

The 1980's must have represented the most miserable and traumatic time in the whole history of Huddersfield Rugby League Club. Coaches were to come and go, new talent was unearthed only to be sold to pay off the bills. The ground continued to crumble and the effects of the Bradford City fire cast a grim shadow over the very future of rugby at the Fartown complex. Season 81/82 under coach Les Sheard saw the club finish in 5th position in a 15 team second division from which Wigan were promoted in 2nd place behind champions York. The crowd averaged 1185, the club going out of the Challenge Cup in the first round with a score line 10-8 to St. Helens in front of 3,094 spectators.

Season 82/83 was equally mediocre while crowds slumped to an alarming average of 776. Most appearances were made by Jimmy Johnson with 35 and there was a new lowest ever crowd of 422 against Whitehaven on the 10th April 1983. The club finished in 12th position, just below Blackpool. During this season coach Les Sheard resigned to be replaced by Dave Mortimer.

Season 83/84 - Chairman Roy Brook had been in negotiation with a new consortium who wished to buy Huddersfield Cricket and Athletic Club, but on the 18th August 1983 new chairman John Bailey, John Hillam and Graham Ramsden joined forces with the existing board as new directors. Events quickly led to the resignation of Mortimer which was followed by the equally surprising appointment of director Mel Bedford as 1st team coach.

A typical team at this time and one that lost 32-10 to new club Kent Invicta was; Barton, Cramp, Leathley, G. Senior, Blacker, Knight, Greenwood, Johnson, Rowe, Wilson, Murray, Fitzpatrick and Dixon. Subs - Slater and Davies.

Chairman Bailey demonstrated his advanced thinking at an early stage when he proposed to offer the ground to a fledgling "professional rugby union circus" which was being mooted at that time. In November after a home loss to Huyton (Highfield) by 21-8 in front of 582 spectators Mel Bedford resigned to be replaced by an ex-Great Britain international Brian Lockwood. He effected a recovery to a mid table position.

In April 1984 whilst the team had lost 3-0 to Rochdale and were blasted by coach Lockwood as "prima donnas" a new group of talent was emerging in the colts team who won 88-0 on the same day. Names which were to become familiar in that team were Antony Edwards, Jimmy Lee and Mick Bostock.

Shockwaves rang around the Fartown complex when after just 8 months of Mr Bailey's chairmanship there were board resignations from Roy Brook, Edward Selby, Ken Scaddon and Mel Bedford. The team however had begun to take shape with the promise of a fine new crop of talented players. The winning team at Dewsbury in April 1984 was; Hirst, Thomas, Leathley, Senior, George, Knight, Paterson, Murray, Price, Rose, Dixon, Rowe, Davies, Blacker and Fitzpatrick.

June 1984 - enter "The Barracudas at Arena 84", another vision of Mr Bailey who once again perhaps was ahead of his time judging by the current vogue for American style razzamatatz evidenced by Keighley Cougars, Castleford Tigers, Sheffield Eagles, London Broncos, Carlisle Border Raiders etc. At the time it prompted merely cynical humour in some, such as "The Examiner" report of July 1984 headlined



"Barracudas Fish For New Players" but anger and resentment by older supporters steeped in the great tradition of the "Claret and Gold" at Fartown.

Outside Fartown affairs there was another case of early thinking when there was a scheme to launch "mini footy" from Australia in the Huddersfield and Wigan areas - a game almost identical to the Puma Little League style launched in 1994 just 10 years on.

The club finished the season in 10th position between Kent Invicta and Cardiff Blue Dragons, Dennis Fitzpatrick topping the appearances list with 35 whilst Paul Dixon and Gary Senior were joint leading try scorers with 14 each. Bob Hirst kicked 51 goals whilst the crowd average had slumped once again to 699.

Season 84/85 was a further year of struggle for the club, Brian Lockwood being replaced by Chris Forster as coach though crowds rose to 905. The club made its regular exit from the Challenge Cup in round one, losing away to Leigh by 14 points to 6. Phil Johnson made most appearances with 30 whilst leading try-scorer was Ian Thomas with a modest 10, Bob Hirst heading the goal-kicking chart with 34.

