

THE DEPARTURE FROM FARTOWN

There was no fanfare, no formal curtain call, not even the customary turf-grabbing souvenir hunters.

The haste in which Huddersfield Rugby League Club left Fartown scene of so many famous triumphs and home to so many heroes over a century of heartfelt tradition - must have caught even the famed ghosts unawares. They didn't even pack their bags - just in case the move was only temporary!

The famous old club, its dignity in tatters after decades of neglect and ridicule, had lurched from one crisis to the next as uncertainty finally brought it to the verge of paralysis.

It was with a certain amount of resignation then, that they set sail - into uncharted waters - on August 30th 1992, with the final destination the proposed Multi-Million Pounds Super Stadium, later, of course, to be known as The Alfred McAlpine Stadium.

Shelter from the raging seas came in the shape of Leeds Road and, fortunately, the natives were comparatively friendly.

A ground condemned as outdated and unfit for the sophisticated world of the round ball game was luxury for the rugby league boys. A playing surface described as the best in the Rugby League, dressing rooms fit for a king and bar facilities that brought a touch of comfort all helped cushion the blow of leaving Fartown for the players and officials.

Supporters, however, took some persuading.

To the diehards, leaving Fartown was sacrilege, heresy. If money could be found for a new stadium, then it should be spent on making the old ground fit for the 21st century (some might say the 20th).

For some, watching Fartown at Leeds Road would have been akin to selling their souls to the devil.

The price for sacrificing their home was actually £50,000, a lump sum paid by Kirklees Council in return for the club relinquishing its newly-won extended lease.

With hosts Huddersfield Town charging just over £1,000 a match to stage rugby league, the economic argument was sound.

Bear in mind also that Huddersfield would have had to spend between £10,000 and £30,000 on safety work simply to start the season and anything between £300,000 and £2 million to bring the ground up to First Division standards, and the case for a move was overwhelming.

So, despite threats by the official Supporters' Club to disown their parent body and persistent lobbying to keep professional rugby at Fartown, Huddersfield played their first league match of the 1992-93 season at the soccer ground.

It was, in fact, the second rugby league match to be staged at Leeds Road. Town hosted the 1952 Championship final between Wigan and Bradford Northern, which was watched by 48,000 spectators.

Less than a tenth of that crowd witnessed history being made 40 years on but officials were nevertheless pleased with the turnout of 2,907 for the Second Division match against Featherstone Rovers.

Huddersfield, in their Alex Murphy-inspired Third Division Championship-winning



DID YOU KNOW

When Huddersfield R.L.F.C. moved from Fartown to Leeds Road, the goalposts came with them.

campaign, had averaged 2,271 in their last season at Fartown.

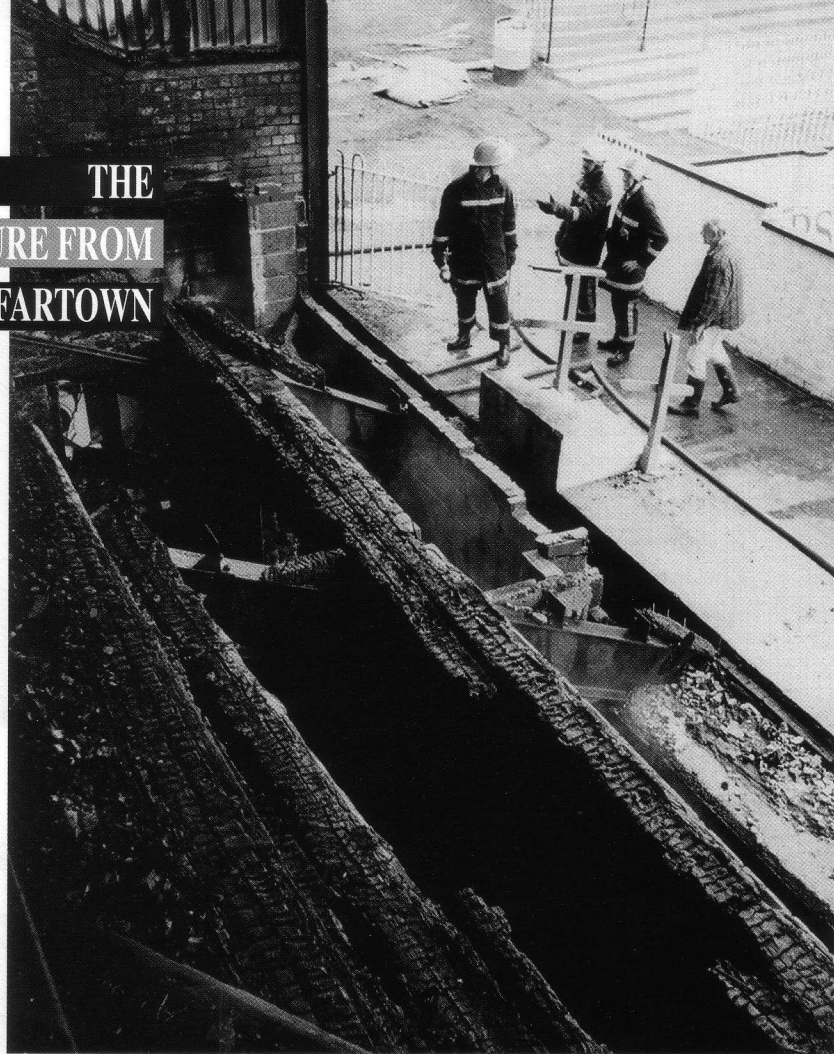
Attendances dipped at Leeds Road, averaging 1,985 in 1992-

