

The Wigan Story

Wigan Football Roots : The formation of Association Football in Wigan

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The first Association Football team to play at Springfield Park was called Wigan County. County played in the Lancashire League and their first football season started in 1897/98. The formation of the club is shrouded in mystery but on July 22nd 1897 a meeting was held in the Ship Hotel, the main purpose of which was to form an athletics and cycle club but no mention at all was made of Wigan County.

However, it seems that there is reason to believe that Wigan County were formed specifically to play at the brand new Springfield Park. The local newspaper, the Wigan Examiner, reporting on the meeting indicated that a football club had been formed but no specific details about the club were disclosed.

What is known is that County were not the first team in Wigan to play association rules football this honour goes to 'Wigan AFC' who were formed in 1883, fourteen years before Wigan County. The first officially recorded game using association rules was played between Wigan AFC and Hindley AFC on Saturday 16th October 1883.



Wigan were captained by George H Souter and Hindley won 1-0. Neighbours Chorley (who had also adopted association rules football the previous season) were the next opponents. The result was not recorded. Although Wigan AFC never participated in any form of League they did play quite a number of games against good quality opposition.

However, in the summer of 1884 a rift developed between the club and their Wigan Cricket Club landlords due to the deterioration of their pitch.

On 8th July 1884 a General Meeting was called at the Royal Hotel and 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 idea that the club turn professional was a non starter and it was agreed that the club continue playing as amateurs under Lancashire Association rules. For their part the Cricket club claimed that severe damage had been caused to their turf by the football team but that they had decided that Wigan AFC could continue playing the game under the Cricket club umbrella.

The newly formed sub committee of the club had looked into the possibility of playing on ground on Greenough Street (near to where Central Park was to be built later) but a few weeks later there was a joint meeting of Wigan AFC and the Wigan

Parish Church club (who had played under rugby rules the previous season). The outcome was that the two clubs amalgamated for the following season (1884/85) and that all home games would be played on the large ground situated behind the Rectory. The team was considerably strengthened and fixtures were arranged with Blackburn Rovers, Darwen, Preston North End, Blackburn Olympic, Liverpool Rovers and Everton.

To whet the public's appetite for the upcoming association football season an exhibition match was arranged by Wigan AFC secretary, Fred J Baldwin. The match was to be played on 20th September 1884 featuring FA Cup winners Blackburn Rovers set to play Darwen at the Cricket ground and it was the sole topic of conversation in the town for weeks prior to the game. In the event 2,000 spectators saw Darwen emerge victorious by 4-0. The match was judged by two cricket umpires, J Wolstenholme and P P Barton and a referee, Mr Gregsonm from the Lancashire FA. In early March of the season Mr P Rainford, secretary of the Haydock Cricket, Bowling and Football club queried as to why 'any Wigan and District Association friends could not raise a cup competition?'

Fred Baldwin was galvanised into action, insisting that up until then their were insufficient clubs in the district. However, the time was right now to instigate such a competition. The first two people to support Mr Baldwin were Geoffrey Hunt, secretary of the Haydock Temperance Football club and T Hodgson, secretary of New Springs Football club. The first ever club AGM saw George Souter voted in as Chairman and Fred Baldwin took the positions of Secretary and Treasurer. During the meeting it was recorded that there was huge support for a cup competition.

Prior to the start of season 1885/86 the 'Wigan Nondescripts' Football club held their first meeting. The association game was now extremely popular in the town. During the previous season when Wigan AFC played Blackburn Rovers at Wigan the interest was so great that the local rugby club had to give away free tickets to compete with the football clubs popularity. It was during this season that the FA issued a statement to all clubs that 'A club can employ as many professionals as they please on the condition that their names are registered and they possess the necessary residential qualifications.'

So dawned the age of professional footballers. This was prompted with the influx of professional players from Scotland increasingly trying to ply their trade south of the border.

On 12th September 1885 Wigan AFC created a bit of history at Bury when they became Bury's first ever opponents at Gigg Lane. The game resulted in a 4-3 victory for the Shakers. Just one month later, Wigan AFC returned to the Wigan Cricket club after a heated argument with the Rector of Wigan who declined the club further use of the ground behind the Rectory. The Wigan Cricket club came to the rescue, but the club was told that they could only use the 'lower end' of the Cricket ground until Christmas. (presumably to protect their turf during the winter months).

The club's next 'home' ground was the Honeysuckle Field in Poolstock. It isn't known when exactly the club re located there but they were resident there for the

start of season 1886/87. The first game played on the ground was against Blackburn Olympic who had John Hunter, the England International playing for them. Sadly, the exact date and the result was not recorded. Whilst the tremendous increase of local association football club was increasing it is sad to note that Wigan AFC were cancelling their fixtures for season 1888/89 due to their inability to obtain a home ground of their own. The club folded.