Wembley 1985 marked the end of referee Billy Thompson's illustrious career when he took charge of his third Wembley final to add to his 18 Internationals including 3 World Cup finals. At this period in local RL history, his name perhaps was the only one which brought the word "Huddersfield" to the lips of regular rugby league supporters.

At the end of this season all sports fans were shattered on the day of the Bradford City fire where 56 lives were lost. There were repercussions for virtually every sports ground in the country and none more so than the crumbling Fartown complex.

Season 85/86 saw coach Chris Forster start without Wilf George and Paul Dixon who between them went on to win virtually all the honours available in the game. The 1st team squad for the start of this season was Thomas, Davies, Humphries, Rose, Johnson, Hirst, Knight, Fitzpatrick, Senior, Simpson, Bostock, Leathley, Meehan, Phil Johnson, Rowe and Blacker.

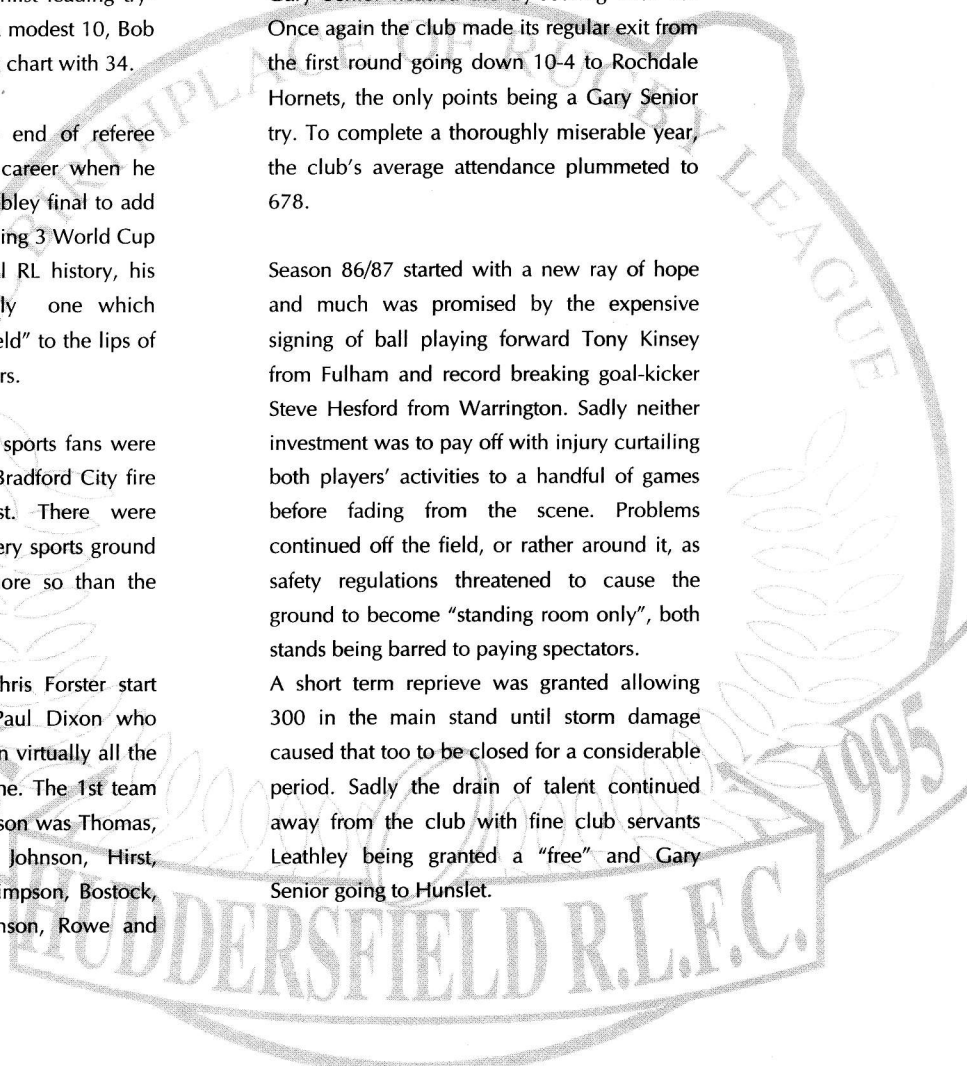
By October Blacker and Davies had filed transfer requests and the club suffered its heaviest home defeat in 90 years, 54-2 to Leigh. Again, talent was emerging in the Colts team which starred Lee St Hilaire, Anthony Farrell and Brian Lee in a good win over Doncaster. Gary Senior now joined the "want away" Brian Blacker on the transfer list. The latter was to leave very shortly for Barrow, but the team won for the first time in 3 months in February 1986 when they beat Workington Town 20-10.