93 (rising to 2,227 in 1993-94),

but the familiarity bred by the eight-club Second Division format in which clubs played each other four times, coupled with Huddersfield's poor start, were acceptable explanations.

It was true that Huddersfield did lose some of their die-hards, who held to their vow never to watch Fartown at Leeds Road, but there was evidence of new support, including Town fans attracted by the novelty factor and held by the

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attractive nature of the handling code.

Huddersfield gained a spin-off from their move when the Rugby League awarded them one of the three matches against Australia, who were preparing for the 1992 World Cup final against Great Britain at Wembley.

The tour match attracted a crowd of 4,716, a not inconsiderable total considering that the Friday night fixture coincided with a live televised soccer match involving Leeds United.

The outcome was rather predictable, although a Phil Hellewell penalty after nine minutes gave Huddersfield a moment of glory by actually leading the world champions. The Kangaroos, led by the legendary Mal Meninga, went on to win 66-2, the Fartowners biggest-ever home defeat at Leeds Road.

A revival in league fortunes - a five-match unbeaten run earned Huddersfield the title of November Team of the Month - enabled them to finish a highly creditable third in the table, missing out on promotion by just one place and confirming Murphy's status as a miracle worker.

Murphy was involved in a third successive promotion campaign the following season, this time in harness with the late Brendan Finn, who had taken over from Terry Flanagan.

The unfancied Fartowners shocked the rugby league world by winning their first

10 matches in their best start to a season for 29 years and they gave mighty St. Helens a scare in the Challenge Cup before bowing out 23-16 in front of 5,155 spectators, the biggest crowd of their two-year stay at Leeds Road.

The bubble burst at home to Doncaster on New Year's Eve, however, and Huddersfield went on to finish fifth in the table, even missing out on the home Premiership tie that seemed guaranteed.

The slump followed further revelations about the financial state of Fartown as the club, more noted for making headlines off the pitch than on it, hit more turbulence.

Chairman Mick Murphy, who had taken over the reigns when Joe Bramley resigned in acrimonious circumstances in mid-season, revealed that debts had reached almost £500,000 and that he was calling in the administrator to find a buyer for the club.

The season ended on a low note, with the final game at Leeds Road taking place on Maundy Thursday, 1994 (to avoid a clash with Town's Autoglass Trophy final at Wembley). Huddersfield lost 28-12 to Dewsbury in front of 1,650 spectators - just 31 more than for their last match at Fartown.

The Dewsbury match brought to an end a brief yet eventful two-year stay at Leeds Road.

More significantly, it paved the way for a ground-sharing scheme that is gradually becoming the envy of The Rugby League.

Former Town chairman Graham



Leslie claimed that, if two partners were to be married, it made sense for them to live together first.

Till death do us part!

