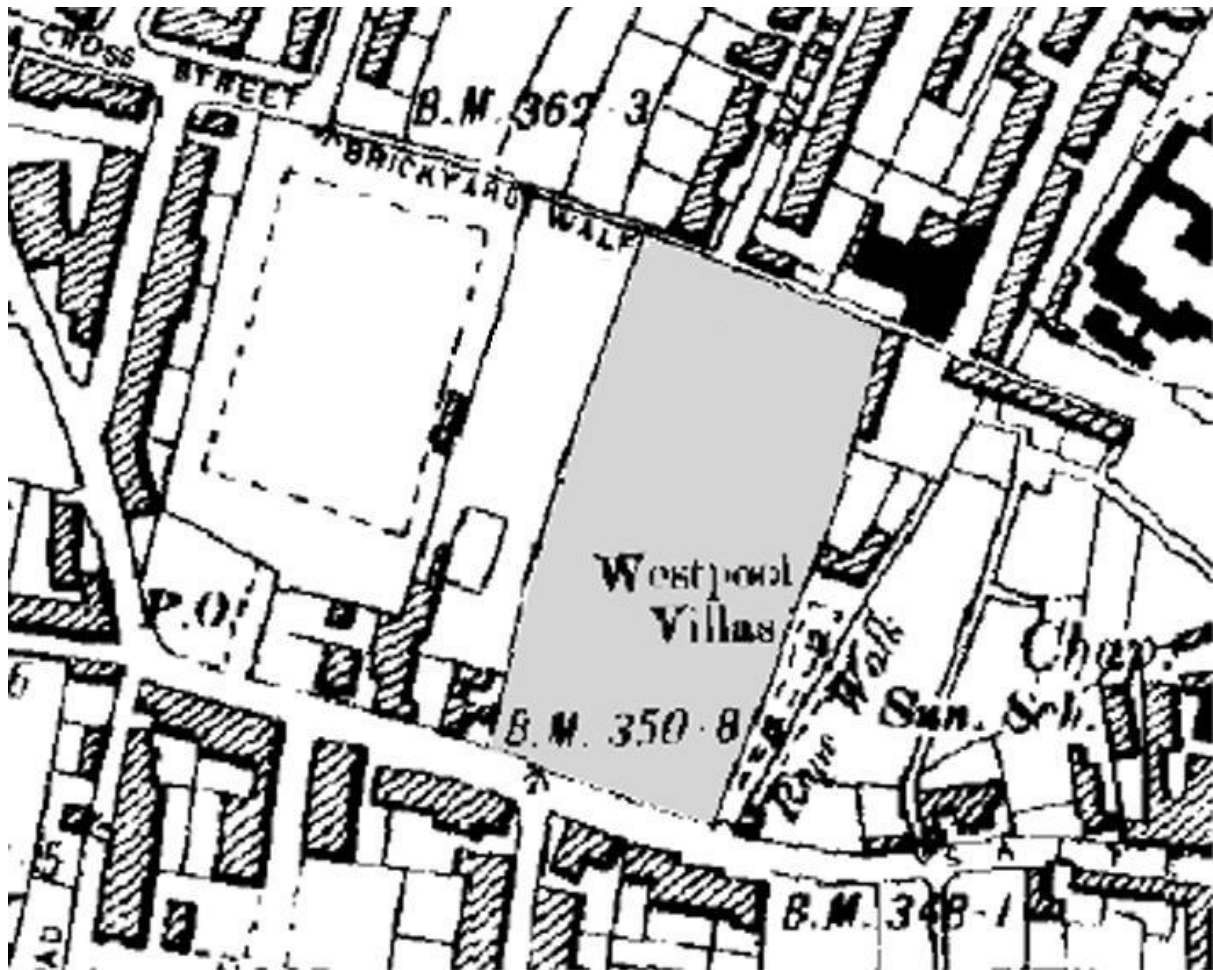


Grounds like the Rec are becoming fewer in number and, with the departure of the Chesterfield Football Club to a new stadium in the summer of 2010, that number became one fewer. Football had been played at the Recreation Ground, on Saltergate, since 1871, but the old place changed beyond all recognition in that time.



