."

It was also recorded at the meeting that there was both a unanimous and enthusiastic support for a cup competition.

In the draw for the Lancashire Football Challenge Cup (1885/6), Wigan were drawn away at Darwen Ramblers. While this may not be of great interest, the fact that the draw was made from only 53 clubs is, for in the previous season 104 clubs had affiliated. It was suggested that many clubs have entered for the junior competition."

The first meeting of Wigan Nondescripts Football Club took place on Thursday 27 August 1885 when, "..fifty gentlemen signed their intention to play."

While Wigan A.F.C. wished to retain their amateur status, the increase of professional players from Scotland caused much concern within the game.

The Football Association in a statement said,

"That a club can employ as many professionals as they please on the condition that their names are registered and that they possess the necessary residential qualifications."

Wigan Association Football Club were helped out of difficulty over ground allocation by Wigan Cricket Club in October 1885. The Football Club had approached the Rector of All Saints regarding the use of the field behind the Rectory. After a heated discussion with the Rector who declined the use, the Cricket Club would allow "use of the lower side of the grounds ... until Christmas ... subject to damage..and a field report."

Two new association football clubs were formed in the district in October

1885. Haydock Temperance not only changed its name to Haydock Association Football Club but also its code of play for it had been a strong rugby football club. Up Holland Association Football Club was formed from the members of the cricket club. There "have been nothing but practice matches so far. When a member has played forward for about three hours at a time, he takes his turn at goalkeeping³)

In a front page advert requesting members for Wigan Association Football Club⁴) for season 1886/87, the ground had changed to an enclosure in Poolstock. The lower side of the cricket ground now being unavailable. The first game at Poolstock saw Wigan play Blackburn Olympic who had Hunter, the English international, in their side. The result was not recorded. It is interesting to note that in order to raise funds for Blackburn Olympic who were in debt, they were advertising a Grand Sale and Prize Draw in the Wigan

Observer. For sixpence, the first prize in the draw" was a shop and goods worth fifty pounds."

Platt Bridge Association Football Club arranged prior to the start of season 1886/7, to play the Free Church club on two occasions. At the beginning of the season in September, Platt Bridge called off the first match two days before it should be played in order to play a cricket match. In a letter to the secretary of the Free Church two days before the second match on New Years Day,

Mr.T.Aspinall of Platt Bridge wrote:

"Sir, Sorry to say we shall not be able to play you on Saturday next, as we have been offered half the gate at Hindley. The Hindley Rovers have an open date for Saturday next.

You can arrange with them if you have no other match on.

Yours sincerely, T.Aspinall."

While the letter was polite and curt, it did not receive approval from the Free Church or indeed from 'Crossbar' in the Wigan Observer.

While Bridgewater Association Football Club were changing their name and

playing as Pemberton AFC in August 1887 , Bolton Wanderers were playing Burnley before Prince Albert Victor. In honour of the occasion, the Prince wrote to Mr. Norris, the Bolton club secretary, saying "that he may henceforth wear the royal badge as a distinctive recognition of having played before him.."

At the first annual dinner of Ashton in Makerfield Association Football Club, the members heard Mr.R.Lathon, the President comment "upon the growing habit of betting at football matches, ...strongly urge . . .all those present to avoid betting in all their games and always to play football in a gentlemanly and honourable manner."

While Ashton were beginning their second season 1888/9, Wigan Association Football Club were cancelling all of their fixtures for the season "owing to their inability to obtain a ground."

With Wigan AFC not fulfilling their fixture, another club decided to switch codes. At a meeting of the Swan Meadow and Western Mills Cricket and Football Club at the Swan Meadow Inn in October 1889,

"The majority of the employees at the ...mills being in favour of the Rugby code, it has consequently been decided to play this, and not Association as previously announced."

At a meeting to propose the establishment of a Wigan and District Football League held at the Raven Hotel in January 1891, the following clubs were elected to the Senior and Junior Leagues

Senior League: Ashton Association, Ashton Recreation, Earlestown, Golborne, Haydock, Horwich L and Y, Ince St.Mary's, St.Helens, Skelmersdale United, Whiston,

Junior League: Earlestown Albion, Haigh, Hindley Green Rovers, Little Halton, Park Lane Wanderers, Rose Bridge, Wigan St.Andrew's,

While there were several prominent clubs missing from the meeting, it was

presumed that there would be space within the two leagues to accommodate new clubs.

