

## EVERTON'S DAYS AT ANFIELD, 1884-1892

Anfield is the legendary home of Liverpool Football Club to today's fans, a stadium to inspire fear in the hearts of visiting teams, yet this was not always the case and it is often forgotten that Everton played their home games there from 1884 to 1892. This is a brief account of the Toffees residence at a ground that has become famous as the home of their local rivals over the last century or so.

Everton, as is well known, was founded as St Domingo FC in 1878, adopting the title of the local district 12 months later. Their early years were spent playing in Stanley Park, a public park that had been opened back in 1870, but for the 1883-84 season fortunes had improved sufficiently for them to hire an enclosed field on Priory Road, almost opposite their previous home. This arrangement lasted just one season before the committee moved to new premises between Walton Breck Road and Anfield Road: the ground that was to become known as Anfield. A key figure in the move was John Houlding a local brewer who was to play an even more significant role in the club's fortunes as time progressed. Houlding has had an extremely bad press regarding his involvement with Everton, although as we shall see some of the criticism is perhaps a little unfair when the facts are considered.

Thomas Keates, the club's early chronicler, suggests two reasons for the move from Priory Road: that the ground was too remote and that the noise and disruption created by the spectators on match days was not to the liking of the club's landlord, Mr Cruitt. The former is perhaps most likely to be correct - for although Priory Road was only a short distance from Stanley Park it was poorly served by public transport, which was a distinct disadvantage if the club was to develop a significant

number of regular paying spectators. Keates himself records that the total gate money for the season at Priory Road was £45, an amount which increased almost fourfold in the first season at Anfield, providing further evidence that any disruption on match days was unlikely to have created problems.

The outcome of the move to Anfield was that Houlding was able to take a firm hold on the fledgling club. He arranged the deal through which the ground was rented, held the sole rights to provide refreshment inside the ground and also owned the Sandon Hotel, which stood by the entrance and which was the club's headquarters, the premises



*This map of the area around Goodison was drawn up in 1890 and clearly shows how the ground had been developed. Anfield Road is to the north, Oakfield Road to the south and Kemlyn Road to the east. (1893 Ordnance Survey Map, Courtesy of Liverpool Record Office)*



no doubt being well-patronised by the fans on match days. The whole of the land, including a field leading to the entrance was originally owned by brewers John and Joseph Orrell. However, after 12 months the land on which the actual ground stood was put up for sale, and Houlding purchased it for £5,400 plus legal costs, which apparently amounted to a further £600. Although some of this was paid in cash the majority (approximately £4,000) was in the form of a mortgage on which interest of 3% was paid. The land was rented to the club on an annual lease, which was renewed at the end of each April. His generosity to the club was further demonstrated by the fact that he charged a relatively low rent, initially set at £100 a year. Bearing in mind the scale of his investment it is not surprising that a condition of the rental was that Houlding insisted that he be allowed to nominate his own representative on the committee.

Anfield was just a field when the club first occupied the premises, but through the hard work of the members rudimentary facilities were created in time for the start of the new season. According to Keates, "A hoarding of boards was fixed on the walls, and rails round the playing pitch. Spectators stood on the intervening sods, a very humble stand crouching on the east for officials, members, pressmen, and affluents." The pitch itself was rather uneven with a distinct slope. Everton were still in the process of establishing themselves at the head of the local football hierarchy and faced competition from both Liverpool Ramblers (whose members were mostly former public schoolboys) and Bootle. The new ground was opened with a minimal amount of ceremony by the visit of Earlestown, Everton's opponents in the Liverpool Senior Cup final of the previous campaign, on Saturday 27 September 1884. The Everton line-up (in 2-2-6 formation) according to the *Liverpool Mercury* was: Joliffe; J McGill, J Pickering; J Preston, W Parry; Berry, Richards, Whittle, Finlay, Higgins, Gibson. The visitors apparently fielded a weakened team and were hammered 5-0 in front of a gate of around 1,000, the scorers being Higgins, Gibson, Whittle (2) and Richards. Fixtures were mostly against local teams of similar stature and the season ended in disappointment when Earlestown gained a revenge victory to seize the Liverpool Senior Cup.

Professional players were allowed from the start of the 1885-86 campaign and Houlding's patronage began to assume even greater significance. A number of men were recruited including Job Wilding of Wrexham Olympic (a Welsh international forward), George Dobson from Bolton and George Farmer from Oswestry. Ground improvements were made over the summer and a much-improved fixture list was arranged. The season began with a home game with Burnley on 15 August and other early visitors included Darwen, Blackburn Rovers, Blackburn Olympic and Bolton Wanderers. Attendances were now in the region of 2-4,000 and the foundations had been laid that would enable the club to rise to the very top of the national game.

