

# A VISIT TO... BRAY WANDERERS

By Philip Paine

It was cricket, not the winter game that drew me across to Eire for the first time. Surrey had drawn Ireland away in the Cheltenham & Gloucester Cup and the match was to be played at Clontarff, a pleasant suburb of Dublin in early May 2004. The teams had met before across the Irish Sea in the same competition about seven years ago but the game had been played near Londonderry, a place not in the same league as this city.



On arrival at the airport I had no plans at all for my 4-day break, happy to listen to the many others who said that Dublin was one of the finest cities in Europe and that there was always plenty to do there.

Well I must state early on in this article that I found the city as grey as Aberdeen and about as interesting too. Much has been written about Dublin and I suppose that having a good literary connection—James Joyce and Oscar Wilde—will cause others to wax lyrical about the city but their pen and imagination appear more powerful than reality. Yes, the city is clean and has a river through the centre plus a famous university (plenty of other cities have both though) but with new buildings a-plenty springing up it is losing its image quickly. There is also an abundance of pubs, accounting for the city's appeal as a destination for hen and stag weekends. However it must be added that food and drink in the city are expensive, as is the cost of living except the rail service which is also clean, efficient and modern.

I found the headquarters of the local Football Association in the city and was impressed by the free literature available to assist one to choose a game to attend. Thankfully there is an abundance of sport in the city, and football is not concentrated on one particular evening.

I decided on the League Cup match between Bray Wanderers and University College Dublin on Tuesday 4th May. Having boarded the very rapid and cheap commuter express train, I found myself in the seaside town of Bray within 30 minutes, a full 90 minutes before the kick-off so took advantage of this unexpected free time to enjoy the chill evening and sea air.

Bray is definitely up-market and a haven for affluent commuters

who find the appeal of a seaside abode so close to their place of work a strong magnet. There is a small harbour at the resort and a long promenade with a bandstand on it running parallel to the shoreline. Also facing out to sea are a couple of decent pubs and plenty of beautiful old terraced houses, kept in pristine condition by their owners.

The football ground (called The Carlisle Grounds) is very close to the local railway station and just a short walk from local amenities and the seafront. Although I did not know at the time when choosing between four matches, I had probably picked the best of the lot. I had also overlooked the fact that the Bray Wanderers club was only one letter away from that of the second oldest in the world that I had seen win 10-0 as my first match of the 2003-04 season!

I was not impressed having to pay 15 Euros for entry (about £10) but on entering the ground I was immediately impressed as I can only describe it as a 'proper ground'. A stunning and large barrel-roofed stand was the first building that I saw. Also the ground has a backdrop of pleasant two- and three-storey houses, large trees and provides a good vantage point to see the local hills.

I was impressed by the floodlights too, just six lamps on each but the light provided was ample. Three sides of the ground are open and terracing is available to stand on and presents up a picturesque environment to watch football. Like Crockenhill it is one of those grounds where I could watch any level of football, the ambience and atmosphere supplying the right ingredients to watch a game. Much work has also been done recently to level the playing surface and install better drainage and I was told by one supporter that the bucket-style chairs on one side of the ground were from Bolton Wanderers old ground.

The match never really flowed and individual skills were rarely evident but UCD won 1-0 after Keirans broke the deadlock in the 86th minute. They just about deserved their win but it was a shame that the cold weather took the gloss off of a good night out. The match was the final one that I saw that season but at the end of it I could add another country to the list of those that I have seen football in.

So to conclude: the 36-page, A5-size glossy programme for the cup match was of adequate quality with pen pictures, bits of news, a quiz and other articles although a fair bit of advertising was evident and it covered three matches and cost two Euros. Sadly the match was not of a very high quality and both sides would have been comprehensively rolled by most Conference outfits. The club shop

was well stocked with souvenirs and most impressive was the tea and biscuits available in a hut behind one of the goals, and no, we had not strayed into the vice presidents room in error!! The proximity of the ground to the town centre, the picturesque seafront and locality, good pubs and most importantly, its closeness to the railway station makes this ground a highly accessible and recommended one to see a match at.

As for the other days? Well I spent one more day at the cricket as poor weather caused it to be spread over two days, and another day sightseeing and shopping. My final day was spent visiting the grave of Thin Lizzy front man Philip Lynott and in the evening I ventured to see Dublin City v Cork (0-1) in a drab and directionless league match. The least said about it the better—it was awful and not even a goal in the 41st minute led to the second half being an improvement on the opening one—and to be frank a half-decent Kent League side would have given both sides serious problems.

