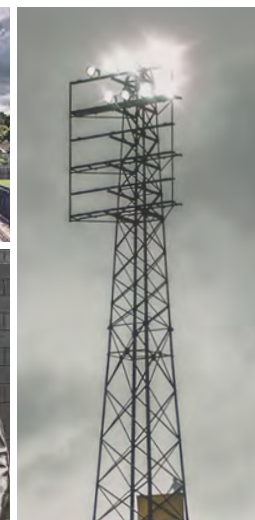
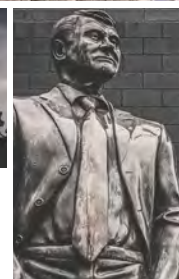
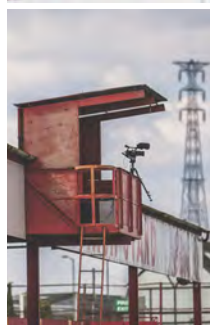




# British Football's Greatest Grounds

ONE HUNDRED MUST-SEE FOOTBALL VENUES



Mike Bayly



**The Ewe Camp**  
NORTHEND THISTLE FOOTBALL CLUB

Journalist Lawrence Kitchen described football as ‘the only global idiom apart from science’. Britain, birthplace of the modern game, is a microcosm of a sporting language practised in virtually every country on Earth. Football’s popularity on the British mainland is well documented, but there are thriving competitions on its islands that occasionally draw national (and even international) interest. In 2016, the *New York Times* ran a feature on the two-team Isles of Scilly League off the south-west coast of Cornwall, referred to as the ‘world’s smallest football league’. At Britain’s opposite extremity, FIFA declared the undulating pitch of Hebridean club Eriskay in the Uist & Barra League as one of the ‘eight most remarkable places to play football in the world’.

Another of Scotland’s island leagues is found on Arran, a 55-minute ferry journey from Ardrossan Harbour on the North Ayrshire coast. Depicted as ‘Scotland in miniature’ due to its topography and economy, Arran has a population of around 5,000. Football on the island is administered by the Isle of Arran FA. Its principal competition is the summertime Isle of Arran League, consisting of five clubs – Brodick, Lamlash, Northend Thistle, Shiskine and Southend – that typically play fixtures on a Monday evening. Perhaps the best known of these clubs outside of the island is Northend Thistle, who, for a brief period in the 2000s, were unexpectedly thrust under the media spotlight. Northend Thistle are based in Lochranza on the north side of Arran, a village of around 250 inhabitants. The former fishing settlement is probably best known for the ruined tower house remains of Lochranza Castle, a popular destination for the 400,000 tourists that head to the island each

year. The club were originally founded as Arran Northend, appearing and disappearing over the decades depending on the availability and interest of players from the local villages. During the 1980s, Northend’s pitch doubled as part of the fairway of the local golf club. Interest in the team waned in the 1990s and was reformed in 2002 as Northend Thistle by local entrepreneur Scott Murdoch. For the first two seasons, all of Thistle’s games were played away from home as no land was available for a pitch in the north end of the island. In 2005 an agreement was reached with the local landowner for a pitch to be created in a field next to Arran distillery. Much of the credit for transforming and maintaining the pitch goes to Thistle manager Chris Traill, who originally joined the club as a player in 2002. ‘The pitch before 2005 could best be described as a bumpy bog,’ he says. ‘We have drained it, removed boulders, added topsoil and taken out as many craters and hills as we possibly can.’

**Ewe Camp is an astonishingly beautiful football setting. Located adjacent to a whisky distillery and surrounded by the sunlit hills of Torr Nead on three sides, it is the very essence of Scotland in miniature.**



# 089

## Cwm Nant-Y-Groes

ABERTILLERY BLUEBIRDS FOOTBALL CLUB

In 1779, the minister and author Edmund Jones wrote about Abertillery in his *History of Aberystruth*. He describes beech trees, abounding rivers, delightful warm valleys and grand high mountains. Twenty years later, Archdeacon Coxe's *Historical Tour Through Monmouthshire* talked of 'An extensive district well peopled, richly wooded, and highly cultivated, almost rivalling the fertile counties of England ... we looked down with delight upon numerous valleys which abound with romantic scenery.'

