

HEAVEN was surrounded. Those tall, dark and smoking steelworks chimneys, the biggest slag-bank in the Western world, two reservoirs, one cemetery and Uncle Jack's pigeons in airborne formation were the guardians of a lad's sweet dreams.

Ecstasy lived here, at the top end of Holker Street every Saturday afternoon, where footballing fantasies danced on the muddy oasis within.

Sometimes the boy would be taken on a day trip to Blackpool to see Stanley Matthews or Preston for Tom Finney. They meant nothing to a lad whose passions were Barrow and Eddie Miller.

Watching Barrow in those days was an instant cure for asthma. The youngster would struggle against the prevailing Irish Sea wind clutching his siphone.

Once his heroes ran out to a tinny Souza march, there was such a surge of natural adrenalin that the wheezes were chased and he could run all the way home with an old tennis ball impersonating every Millerism.

I was that boy...

Heaven is not quite the same these days. The chimneys have gone, a super-store stands where the pigeons flew and in 1972 Barrow were removed from the Fourth Division, unfairly I protest, after finishing third from bottom. There were tears.

The club went to hell. Dreams became nightmares and, worse still, someone walked away with the little blue wheelbarrow that had written along each side: "Wheel 'Em In Barrow."

Happiness, if not the wheelbarrow, has returned to Holker Street. The lads are going to Wembley on Saturday for the Final of the FA Trophy, meeting Leek Town seven days after the Manchester United-Crystal Palace curtain-raiser.

Would you like a seat in the Royal Box?

Forgive me if these words

Why ecstasy for me is a team named Barrow



HAPPY DAYS... James Mossop reflects on heavenly times at Barrow's Holker Street ground

by James Mossop

become sighs. Bear with me through decades of self-indulgent nostalgia. Have your team ever been to Wembley? Have a team that never trains together ever been to Wembley?

This Barrow represents a collection of part-timers from the North East, Barrow, Maryport, Kendal, Grange-over Sands, Worthington, Morecambe and all points Cumbria.

They meet on match days and draw on the spirit of comradeship inspired by manager Ray Wilkie, a 49-year-old Durham book-maker who drives 50,000 miles a year for our cause.

"We are big in Barrow, but

nobody knows us when we go home," says Wilkie, who played for Crook Town in the 1960 FA Amateur Cup Final.

He joined president Bill McCullough, chairman Sam Morgan and director Cyril Whiteside at the latter's ancient pub on Walney Island and the talk turned from the 12,000 fans travelling to Wembley to memories of earlier times.

"Here, Sam, do you remember the time we signed that centre-forward who had a broken leg?" asked Bill. "We wanted someone to knock 'em in and ended up with a cripple."

More admissions, more

laughter as they recalled the appointment of Ron Yeats, the former Liverpool defender, and a huge crowd — a few hundred, anyway — turned up for his debut.

At kick-off time, no Yeats, and they started with ten men. He arrived 20 minutes late to the biggest cheer of the day, revealing that his diesel-engined car had been filled up with petrol. Barrow won.

The entire team that left the League was sold for less than £4,000 and local lads were recruited to play in the Northern Premier League. Life was so tough and money so scarce that Yeats led the move to play for four months without wages.

During earlier League days of hardship and frugality, when the boyhood dreamer had become local reporter, nothing could deter my love of the club.

The electricity and telephones were cut off. No coach company would transport the team to away matches until a small Lakeland company provided a disused school bus that had a window missing.

Our only self-appointed star, Ted Purdon, refused to travel in it and followed behind in a friend's car. He rejoined the real world after a 10-1 defeat at Hartlepool.

One day they set off for Crewe Alexandra without socks. The old trainer Jack Baggett, who was given to

MAY 90