The new 'penalty kick' rule established by the Football Association for season 1891/2 "was in evidence at Skelmersdale when the colliery village received a visit from the Hindley 'demons', in the Lancashire Combination League." Hindley awarded a penalty, drew level at 1-1 and went on to record a victory of two goals to three.

With football skills to be acquired, members of clubs often practiced in the evening or at weekends. The use of club facilities for such a purpose was recognised. A letter from a member of Golborne AFC to 'Crossbar' of the Wigan Observer proved otherwise:

"It has been the rule at Golborne ... for members to be allowed the use of a ball for practice purposes ... person this year ... the right to do with them as if they were his own. ... members going for balls and been refused ... received abuse that would have disgraced a Hottentot chief . . . there will be a scarcity of members as a result ... speedy and deserved downfall of the club."

The newly formed Garswood Hall Recreation Club at Bryn provided by Mr.R.H.Edmondson of Garswood Hall Collieries allowed his employees to form an association football club. In addition, he arranged an exhibition football match between Preston North End and Bolton Wanderers on the recreation ground so that followers of the code could watch "the real thing."

As Garswood Hall Association Football Club were being formed in September 1892, so were Platt Bridge AFC with their "ground in the central of a populous area."

'Crossbar', the sports reporter of the Wigan Observer announced in February 1894, that an "effort was to be made to form an association football

league amongst the amateur clubs of:

Adlington, Aspull, Blackrod, Chorley, Horwich, Leyland and Standish districts."

A meeting was to be held at Horwich on the first Monday in March. The league was eventually formed from the above districts.

The annual general meeting of the Hindley Association Football Club in May 1894 at Leigh Arms Hotel saw their finances shrink. Like many other clubs and societies in the district they had suffered due to "falling off of spectators because of the coal miners' strike... gates suffered consequently."

An amusing incident occurred on Christmas Day 1894 when Pimbo Lane and Crawford Village Association Football Clubs met. Shortly "before half-time with the score at one each, the ball burst...not another one available, the game was abandoned."

In order to raise funds similarly to other clubs in the district had done, Golborne Association Football Club organised their first annual athletic festival in June 1895. With a mixture of cycling and athletic events on offer, "the fields were good, the racing capitalother attractions in the district kept the crowds down."

At the annual general meeting of the Haydock Association Football Club at the end of June 1895, the Secretary, G.H.Hunt, announced: "...phenomenal success of the team during the season... winning the Lancashire Alliance championship for the second time in succession.. a feat not hitherto accomplished."

The importance of the role of the newspaper in providing information was highlighted by the Wigan Observer in August 1895. Six association football clubs wrote to 'Crossbar', the sports correspondent, requesting fixtures for the open dates they had. It was an important service the newspaper

provided since it allowed clubs to fulfill their fixture lists more easily.

New rules were still being formulated and introduced by the Football Association as the game continued to develop. In the match between Hindley and Adlington football clubs at the start of season 1895/6

"The referee, Mr. Hunt... before commencing the game called the players together, and explained the new rule with regard to throwing the ball in over the line."

With the proliferation of senior clubs in the district playing league association football, "The secretaries of thirty football clubs met in the Hindley district to form a Junior League on the same line as other leagues." With an age limit of eighteen years, the league was established and subscriptions in the first year of membership was two shillings and sixpence per club.

In an exhibition match, the British Lady Footballers paid a visit to Wigan on Wednesday December 4th 1895. On a rainy day, the ladies changed at the Green Man and played on the Coppull Lane ground, kicking off at 3pm. With no description of female skill or tactics, the Wigan

Observer described the game thus:

"There was a rush for the ground, and a fairly good gate was the result. The players discarded their skirts before the game. For the benefit of our lady readers we might state that the dress is not a very becoming one. It consists of a blouse made in the sailor shape, one team in red and white, the other in blue and white...and the knickerbockers made very wide, of dark blue serge. Two local footballers played in goal ...game lasted about an hour." The Blue Team won two goals to one

While St.Helens is not within the jurisdiction of the boundaries of this study, it is interesting to note the conversion from one code to the other for varying

reasons. St. Helens Recreation Rugby Football Club "held aloof from the Northern Union.... deemed it inadvisable to participate in the championship under the auspices of the Lancashire County authorities... friendly fixtures excited very little interest... committee after discussion... recommend to members ...to play under Association rules next year."