**Cwm Nant-y-Groes lies beyond the unfeasibly steep residential hills of Six Bells. Like many Welsh grounds, the stupendous location defies conventional wisdom. On a clear day there is little in Welsh football to rival the scenery. Damp afternoons can cloak the ground in mist, creating a moody, spectral atmosphere.**

089 // Cwm Nant-Y-Groes ABERTILLERY BLUEBIRDS FOOTBALL CLUB

Abertillery was keeping a dark secret hidden in the earth. In 1842 Thomas Brown discovered coal in the Elled seam at Cwmtillery. People arrived from rural and industrial Wales, joined by those leaving the barren coalfields in England to find work. From a cluster of stone cottages dotted along the hillsides and a small ironworks in 1840, the population grew from 6,000 in 1881 to almost 40,000 by 1921. Mining operations transformed the lush quiescent hillsides of South Wales into a dark wilderness of slag and cinder, but despite the prosperity of the coal industry South Wales experienced periods of extreme poverty. In the slump of the 1920s and 1930s, Abertillery's unemployment rate hit 85 per cent. The bleak imagery is captured in the 20th-century works of miner-turned-poet Idris Davies, notably *The Angry Summer* and *Gwalia Deserta*, or the 'Wasteland of Wales'.

Rugby Union emerged as the town's leading code in the latter half of the 19th century. Blaenau Gwent RFC, formed in 1869, are believed to be the oldest Union side in Wales. Association Football arrived in Abertillery in the early 1900s and would have found favour with the strong English diaspora: Brynteg, Cwmtillery Celtic, Cwmtillery United and St Paul's are among many documented in Keith Thomas's *Old Abertillery In Photographs*.

The leading Association side of the day were arguably Abertillery AFC, also referred to as Abertillery Town. Formed in 1901 with a strong Bristolian contingent, the club joined the English Southern League in 1913, applying unsuccessfully for election to the Football League in 1921, gaining only four votes. In 1922 they finished in penultimate place in the Southern League and the following season failed to complete their fixtures and withdrew.

Abertillery's mining operations declined in the late 20th century. The last pit at Six Bells closed in 1988, a name that lives long in the memory of local townsfolk. In June 1960 an explosion at the Arael Griffin pit at the Six Bells Colliery claimed the lives of 45 men. In 2010 a 70ft metal sculpture known as 'The Guardian' was built on the former Six Bells Colliery site, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the tragedy.

Abertillery Bluebirds formed in 1989, playing at Cwm Nant-y-Groes in the village of Six Bells, until drainage problems forced relocation to a 3G facility on the edge of town in 2014. The ground remained in use for occasional reserve games, but in 2019 the club announced it would be returning, taking out a long lease on the facility. Improvement work was carried out by volunteers in the summer of 2020, resulting in acceptance to the tier three FAW League One for 2020/21.

Cwm Nant-y-Groes lies beyond the unfeasibly steep residential hills of Six Bells. The ground is reached via a narrow residential lane running off the junction of Cwm Farm Road. A pleasant walk past allotments and neatly pruned gardens leads to the club car park and a football pitch situated at the bottom of a steep, three-sided conifer valley. Like many Welsh grounds, the stupendous location defies conventional wisdom. The recently upgraded main stand and balcony clubhouse afford enviable views across the valleys, providing the weather is favourable. On a clear day there is little in Welsh football to rival the scenery. Damp afternoons can cloak the ground in mist, creating a moody, spectral atmosphere.

It is hard to connect this beauteous evergreen setting with the area's excavated past. Cwm Nant-y-Groes football ground was formed on waste from the Cwm Nant-y-Groes Colliery. Land reclamation schemes have helped heal the physical scars in Abertillery. Cwm Nant-y-Groes has returned to the romantic landscape that inspired those early writers, a part of Wales once more defined by the artistry of nature rather than the pallet of industry.



# 073

**Edgar Street**  
HEREFORD FOOTBALL CLUB

Football in Hereford dates back to the mid-1870s with the formation of Nil Desperandum FC, an offshoot of the Hereford Rugby Club. The Nils renamed to Hereford FC in September 1880 and according to a series of articles in the *Hereford Times* of 1899, 'The first ground acquired by the club was curiously enough the present meadow in Edgar Street which was opened on November 1st, 1884, with a match against Malvern.'

