

Parry has last say on Wanderers' sloping turf

Reporter Andrew Chatfield samples the atmosphere at Loakes Park

AT 4.48pm on Monday Wycombe Wanderers director Alan Parry struck a rather feeble shot into the side netting at the Hospital End and the crowd released a sneering "aaaaarrrrrrr."

It was not a great moment of football but it was an historic one. Mr Parry's embarrassing effort was the last ever kick at Loakes Park after 95 years of football there.

On occasions like Monday's farewell match, everything seems to assume a huge significance.

It is nice to believe that someone, somewhere was noting down all the important moments: the last kick, the last header, the last throw-in, the last cup of tea sold, the last car owner asked to move his vehicle, the last record played on the tinny sound system, the last supporter to leave.

There was even the last ever stalker, who was possibly also the first.

I was not the only one thinking about these things. A mother rushed up to me at the end brandishing her four-month-baby, claiming: "He must be the youngest here."

But whoever records these things, the last kick was by Mr Parry. The final whistle went and after a split-second delay, fans streamed onto the sunlit pitch.

There then followed extraordinary scenes. As the younger fans crowded round the tunnel to catch an autograph from the visiting star players, others, more nostalgic, fell to their knees on the pitch.

For an instant it seemed they were offering prayers of thanks on the hallowed turf. But it soon became clear they were actually digging it up.

An announcement at half time had invited supporters to do this - a rare example of a football club asking its supporters to vandalise the ground.

Some had come prepared and whipped out small gardening forks and spades. Others improvised with keys, pencils, and bits of wood.

Supporter Richard Endorsor was taking a piece to put on the grave of his grandfather, Dick Lee.

"He used to bring me down to watch them and now I bring my son," said Mr Endorsor, 45, of Totteridge Drive, Totteridge.

Another supporter, 56-year-old Brian Lacey, declared he was taking a turf home to give it pride of place in his garden at Lacey's Drive, Hazlemere.

Suddenly a full-size spade appeared and someone started cutting a huge swathe of turf from near a corner at the Gasworks End and passed chunks to fans.

These were memorable moments, in which the emotional tension of the afternoon was suddenly released in acts of unashamed nostalgia.

Younger fans even tried to dismantle the goal nets and posts, before a voice on the tannoy asked them not to.

End of season matches traditionally produce rather subdued crowds. Monday was the end of an era and for most of the afternoon it was hard to believe there were as many as 4,000 people there.

Despite the fun on the pitch provided by a very impressive star line-up, this was a sad goodbye.

Speaking to fans before the game, it was clear feelings are very mixed about the club's move to its brand new out-of-town home in Sands.

Denzil Ashcroft's view was typical of many.

"I think it has got to happen if Wycombe want to go into the Football League," said Mr Ashcroft, a 51-year-old sales manager, of Camborne Avenue, Aylesbury, stoically.

But he added: "I am very, very, very sad. My feelings are very, very mixed."

Fabricator and welder Robert Beasley, 43, of Wrights Close, Lane End, said: "It is a good thing in one respect but it is the end of an era for people like me because I have been coming here since 1956. It is part of Wycombe's history going."

Dennis Smith, 70, of Micklefield Road, High Wycombe, said: "This is progress I suppose but when you come to this place all those years it is a job to visualise it being Wycombe Wanderers at the new ground."

"I don't think I will get used to the new ground," he added.

Ann Lewis, 55, of Green End Road, Radnage, said: "It is sad. I think the atmosphere is here."

For others, the impending move presents more practical obstacles.

Pensioner Denis Wells, of Sedgemoor Gardens, Flackwell Heath, has followed the team since the age of 13. He is now 79.

For the last five years he has been unable to come to evening matches because there is no bus service then from the village.

He will now have to catch at least two buses to reach the new ground and making the right connections will be hard with the current timetables.

"People of my age who don't run cars are not going to like it."

"To me this is Wycombe Wanderers Football Ground. Going up there will be like going to away matches."

So, is the team capable of matching the promise of its expensive new ground?

Builder Jim Winch doesn't think so. "It is just an average side. If they want to get any better they have got to strengthen it," said Mr Winch, 57, of Rowan Close, Holtspur.

Most of those I spoke with acknowledged it is the beginning of a new era for Wycombe Wanderers as well as the end of an old one.

After all, the new season will bring the first ever shot at the new ground, the first cup of tea and, who knows, may be the first stalker.

I hope someone, somewhere takes note of it all.