Horwich Association Football Club held their second annual athletic festival on the first Saturday in July 1896. However because of rain "...the track was anything but suitable for cycling, and several nasty spills occurred." The entries for cycling and running were well contested, there being some two hundred and forty competitors for eight events.

The Wigan and District Football Association which had fallen in popularity was reconstituted in December 1896

"and we are requested to call the attention of all the secretaries of all the clubs within a radius of six miles from Wigan that the rules have now been brought up to date, having been revised by the special sub-committee of the Football Association."

At the beginning of May 1897, a new association football club was formed, the Wigan County Association Football Club. This was supposed to be the premier football club of the town beginning its first season of 1897/8 on the Wigan Trotting and Athletic Grounds at Springfield. The first eleven had applied to and been accepted in the Lancashire League while the second eleven were to play in the Lancashire Alliance League. In order to raise the standard of play, the club had secured the services of Menham, the Everton goalkeeper, and who had played in the English Cup.

Wigan Nondescripts AFC who held their annual general meeting in July 1897 applied to and were accepted in the Liverpool and District Amateur League for 1897/8. This allowed the club to run two teams of parallel standard "so that patrons may be catered for every week at home."

Wigan Counties first game in the Lancashire League was against Burton Swifts

at Springfield Park, Wigan, on Wednesday September 1st 1897. With fifteen hundred spectators "...a small attendance owing to the wet weather... The match throughout was most interesting..." Wigan drew with the Swifts, one goal all. There was an interesting comparison between the reporting of the two codes of football in the Wigan Observer. Wigan Rugby Football Club were playing Salford the previous Saturday and their match description directly above that of Wigan County was at least three times in length. The report also included several descriptions of the game and the names of the two teams playing. The report of the County game contained little factual observation or players names for such an important game in the history of association football in Wigan.

Wigan County played their second home game against Southport Central on Saturday September 11th 1897 when four thousand spectators saw them win five goals to nil. The fees "for admission are rather sharp (4d and 8d], but that is not the fault of the Wigan County Club, as they are compelled by the Lancashire Association to fix the prices as announced."

The first Saturday in October 1897 saw Wigan County play Fleetwood Rangers in the first qualifying round of the English Cup. Before four thousand spectators, Wigan won one nil. In what would become a prophetic statement Wigan Observer made the following prediction:

"The new club has been fortunate to make a host of friends this early in its career, and with such a clever team, and a splendid ground, and such gates as hitherto have been seen up at Springfield there appears to be no reason why the Association game should not flourish exceedingly in our midst."

Wigan County continued to have a successful English and Lancashire cup run

which must have proved a great stimulus to the new club. In the Lancashire Cup at the end of October 1897, Wigan, away to Bacup, won by one goal to nil scored by Sharples in the final thirty seconds of the match. A month later, Wigan County met Blackburn Park Road in the fourth qualifying round of the English Cup. Before three thousand spectators, Wigan won two goals to nil.

The next round of the Lancashire Cup in mid December 1897 saw Wigan play Newton Heath at Wigan. In the wind and rain and having played some eighty minutes of football, the flood lights failed. Unfortunately for Wigan, they were losing 6-0; "A protest was lodged by the Wigan County authorities on the ground that the game was stopped owing to darkness seven minutes from time...." At a meeting of the Lancashire Football Association on the following Wednesday, Wigan's protest was dismissed and a replay would not take place.

At the beginning of February 1898 in the first round proper of the English Cup, Wigan met Manchester City in Manchester. City scored with twenty minutes to go and Wigan made their exit from the cup. Due to irregularities, the Wigan County Committee suspended three players permanently "for violation of their terms of agreement with the club, principally in the matter of training.". The Christmas and Boxing Day matches of 1897 saw Wigan County playing poorly and the suspension of players for not training may well have accounted for part of the reason.

On Christmas Day before four thousand spectators at Rochdale, Wigan lost 5-1.

The following day at Southport again in the Lancashire League, Wigan drew 1-1.

From fifteen teams in the league, Wigan County were twelfth; "If...show the same form in other matches away from home, their position in the league would be one to be envied."