Strangely March 1986 saw another prophetic move when the then "Big Ten" (including Hull and Hull KR!) mooted breakaway plans to form a Superleague. Predictably the outspoken Fartown chairman John Bailey blasted the rebels as "overgrown schoolboys" and threatened to make Fartown into an amateur team!

Further depression set in with only 303 people turning up to see an amazing 32-32 draw with Keighley. Trevor Leathley made most appearances with 37 and player of the year Gary Senior headed the try-scoring with 19. Once again the club made its regular exit from the first round going down 10-4 to Rochdale Hornets, the only points being a Gary Senior try. To complete a thoroughly miserable year, the club's average attendance plummeted to 678.

Season 86/87 started with a new ray of hope and much was promised by the expensive signing of ball playing forward Tony Kinsey from Fulham and record breaking goal-kicker Steve Hesford from Warrington. Sadly neither investment was to pay off with injury curtailing both players' activities to a handful of games before fading from the scene. Problems continued off the field, or rather around it, as safety regulations threatened to cause the ground to become "standing room only", both stands being barred to paying spectators.

A short term reprieve was granted allowing 300 in the main stand until storm damage caused that too to be closed for a considerable period. Sadly the drain of talent continued away from the club with fine club servants Leathley being granted a "free" and Gary Senior going to Hunslet.



The opening game of the season saw a 27-16 win over Keighley with the following squad; Hesford, Munro, A Trialist, Edwards, Campbell, P Johnson, Marshall, Wills, Schofield, Cockerham, Boothroyd, Platt, Kinsey. Subs - Thomas & Nelson. Four months later consecutive defeats of 52-6 at the hands of Hunslet and 54-22 against York during the Christmas period saw the departure of coach Forster.

for the first time, chairman John Bailey offered to surrender control of rugby at Fartown whilst appointing Jack Addy as coach.

The state of affairs was too much for the new coach to recover from, the season ending with a double defeat against Dewsbury, just 432 showing up at Fartown and only 322 at Crown Flatt. The Examiner headline read "This was one of the worst - a shameful end to the Arena season". In total contrast three Huddersfield men, Paul Dixon, Wilf George and Seamus McCallion were in Halifax's cup winning side at Wembley - the last winners before the start of Wigan's incredible winning run. Mick Taylor and Peter Bell were other recruits to "The Fax" following the line of others such as Colin Hawkyard, Tom Naidole, Henderson Gill and Roger Simpson who chose to further their careers away from their home town club. Attendances at Fartown achieved their lowest ever point with an average of just 524.

Season 87/88 - the wind of change- the season starting with mixed news. The exemplary Mick Bostock was chosen as captain on his return after a year's injury but Ian Thomas was reported to be on his way to Leeds. The Fartown faithful were once again condemned to "standing room only", no work having been done to bring the stand up to safety standards. A council loan was proposed, but then local businessman Jim Collins made his first takeover bid for the club.

The opening game of the season was lost 22-16 at home to Springfield Borough in front of 447 spectators. The Fartown team being Harris, Lee, Sedgwick, Edwards, Thomas, Bostock, Meehan, Cockerham, Cook, Boothroyd, Simpson, Nelson, Kenworthy, Hirst and Wills. The proposed loan of £25,000 from the local authority to assist with the refurbishment was blocked by a council sub-committee.

On a more positive note Anthony Farrell was capped for Great Britain Colts against France, but the 1st team languished 2nd from bottom to Dewsbury at the turn of the year. The "politics game" took over - the council loan was re-offered under "certain terms", John Bailey blocked Jim Collins' attempt to buy shares - November to February were win-less, the tide turning at Batley with a 26-20 scoreline in Fartown's favour.