Meetings were regularly held there by the Hereford & County Amateur Athletics Club and help explain the oval perimeter that became a feature of the ground. It is difficult to say with absolute certainty if the Edgar Street used for the Malvern game is the same one as today. At the time, the area was largely rural. Football fields, often consisting of little more than goals and a roped-off spectator area, could be moved with relative ease within the same locale.

Hereford FC flitted between Edgar Street and other venues through the early to mid-1890s. Acceptance to the Birmingham & District League in 1896 (prompting a name change to Hereford Town, possibly to avoid confusion with league rivals Hereford Thistle who played at the Barracks Ground) saw Edgar Street's flimsy material enclosure replaced with boarding in 1898 to prevent 'the loss of gate money occasioned by the wind taking the old-time canvas heavenward'. The cost of the improvement was met by private subscription via the committee.

Hereford FC (or Hereford Town FC as they latterly appeared in league tables) folded around 1901/02. As time progressed, it became clear the remaining clutch of amateur sides in the town might be better equipped to challenge for honours by joining forces, leading to the merger of St Martins and RAOC Depot in 1924, creating Hereford United. The same year, the Hereford Athletic Ground Company, a body of citizens formed to provide a multi-purpose sporting facility in the heart of the city who purchased the ground from Bulmers in 1920, restricted the number of football clubs using Edgar Street. Going forward, only two would be allowed to play there, one being Hereford United. Around this time, the athletic club ceased meetings at the ground due to lack of support.

United joined the Birmingham Combination, constructing a stand on the Edgar Street side and a similar-sized structure opposite. Desirous of a higher standard of football, the club successfully applied to the Birmingham League for 1928/29. Hereford City FC continued playing at Edgar Street until folding at some point in the late 1930s. With City gone, United were uncontested as the town's leading club and in 1939 were elected to the Southern League from the Birmingham League. To accommodate a surge of post-war interest a new shelter was erected on the popular side and floodlights added in 1953, a coronation gift by local company Painter Brothers. The four, 50ft pylons were highly advanced and installed at a time when the technology was still in its infancy.



# 055

## Cappielow

GREENOCK MORTON FOOTBALL CLUB

Morton Football Club formed in 1874, driven by a town in transition. Immigrants fleeing famine and poverty from Ireland and the Highlands were drawn to the area's employment opportunities in shipbuilding, dock work, sugar refining and textiles, swelling the population from 35,000 to 66,000. The expansion was the latest in a series of changes that had unfolded over the previous century.

The majority working classes lived in the poorest housing and were subjected to the attendant social problems of poverty, notably alcohol abuse. To counter the escalating drink epidemic, welfare groups were established to help Greenock's impoverished communities. Religion and, based on its observable popularity, football, were recognised as a structured means of escape from the harsh reality of life. Morton's fledgling committee adhered to this philosophy and resolved to create a club where men could enjoy the benefits of exercise and practise abstinence from drink.

Morton's first ground was a piece of land near Morton Terrace. When this was acquired for housing in 1875, the club moved to Garvel Park, off Port Glasgow Road. Garvel Park had been sold to the Greenock Harbour Trust in 1867 and later earmarked for construction of the James Watt Dock, meaning Morton moved across the road to their current home of Cappielow in 1879. The origin of Cappielow's name is revealed by author and screen writer Alan Sharp in his essay *A Dream of Perfection*, where he discovered 'it's an old Scandinavian word meaning "a race between mowers"' and conjured a Breughel-ian vision of





## The City Ground

NOTTINGHAM FOREST FOOTBALL CLUB

Nottingham Forest were formed at the Clinton Arms, Sherwood Street, in 1865 by members of the Foresters Shinty Club. From foundation until 1879, games were played at the Forest Recreation Ground, a public park to the north of the city where the annual Goose Fair is held. The club relocated to the Castle Ground in the Meadows in 1879, and from 1880 played their major games at Trent Bridge Cricket Ground. Forest's short tenure at Trent Bridge officially ended in 1882.

Forest moved to the Lenton area, developing a base at Parkside, and then on to the Gregory Ground in 1885. Lenton's location proved unpopular with supporters, so Forest turned their attention back to the city centre and moved again in 1890 to a site called Woodward's Field, subsequently named the Town Ground. The field was levelled, and accommodation erected on all sides. A then radical concave seating arrangement was favoured near the end touchlines to improve viewing.

