

Part 4 in our look at teams that could've made an impact on the Football League, but didn't....Wigan Borough FC by Stuart Fuller

Last season Wigan Athletic under the watchful eye of Roberto Martinez pulled off one of the biggest shocks ever seen in a FA Cup Final when they beat the richest club in the world, Manchester City. Despite being relegated a few weeks later, European football beckoned for the club built by one man. It is easy to mock the vanity of owner Dave Whelan, especially with the decision last year to rename the stadium after himself, but if it wasn't for him Athletic may have gone the same way as AFC, Central, County, United, Town and finally Borough.

Football has struggled to break the ice in Wigan since Wigan County were formed back in 1897, playing in the Lancashire Leagues on a local park known locally as Springfield Gardens (later renamed as Springfield Park). They applied for election to the league in 1898 but failed, with the closed door policy keeping out teams with lofty ambitions. Wigan County soon fell by the wayside and the baton for the town was taken up by Wigan Town. Ditto same story played out over the next few seasons and then Wigan United were born.

The fourth attempt at making football work in a rugby league dominated town came in 1919 when Wigan United were found guilty of paying their players, which even at this stage in the development of the game, was deemed "not in the interest of the modern game". A new club formed was created out of the ashes and called Wigan Association although they soon changed their name to Wigan Borough.

With a lease secured on Springfield Park they entered the Lancashire Combination League for the 1920/21 season. They found the going tough, spending most of the season at the bottom of the league. During the winter, the Football League announced that they would be creating a new regional tier of football for the following season which would be known as the Third Division North. The previous season they had created a Third Division but this was populated virtually by southern-based teams and they needed to balance the geographic imbalance.

Wigan Borough decided to throw their hat into the ring and despite finishing in 17th place (out of 18 teams) in the Lancashire Combination, the Football League accepted their application. They lined up for their first game away to Nelson the following August and came back with all 2 points with a 2-1 victory. Alas there wasn't a lot more high points in the season and they eventually finished the league 4th from bottom, avoiding re-election by just two points.

Over the next few seasons the club struggled, although they did achieve a fifth place finish in 1922/23 and then recorded their best ever finish in 1928/29 when they finished fourth. Whilst crowds could reach 10,000+ at Springfield Park on occasions when local teams such as Darwen, Blackburn Rovers and Burnley visited, they were the town's poor relations to the Rugby League side who played at Central Park.

At the beginning of May 1931 the Football League issued an ultimatum to the club to pay all outstanding monies owed to the players after complaints about non-payment of debts. A fundraiser and a fire sale of players saw them reach break-even point but the following season saw them struggle both on and off the field. After their game versus Darlington in September which saw Borough lose 5-0 the Football League again stepped in to "encourage" the club to get their house in order. They managed to carry on for a further month before on the 19th October, just after the home victory against Carlisle United, the club handed in its notice to quit the league. With the club bizarrely giving a week's notice they actually went into their final ever league game knowing this was

the end. As if they were inspired by the impending death of the football club they recorded their season best performance with a 5-0 win at Wrexham. The final financial statement showed the club had liabilities of over £30,000, a huge sum 90 years ago.

Just a year later a final attempt was made to keep football in the town when Wigan Athletic were formed and after a deal with the liquidators of Borough, they moved into Springfield Park. Fifty years later that entity were elected to the Football League, although their stay has been significantly less traumatic than any of their predecessors.