A short mini revival was followed by a predictable slump and the resignation of Jack Addy as coach. Long term Fartown stalwart Neil Whittaker and St Helens based Allan Jones were appointed to finish the season out. It ended sadly in a home defeat against Runcorn by 16-14 in front of 330 spectators. The team was Harris, Wells, Lee, Thomas, St Hilaire, Sedgwick, Cook, Johnson, Huck, Wills, Simpson, Nelson, Kenworthy, Brook and Dickinson. Average attendances showed a marginal increase to 601.

Season 88/89 and glimmers of hope began to emerge. Chairman John Bailey abandoned the universally disliked "Barracudas" tag for the 1st team and the equally unpopular "Piranhas" for the 2nd team. He offered to "give the club away" to anyone who would take on the responsibility of running the team, improving the ground and being responsible for the necessary work to retain a safety certificate.

The season opened with Mr Bailey still at the helm but overtures had been made by a small number of interested parties. Among them were Liverpool raised, Aberdeen based,

ex-Welsh RL International Mick Murphy, local property developer and builder Jim Collins (whose earlier solo efforts had been unsuccessful) and lifelong Fartown supporter Neil Shuttleworth.

This three-man consortium finally took over rugby activities in November 1988 losing their first three games in control. Nigel Stephenson had been recruited as coach and it was a euphoric moment to go to Elland Road - the home of Nigel's previous coaching role - and win a game after what seemed a lifetime of failure. The nail-biting score was 21-18 in Fartown's favour with tries from Kenworthy, St Hilaire and Brooke. Four goals and a drop from Kenworthy completed the scoring.

A portion of the main stand was re-opened, new fittings put in place on the 'domino pattern' floodlights and the club was visited by representatives of the Rugby League Board of Directors to make sure that there were genuine plans for the future. Overtures were made to a number of local professional clubs in an attempt to strengthen the squad whilst financial constraints were still in place.

Featherstone Rovers in particular were very genuine in their attempts to assist in the revival. Andy Mackintosh, Gary Senior, Dave Heselwood, Peter Subritzky and BARLA International Bob Jowett were early recruits and were followed at the end of the season by Greg Shuttleworth, a former Australian schoolboys captain.

Ian Thomas was leading try-scorer with 13, whilst Simon Kenworthy kicked 52 goals and made most appearances with 30. Depressingly the team again made its exit from the Challenge Cup in Round One at Barrow losing 38-16, tries being scored by Brian Lee, Dave Nelson and Jimmy Johnson. However, the average attendance virtually doubling to 1114 was evidence of the new air of optimism.

Season 89/90 - a tremendous amount of work was done on the ground during the summer break which began to show some signs of its previous splendour. The scoreboard was fully refurbished and much of the famous terrace side was repaired. With new goal posts and extended seating in the main stand the club was beginning to show pride once again.

An anonymous Australian burst on to the scene a long term friend of Greg Shuttleworth's, who made his debut at Whitehaven scoring an incredible debut hat-trick. His name - Wally Gibson.

Another notable signing was leading local amateur Joe Naidole who carried on the tradition set by father Tom, a classy centre in the 1960's.

Anthony Farrell meantime had followed his Colts cap with one for the Great Britain Under 21 team. However, the economics of 2nd division rugby took over and he was sold to Sheffield Eagles in a record deal for both clubs of £55,000, which supported the club's finances for the remainder of the season. Pressures on and off the field saw the departure of both Neil Shuttleworth and Nigel Stephenson, the former being succeeded by Joe Bramley and the latter by Barry Seabourne.

Top try scorer was Wally Gibson with 19 who also made the most appearances (31). Simon Kenworthy was leading goal scorer with 61 and attendances showed a near 50% increase to 1634. The regulation exit was made from the Challenge Cup but this time with a gutsy performance at home to St Helens.

At last the 'dreadful decade' was over and yet another mood of optimism was in the air. The good ship 'Fartown' had sailed through unbelievably difficult waters during the eighties - and no one could deny that the club, players and the incredibly loyal band of hard-core supporters were entitled to happier and more successful times in the nineties and beyond. 'McAlpine' was still a name synonymous with bricks and mortar and the 'Superleague' was something that the big boys of soccer were only just thinking about. And so the club entered the nineties - ready for action and long awaited success!

DID YOU KNOW

Tom Naidole was the most capped Rugby International. Even as an ex-professional he was allowed to lead out the Fijian Rugby Union team at the last Rugby Union World Cup.