

Our history

Because a comprehensive history of New Zealand soccer has never been compiled, those interested in our past are indebted to the efforts of veteran contributor Don Service for his unique recollections about the game from years gone by. In his latest offering, he recalls life at Auckland's long-deceased...

Blanford Park

Although Newmarket Park, the headquarters of Auckland soccer from 1964-1979, is still there as a public Park of the lawns and trees variety, not a trace remains of Blandford Park, it's predecessor.

With several roads developed in that area as part of the motorway system through Grafton gully, it's hard to pinpoint the exact site now, but the large carpark for University students approximates it, and one can get a bearing by looking up the steep bank to the big stone church of St Pauls with its frontage on Symonds Street, and remembering that the park was in the gully below it.

The main entrance was on Grafton Road, but that central part of this road was obliterated, although the upper and lower parts still exist. Across the road was the Auckland Bowling Club, and just a bit further away the Stanley Street tennis courts and the old entrance to the back of the terraces at Carlaw Park.

And up the hill at the Auckland Domain were four or five soccer grounds heavily used by lower grades every Saturday.

From Queen Street you could walk up Wellesley Street East, past Seddon Memorial Technical College, who

sometimes used the park for their annual athletic sports, past the Wynyard Arms Hotel (renamed the Kiwi in the 1950's) across Symonds Street to go down Wynyard Street along the side of the church to a right of way with steps doing down to the park.

The wooden grandstand, with about twelve rows, licensed by the City Council to hold 684, backed onto Grafton Road. It was a peculiarity of the afternoon light that usually in photos only the front half of the crowd in the stand were seen, the back half were obscured by the shadows.

From one side of the stand six or seven rows of wooden seating stretched up to the main entrance, and then around and along the full length of the goal-line at what was called the Stanley Street End, as opposed to the Grafton Bridge End. This open seating accommodated about 1400 people.

Opposite the stand was a fair-sized grass slope below the church. When I first saw the park in 1940 there were just three grass-topped terraces at the bottom of the slope, yet pictures from 1925 and 1926 show 12-15 rows of terraces there. When or why these terraces were removed seems a bit of a mystery.

A very modest place compared to

Ericsson or North Harbour. And yet it offered far more seating than the four or five leading Auckland clubs of today, some of which still have no grandstand. And you had a reliable programme every week of a main attraction with the next best attraction as a curtainraiser.

And clubs, not so obsessed as nowadays with home and away concepts, sometimes complained if they weren't chosen often enough for headquarters!

The park was named after Mr Morgan Blandford, the original owner of the land. It was officially opened on May 9th, 1925 when Auckland beat Waikato (*Damn -- Ed*) before a crowd of 5-6000. It was supposed to have been opened by the Governor General, but he was detained in Wellington by the fatal illness of the prime minister, Mr Massey.

The park had a fair playing surface in later years, but in the 20s and early 30s it was notoriously muddy after rain. Yet old-timers used to claim that Auckland's standard was better then than post-war.

This view was shared by Fred Fullbrook, a long-serving administrator, who with his carrying voice, was often heard reminiscing with friends in front of the kiosk. He thought highly of players such as Danny Jones, apparently a very skilled ball-player, Bob Innes, the best of the Kiwis, Jimmy Christie, Murray Kay and Alan Reid. The last two had Scottish professional experience.

A goalkeeper who was something of a legend with Aucklanders was Bill Zuill, but

his career was cut short by injury during the New Zealand tour of Australia in 1933.

Another noted keeper was Jack Batty, grandfather of Jason Batty, who used to tell how when he transferred to Tramways during the depression he was immediately given the job on the trams although they had a waiting list of 1300.

Admission prices were low. I think it was in the early 50s that administrators of the three football codes met in solemn conclave and decided that because of increasing expenses they would have to raise the price of admission for club

matches from one shilling to one and sixpence, the equivalent to raising it from 10 cents to 15 cents.

Strangely, in the park's 39 years, only two test matches were played there, Australia winning 4-1 in 1939 and 8-1 in 1948. Plus one "unofficial test" when FC

Basel (Switzerland) won 4-1 under floodlights in 1964.

This was because for many major attractions bigger grounds were hired, Eden Park just a couple of times and the Epsom Showgrounds for Tom Finney's English FA XI in 1961; but more especially Carlaw Park, the rugby league headquarters, where twelve soccer games between 1922 and 1969 attracted approximately 180,000 spectators.

Back at Blandford, Auckland were beaten 8-4 (5-3 at halftime) by the English amateurs in 1937, and the rest of New Zealand scored only two goals against the visitors in eight games.

Other Auckland achievements at the

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park included the two 3-3 draws with South Africa in 1947 and the beating of the FK Austria club 3-0 in 1957 and of Australia 2-1 in 1958. This win was particularly satisfying to those of us who had seen Australia beat Auckland 5-0 and 8-0 in 1948.

But in some ways the most memorable day at the park was in 1955 when Auckland Province played a Hong Kong club and a see-sawing game ended at 5-5 was watched by 10,000, the record for the ground.

A sensational game was the North Island final of the Chatham Cup in 1949 when Eden drew 2-2 with Petone Settlers. The game was eventually called off through failing light after 40 minutes of extra time. In the replay Petone won 4-0 at Wellington.

Then there were the many stirring games between the arch-rivals North Shore and Eastern Suburbs and the once-frequent games between the Navy and Auckland for the Drummond Cup which petered out in the mid-50s, when the Navy, who had not won since 1939 could no longer hold the Auckland second division reps, let alone the first.

The Falcon Cup knockout was disappointingly discontinued about the same time although it had a long history and gave clubs each year, a second chance to win a trophy.

Perhaps the funniest incident was about 1952 when Auckland B was leading a Merchant Navy selection by 4-0 after about half an hour. The Auckland goalkeeper, Harry Sime, decided the sailors needed some encouragement, and accidentally on purpose knocked the ball into his own goal. The visitors finally went down 8-3.

In the post-war years I don't think any crowd for a local club match exceeded 1600 (sometimes it was only half that), but the North Island final of the Chatham Cup regularly drew 4000, and more than that sometimes watched the end of season "International Tournament", begun in 1956.

Local players, including the best from Gisborne and the Waikato played for teams according to their country of origin. There was England, Holland, New Zealand and The Rest. Later there was Scotland. The players took it seriously and there were some fine games.

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