The Town Ground opened on 3 October 1890. Football League side Wolverhampton Wanderers should have been the visitors, but Notts County lodged a complaint with the governing body, fearing the crowd for their own home game.





**Despite the original design dating back almost 20 years, the glass and steel fascia still look futuristic.**

in Highbury Square can sell for upwards of £900,000. Two months after Highbury closed its gates, the Emirates Stadium hosted its first major game with a Dennis Bergkamp testimonial, and was officially opened on 26 October by Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. The final cost of the project was £390m, primarily financed through a £260m bank loan.

The visually stunning Emirates gained Populous an architect-of-the-year award in 2006. Long viewed as the benchmark for modern football stadia in the UK, it was a radical departure from both the traditional English style and sterile new builds that offered little in the way of flair or individuality. Despite the original design dating back almost 20 years, the glass and steel fascia still look futuristic. The opulence of the exterior extends to the internal fixtures and fittings; padded seats with extra leg room afford one of the comfiest spectator experiences around, while a passenger lift and

escalators provide access for less able-bodied supporters. Hospitality – a key revenue objective of the move – is provided on club level with four large corner bars and restaurants.

When first opened, the Emirates felt an ostentatious intrusion among the high-rise tower blocks and fast-food outlets. Islington is famed for its elegant town houses and celebrity residents but is one of the most economically disparate boroughs in London. However, placed in the context of an increasingly visible regeneration programme, the stadium has provided the area with long overdue change and investment. Equally important, the Emirates has grown from a football ground into a home. Fan memorials on the concourses and external North Bank terraces have humanised the surroundings and ongoing Arsenalisation has ensured the club's heritage won't be forgotten.



## Fratton Park

PORTSMOUTH FOOTBALL CLUB

In April 1898, six men met at 12 High Street, Portsmouth, and purchased five acres of land near Goldsmith Avenue. Portsmouth FC and Fratton Park were born. The land was levelled, drained and grassed. On the south side of the ground, a 100ft stand with seven rows of seats was built. To the north, a 240ft enclosure was added.

Portsmouth were accepted directly into the First Division of the Southern League in 1899. Fratton Park opened with a series of public trial matches in August of the same year and was formally opened on 6 September in the presence of around 5,000 spectators. The ground's first upgrade took place in 1905. Strong performances in the Southern League led to terracing of the enclosures and the construction of a balconied mock-Tudor pavilion with clock tower at the Frogmore Road entrance. The pavilion now houses club suites and provides access to the South Stand, minus the time-keeping appendage.

Fratton Park developed into an exemplary ground, aside from the 1,000-capacity original South Stand that, by the 1920s, had outlived its original purpose and seen the roof torn off by storms on more than once occasion. Portsmouth recruited Archibald Leitch to design a replacement. A hundred men began work in the summer of 1925 and completed the two-tier, pitch-length structure in time for the start of the 1925/26 season. It could house over 4,000 patrons, with 8,000 spectators on terracing to the front and in the undercroft, taking total ground capacity to 40,000. Football League president John McKenna opened the stand on 29 August 1925.

**Cast away on Portsea Island, Fratton Park is marooned between past and present, a glorious medley of noise and period details cut adrift from the modern game.**

The receipts from the FA Cup Final against Manchester City in 1934, combined with the sale of England centre-half Jimmy Allen to Aston Villa, funded a new £12,000 North Stand 'for the shilling spectator'. John McKenna returned for opening duties in September 1935, when, somewhat fatefully, the visitors were Aston Villa. According to the architect's certificate, completion of the work would take Fratton Park's capacity to 57,000, with 37,000 under cover.

As a naval city, Portsmouth was a prime target for attack during World War Two: German reconnaissance photographs identified railways, barracks, HMS Dolphin, power stations and the dockyards for bombing. Between 1940 and 1944 Portsmouth suffered nearly 70 raids. If the city needed inspiration after the war, it came through their football club. Fratton Park remained intact and Portsmouth secured the First Division title in 1949, their golden-jubilee season.

In 1952 Portsmouth joined a growing band of clubs by pressing ahead with floodlight installation. Four tubular scaffolding towers were erected on the stand roofs, each with a cluster of 16 lamps. The other wise functional addition made history on 22 February 1956 when Fratton Park welcomed Newcastle United for the first-ever

league game by floodlight. Further improvement work was carried out that season with a new £40,000, two-tier, iron-stanchion, concrete stand at the Fratton End of the ground. New floodlight pylons were installed in the 1960s and decommissioned in 2019.