The ground was still rather rudimentary at the start of the 1886-87 campaign, although the club's support had increased somewhat and it was recognised there was a need to improve the facilities. A second stand was erected in the first few months of the season and opened for the FA Cup first round clash with Scottish club Rangers on 30 October. Having drawn such attractive opposition the Everton committee showed a rather pragmatic approach by scratching from the competition and playing the match as a friendly to maximise the attendance. Had they decided to play the game as an FA Cup tie they would have had to omit several of their star players from the line-up as they did not meet the strict residency requirements demanded of professionals to play in the competition.

Anfield now had a capacity in the region of 10,000, but with the club's support still increasing further improvements were needed. The next major developments to the ground came in the summer of 1887. The pitch was levelled out, but more importantly the facilities for spectators were further developed to bring them up to some of the best in the country, the main addition being to create a raised stand behind the Oakfield Road end of the ground. This provided standing accommodation for around 4,000 fans. The cost was around £1,500 - a substantial sum of money - but much of this was recouped by the increase in gate receipts. The ground was now considered of



sufficient standard to host important fixtures and in October Lancashire played Dunbartonshire in front of a 5,000 crowd, while later that season Anfield was selected as the venue for the FA Cup semi-final between Preston North End and Crewe Alexandra.

Anfield was now developed on three sides, the exception being the area behind the goal to the north bordering on Anfield Road. Here a structure similar to that at the Oakfield Road end was built in the opening months of 1886-87 and opened in time for the Boxing Day 'friendly' encounter with bitter local rivals Bootle. A record crowd in the region of 15 or 16,000 was attracted, and the committee again showed financial astuteness by doubling the entry fee from 3d to 6d to make the most of the occasion.

A contemporary description of the ground reads:

*"The enclosure now bears the resemblance of a huge circus, with its two immense galleries, rising tier above tier, and its covered stands stretching the length of the ground on the one side, and for the greater part of that distance on the other. Every inch of available space was utilised, and the spectacle was of a most imposing description."*  
(Football Field, 29 December 1888)

Anfield was selected to play host to the annual international fixture between England and Ireland in March of 1889 but the game was not a particularly big attraction and although England won 6-1 the attendance of around 4,500 paid receipts of just £120. In comparison a Football League game against the mighty Preston North End had attracted around 15,000 paying £215 a few weeks previously.

The ground now had a capacity of between 18 and 20,000 and was probably the finest of all the club grounds in England:

*"At each side are large covered stands, behind each goal are other stands holding nearly 4,000 each; and taking all the stands together about 12,000 have a good view of the game from them; while another 6,000 have the same from standing room on the ground. Notwithstanding this, the spectators are almost inconveniently crowded, and gates of nearly 20,000 are not altogether unknown."* (Liverpool Football Echo, 16 November 1889)

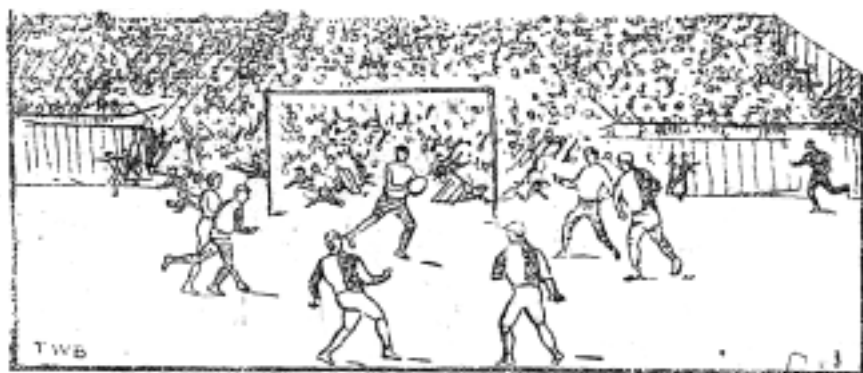
Everton were now the most popular club in England, with gates of 10,000 plus attracted to almost every competitive game. The committee exploited this to the full, doubling entry prices to 6d when they thought the opposition warranted it, although not always with success. When the price was raised for the visit of Notts County in December 1889 the gate plummeted to around 4,000.