Prior to using the Recreation Ground the earliest Chesterfield Football Club - no more than an arm of the cricket club - played at the Recreation Ground. Bear with us: picked out in grey on the map above, this Rec was a hundred yards or so closer to town than the current place, and Tennyson Avenue runs up the middle of what was the field that was once our home. When the cricket club fell out with the owner of the Rec the club moved a bit further along Saltergate to what was immediately known as the New Recreation Ground. The word "new" dropped out of use over the next ten years or so. Interestingly, it was not until the 1920s that it began to be popularly known as "Saltergate."

Football shared with cricket until the mid-1890s. Looking around the developed stadium, it was difficult to imagine a cricket field fitting in the perimeter, but with everything demolished in 2012, it was easier to appreciate how the cricket might have taken place there. The Cross Street end was once known as the Cricket Pitch End, but this pitch would not have had a 'square', as such, since it was customary in those days for the visiting team to decide where the wicket would be pitched, anywhere on the field. This end has also been known as the Brickyard End, since there was a brick yard off Hawkesley Avenue, and Brickyard Walk, which runs from

Marsden Street to Tennyson Avenue, continued along behind the ground before it was opened out by the council to form the Cross Street extension in 1921.

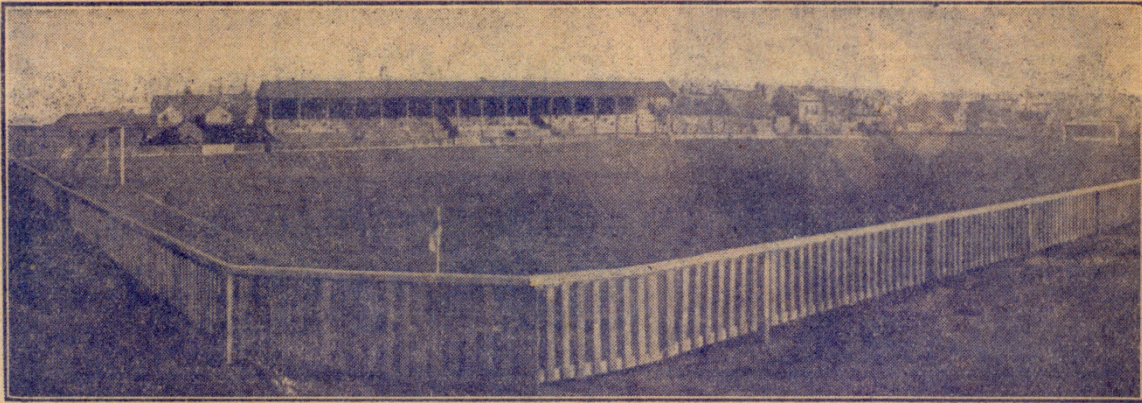


*Looking down St. Margaret's Drive from Cross street in 1923.*

The club made a gift of the necessary land for the council's scheme in exchange for the building of the wall at the back of the Cross Street end. This wall was the oldest surviving feature of the ground at the time of its closure. To accommodate Cross Street the pitch was shifted around twenty feet closer to Saltergate, and levelled by as much as four feet along its length. There used to be a noticeable hill in the Compton Street/Cross Street corner of the ground: much of this was dug out to fulfil a condition of entry to the Football League in 1899, but an appreciable slope remained until the 1921 alterations.

A wooden stand sat along what became St. Margaret's Drive. This was put up around 1893 and originally held about 400. It was steadily doubled in size to hold 1600, eventually, and was roofed over when the Town club joined the Football League in 1899. This stand lasted until 1936, when it was replaced by the most recent edifice. It didn't quite run the length of the pitch; its northern end was where the later players' tunnel was, and a ramshackle hut between that and the Cross Street end served as changing rooms. Each extension took it closer to Saltergate until, by the time of its demolition, there was a tidy symmetry to the thing. Directors' rooms and offices occupied land between the stand and Saltergate. To get into it, you paid ground admission at Saltergate and then paid to transfer to the enclosure or the stand. For a number of years, women were admitted free of charge, since it was felt that their presence had a calming effect on their men folk. The lack of a 'wet' bar would have been of greater effect, though: the club banned the sale of ale at the ground after the First World War following continued scenes of drunkenness and vile behaviour, and it was some years before such facilities were reinstated.

1912.