Wigan County decided towards the end of season 1897/8, to arrange

Wednesday matches in order to elicit "the amount of support which they certainly merit." However, lack of attendance by spectators had the effect of "checking the good intentions of Wigan County Club... who provide football displays of the highest order for those who are fortunate enough to have a holiday mid-week..."

The first team of Wigan County having had a poor first season, was "reconstructed and infused liberally with young blood " to begin its second season in Lancashire League. The reserve team was withdrawn from the Lancashire Alliance and placed in an amateur division of the Wigan and District Senior Association Football League.

The first four months of season of 1898/9 saw Wigan County first eleven play twenty four matches {including friendlies}, winning only seven. Their Lancashire League position gave them eleven points from twelve matches, only three which they won with "their supporters . . .wondering when the tide will turn ... their position is not only unfortunate but unexpected

Wigan County had invited both Newton Heath and West Bromwich Albion to play a friendly football match at Springfield Park in March 1899. However, both teams declined the invitation and the same offer was made to Dumfries, "the amateur team...Champion of Southern Scotland." Wigan won by seven goals to nil. The return fixture at Cresswell Park in April saw Wigan County again dominate play, winning eight goals to two. What was interesting while Wigan were in Scotland was the fixture against Glasgow Celtic. Celtic fielded six players from their first eleven and five from their reserve team who all had first team experience. Celtic were defeated by two goals to nil. It was recorded that "Celtic had anticipated a hollow victory, and their surprise when they could not penetrate the visitors defense may easily be imagined. " Wigan County's poor form in the Lancashire League prompted

the Wigan Trotting and Athletic Ground Company directors "to advertise for tenders for the privilege of using the grounds next season." They were granted leave by the directors to again play at Springfield Park for season 1899/1900.

Quite what happened to the dressing rooms at Springfield Park is not known but the playing members of Wigan County appreciated the gesture offered by Mr. David Bell, owner of the White Horse Hotel in Standishgate. The result was

"that instead of the team being compelled to dress in the stables on the field at Springfield Park as hitherto, they will be provided with all the advantages of a most suitable and spacious room at the White Horse... half an hour before kick-off... Mr. Bell himself will drive the team to the field. . . returning to the headquarters immediately the match is over."

The plight of Wigan County was highlighted at the meeting of local association football clubs in October 1899. Approximately thirty clubs attended allowing their players to "enable Wigan County to have on their list, eligible to play at any time, the very best of talent.." Wigan County only had a professional squad of thirteen which needed strengthening to cover injuries and to rest players. The local clubs in return "will have the services of a qualified instructor who will train and coach them in any way that may be considered best."(1) With the formation of the Wigan and District Union of Association Football Clubs at the meeting, it was considered that "The arrangement will present opportunities to local players of appearing in superior company, enabling them to gain valuable experience; they will also be brought together for effective and useful practice."

Over the Christmas period of 1899, it was rumoured within the town of Wigan that the premier club, Wigan County, had disbanded. While it was not strictly true, with poor results and falling gates the club decided to fulfill remaining

fixtures in March 1900; "...decision is fair a number of local amateurs intimidated their willingness to play." Mid-April 1900 saw "a number of local gentlemen who are determined that the game shall not go under in Wigan.." meet to reform the club on a more sound basis. The experience "of the last three seasons under the old regime may serve to indicate what not to do.

The prophetic statement of October 2nd 1897 didn't quite come true. Wigan County folded at the end of season 1899/1900 but a new committee of gentlemen "determined to work in harmony with spectators and players alike.." formed a new club, Wigan United. Due to the lateness of the old club disbanding, Wigan United were not able in their first season to be entered for the Lancashire and English Cup competitions. They were however able play in the Lancashire League. Matches and training took place on the West End Grounds in preference to Springfield Park. Wigan United's first match saw them play Southport Central at Southport where they lost 4-1. Having "only just formed, several new players signed...still getting players to practice ..."

A letter was received by the Wigan Observer in October 1900 from J.Sedgwick, formerly connected with Belle Green Association Football Club. He wrote to protest "against a rumour which he alleges has been set on foot by a committee man of the club that he received bribes...to throw matches." Sedgwick felt that the rumour was detrimental to him personally and totally unfounded. When he was a goalkeeper with Belle Green first eleven, he won the championship of Wigan and District, the Littler Cup and thirty six medals and "never lost a match from the time he joined them.