Little else changed until the late 1980s when a five-year, £4m programme of work was initiated to remediate structural work. Most surprising was the partial demolition of the Fratton End after it was found the steel reinforcements in the concrete were corroded as the aggregate used was rather salty, having been dredged from the bed of the Solent. The upper tier was condemned in April 1986 and demolished in the summer of 1988. The lower tier continued to be used until 1996 and was removed when the new Fratton End was built in the summer of 1997. The remediation effort was, in some respects, papering over the cracks. Fratton Park had little room for expansion in the post-Taylor Report era and faced challenges converting a predominantly terraced ground to all-seater before the August 1994

deadline. Numerous relocation schemes were explored in the early 1990s and variously rejected or abandoned. Left with little alternative, the club sought approval to extend the all-seater cut-off point by two years and began renovating their near-century-old home.

Seats were added to all sides in the summer of 1996 to comply with regulations, and the following year the Fratton End was rebuilt with a new single-tier, 4,500-capacity seated structure, opened in October 1997. Promotion to the Premier League in 2003 led to the addition of cover on the 3,200-capacity Milton End in the 2007/08 season, until then the only roofless stand in the top flight.

What followed was a tumultuous period of new owners and financial difficulty for the club, until a community bid to save it was launched by the Pompey Supporters' Trust, who became majority owners in 2013. The fan-owned club inherited a dilapidated Fratton Park. Safety requirements cut the capacity to 18,100 and more than £3m was spent in four seasons clearing a backlog of planned maintenance ignored by previous owners. In the summer of 2017, having won the League Two championship in May, trust





In the three decades since the Taylor Report, the number of out-of-town stadiums in England has grown exponentially. Football clubs are increasingly relocating to large, affordable spaces occupying the no-man's land between town and country. In truth, the idea that all clubs began life playing in densely populated urban areas is misleading. As John Bale notes in *Sport, Space and The City*, 'The Lowry stereotype of the inner-city stadium is not invariably accurate in the case of the British football landscape.' Nonetheless, grounds still found in town and city centres are highly romanticised. Of these, few can challenge the sheer authority of St James' Park in Newcastle upon Tyne.

## St James' Park

NEWCASTLE UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB

St James' Park was originally grazing land known as Castle Leazes in an area called Town Moor. It was used by local butchers and owned by the Freemen of the City. Newcastle Rangers formed in 1878 and were the first football club to play at Castle Leazes, taking up residence in 1880 after leaving the Drill Field in Gateshead due to a lack of pitches in their home town. The ground was soon referred to as St James' Park.

Newcastle Rangers folded in 1884. The vacant St James' Park was next used by Newcastle West End in 1886, formed as an offshoot of the West End Cricket Club in 1882. An 8ft fence was erected around the pitch to create a semblance of a football ground, or, as has also been implied, an enclosed mudheap.

West End's main rivals were, appropriately enough, Newcastle East End, established as Stanley FC in 1881, a sister of the Stanley Cricket Club based initially in Stanley Street, Byker. By 1892, lacking finance and playing second fiddle to their well-resourced rivals, West End decided to fold. As a (de)parting gesture, they offered East End the remainder of the lease on St James' Park.

Although the location was good, the move was greeted with muted enthusiasm by supporters. Like many clubs that started out with localised origins, East End's name was too parochial for a city-centre club hoping to attract a wider fan base. A meeting was held on 9 December 1892 to discuss a name change. The words of a local councillor, encouraging petty rivalries and jealousies to be put to one side in favour of a united front, may have had a bearing on the decision to select 'Newcastle United' from the various proposals.

The arrival of Frank Watt as secretary and 'unofficial' manager in December 1895 altered the course of the club and the status of St James' Park. Under his skilled and tenacious stewardship, they were promoted to the First Division in 1898, won the title in 1905, 1907 and 1909, the FA Cup in 1910 and were runners-up in 1905, 1906, 1908 and 1911.

The end to an otherwise prosperous century was soured by the beginning of an uneasy relationship between Newcastle United and the council who, along with the Freemen of the City, owned the freehold to the ground. Permission to expand St James' Park met with resistance, almost forcing the club to move in 1898. The council were hardly enamoured with football at the time, receiving