*The ground in 1912*

Turning our gaze away from the stand, little appeared to have changed in eighty years. A fan from the early 1920s would have certainly recognise the Cross Street end and "Pop" side as they most recently were, just - Apart from the laying of concrete terracing and the replacement of wooden crush barriers with metal ones around 1950, the only change of note to the away end had been the removal of the half-time scoreboard. Similarly, although the Pop Side roof was replaced once since its installation in 1921, you'd hardly know, and the television gantry was the only new feature (beyond fences and safety steps) to be added there for fifty years until seats were added at the beginning of the 21st century.



*An aerial view of the ground from around 1952.*

The Kop was roofed while the club was at its lowest ebb for some time, in 1960. There were a number of stone or metal plaques built into these improved features to

mark the role played by the supporters in raising the money for the improvements. A pleasing touch saw these memorials carefully removed during demolition with a view to their being installed in displays at the b2net Stadium, as a small memorial to all those who have tried to improve their club over the years.

The major changes over the last fifteen years of the Rec's life all came about as a result of disasters at other stadia and are not too obvious - rewiring and the installation of fire doors tend not to capture the imagination. The most obvious change on Saltergate's face was the floodlights.

The club resisted the installation of lights for too long, and were the last League side to use them at home. Ironically, we might have been the joint-first club to play a League game under lights, but the board turned down Rochdale's suggestion that we play under the Spotland lights around 1955. Our first set came second-hand from Bramall Lane and lay rusting behind the Kop (on the area that old players who trained there refer to as "Scar Park") before the money and will was found to get them up. As each one was put up, they began to twist, and the first one was erected and dismantled more than once. In the end three were erected before the whole thing was written off as a bad job, and a new lot were bought. Some ten years or so after fans first began to press for their installation, the club played its first League game under the Saltergate lights on October 23rd., 1967.

Here is an irony. Many critics of modern stadium design condemn the sameness of new grounds, of their resemblance to DIY superstores or industrial units. They are derided for their lack of "character." Well, by the mid-fifties, The Recreation Ground was a textbook, modern Archibald Leitch ground, consisting of three sides of open concrete terracing and a single main stand. The terracing used patented Leitch crush barriers, identical to those at every other Leitch ground, and the stand design was noticeably similar to other modern Leitch ones at Derby County, Crystal Palace and Blackburn Rovers, with its brick front and small pitch-side windows. In short, the ground looked neat, modern and strikingly similar to a lot of others. It was the Bescot Stadium of its day. Subsequent modifications, the Kop roof, the television gantry and different colours of paint - gave the ground its "character," and the effects of weathering gave it an appeal that can be described as "homely." The Rec' was probably the last football ground in the country to undergo a complete transformation at the hands of Leitch's firm, and the work on the terracing carried out around 1950 is possibly the last major work that his firm did, in a stadium setting. The Leitch barriers are considered of such importance that two of the old ones from the Rec' were salvaged and sent to the National Football Museum in Manchester and the Scottish Football Museum in Glasgow, Leitch's home city.

Apart from an empty bank account, a string of understandably stropky creditors and the seething hatred of almost everyone in football, Darren Brown also bequeathed us a string of broken promises to the Football Licensing authorities regarding ground development. Faced with the real prospect of having three sides of the ground closed, CFSS had to do something about the place and did a fine job, re-terracing the standing areas and putting seats onto the Pop Side in recent times. As welcome as the work was, though, it kept the club only barely viable.





*Work on rebuilding the Kop in 2001. (Photo: Phil Tooley)*

Much has been written elsewhere about a new stadium for Chesterfield FC. After the idea to build on the Queens Park Annexe was floated (and dismissed on cost grounds) in 1919, sites have been discussed from Junction 29 in the east to Goldwell Hill in the west, and Wingerworth in the south to Sheepbridge in the north. 2010 saw the club move to a site at the former Demaglass works on Sheffield Road. Most of those folk who favoured a move came to such a decision with a heavy heart, but the years of studied neglect that the place suffered before CFSS did something about it in 2001 left too much to do - not so much with the bricks and mortar as with the perception that locals came to hold of the place. It was necessary to attract new people to watch Chesterfield, and the club could not do that without attractive, modern facilities to watch the team in. Furthermore, the club needed a stadium that could make money from non-football activity. It was sad to leave, but most of those fans of other clubs who have gone down a similar road would not go back. For Chesterfield FC the choice was move away, or pass away.

After laying idle for a couple of years, the Recreation Ground was demolished in the spring of 2012 to make way for a housing development whose name - Spire Heights - gave a respectful nod to the site's former use.

*Stuart Basson*