When large numbers were attracted the ground became dangerously overcrowded and on the occasion of the visit of Preston North End in November 1889 there was nearly a serious accident behind the Oakfield Road goal:

*"When the battle waged close to the posts the occupants of the top rows had a difficulty in following the movements of the twenty-two units struggling below, and so they leaned forward on their fellows in front. These in turn threw the burden on the lower rung, until layer on layer was piled on the bottom supports. These being but human gave way, and the whole pile fell forward like a house of cards. It is a wonderful fact that with so many hundreds involved in the crash that only one small boy was hurt, and he appears to have been sitting beneath the hoarding when it fell."* (Cricket & Football Field, 23 November 1889)

Shortly afterwards Anfield hosted its first-ever game under floodlights using the Wells' Light system. Sheffield United were defeated 5-2 on 8 January 1890, and later that week a line-up





*An artist's impression of the incident behind the Oakfield Road goal against Preston in November 1889. Note the high frontage to the standing area which was built of brick and wood. (The Cricket & Football Field, 23 November 1889)*

described as 'Everton A Team' played Lancashire Nomads in front of a 4,000 gate. The Toffees continued to attract huge attendances at the ground, and success at the gate eventually paved way for success on the field. In 1889-90 they finished as runners-up to Preston, pipping their rivals from Deepdale for the title 12 months later.

However, despite their status as the country's top club, all was not well at Anfield. The 1889 annual general meeting had seen something of a coup with the election of WE Barclay as secretary in place of Alexander Nisbet and dissent with the way the club was run seems to have begun to grow within the membership, although it should be noted that this was still a close-knit organisation which continued its tradition of organising an annual picnic to some local beauty spot until at least 1891. The dispute boiled over after the championship was won and became a very public affair with Houlding and his allies on the one side and several prominent committee members on the other. Essentially Houlding wished to raise the rent on the section owned by him to £250, keeping the agreement on a yearly lease. The dissenters made an offer of £340 for the whole of the land (£180 to Houlding, £100 for the portion owned by Orrell and £60 in taxes), and also wanted a ten-year lease and written agreement regarding the fixtures and fittings on the ground, most of which had been paid for by Houlding. In the end there was not even an acknowledgement of the offer. In January 1892 a meeting of the membership voted not to proceed with plans to buy the land from Houlding and Orrell, instead agreeing to secure new premises on Goodison Road and to turn the club into a limited company. Despite the bitterness of the argument the membership were almost of one view, with only four of those present voting against the move. This was not however the end of the tale, for it was then discovered that Houlding had already formed his own limited company using the title 'Everton Football Club and Athletic Grounds Company Limited' and this had been registered at Somerset House. The wrangle continued, Houlding obtaining an injunction in the Chancery Court to prevent the committee removing fixtures and fittings from the ground. The matter was eventually concluded following intervention by the FA, who concluded that Houlding must choose another name for his club (Liverpool AFC) and pay £250 in compensation for retaining the stands at Anfield. The move proved a great success for both parties - Houlding's new club went on to win the Second Division title at the first time of asking in 1893-94, while Goodison was quickly developed into the best club ground in England.

The final home match played by Everton at Anfield took place on 30 April 1892 when a crowd of 5,000 witnessed a 3-3 draw in a friendly match against Burton Swifts. The line-up was rather



different to that which had taken the field for the very first game against Earlestown: Jardine; McLean, Kent; Kelso, Jones, Robertson; Latta, Geary, Maxwell, Whittaker, Chadwick.

I shall finish with a brief consideration of Houlding's role in the affair. Traditionally he has been seen as a typical greedy capitalist whose main interest was to make money out of football, perhaps partly because of his associations with the Conservative Party (he was Lord Mayor of Liverpool in 1897). It is true that he saw Everton Football Club as a commercial enterprise, however he had effectively bankrolled the club during their rise to fame, paying for the development of the ground himself for the most part. The committee were not exactly innocents in their commercial aspirations, exemplified by their eagerness to withdraw from the FA Cup in 1887-88 so that they might play a stronger team against Rangers (and so attract a larger gate) and by their policy of doubling entrance prices, sometimes with no prior notice, for big matches. Although he was not a popular man in Everton circles the club would not have developed into one of the top outfits in the country without his financial assistance, and he certainly had his supporters in Liverpool, as *The Athletic & Dramatic News* noted, "Personally we should much like to see the new combination [Liverpool AFC] boom, if only to prove to Mr Houlding that, although he has been, all things considered, badly treated by his colleagues, the football loving public of Liverpool have not forgotten his great services in the cause of their pastime." (5 April 1892)

*Main sources: Liverpool Courier; Liverpool Mercury; Liverpool Daily Post; Liverpool Echo; Liverpool Football Echo; T Keates, History of the Everton Football Club 1878-1928 (Liverpool, 1929, facsimile edn., Westcliff-on-Sea, 1998); T Onslow, Everton FC, The Men from the Hill Country (Birkenhead, 2002).*

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