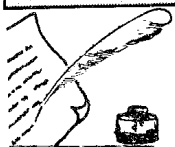


CHURCH VIEW



By **ARTHUR
CHURCH**



The times they are a-changing

TIME marches on, while some plans and schemes stand still it seems.

Now that one Wycombe plan, that of extending the General Hospital, has been resurrected there are, inevitably, conflicting views as to its correctness.

Perhaps resurrected is hardly the word; the project was not buried years ago but apparently merely put to simmer on the back burner.

The hospital authority's desire to acquire a part of Loakes Park when it was the home of Wycombe Wanderers was long-standing. It was the health body's avowed intention to persuade the Blues to sell them land there and to find a ground elsewhere. Not all of the football ground mind, the other portion to be acquired for other development.

The venture packet was first mooted decades ago. Three old club chairmen with deep roots in, and affection for, the club and the town – solicitor Eric Webb, police superintendent Jack Smethurst, and furniture boss and former Wanderers' goalkeeper Reg Williams – all told me of various approaches and of negotiations in which they had taken part.

None of them, I gathered, was keen to see the Blues move from their old home. But each was sensible of the hospital's need.

Eric, a former Mayor of the borough, was the first, I think, to have to wrestle with the problem, in concert with a committee of town stalwarts. It was never a move initiated by the club and over the years the Wanderers have been unjustly maligned on the subject.

All three chairmen would have been reluctant to sell and move elsewhere but they recognised and sympathised with the hospital's need to expand westwards.

It is certain that in a quest for a new location little or no help was given by successive councils – town and district – and it seemed that while paying lip service to the concerns of the hospital a majority of the councillors loaded the dice against the Wanderers. As recent events have shown, they have not been particularly amenable since.

I noticed a letter in the Bucks Free Press not too long ago in which the writer unjustly implied that the Blues had sold out to commercial interests, using the hospital's need to gain a new ground as an excuse for the move, while still no hospital expansion had taken place. Neither former chairman Brian Lee nor present incumbent Ivor Beeks would have been party to such subterfuge.

The fact is that as the years passed the hospital came up against financial constraints and was no longer able to go ahead with its former expansion plans. That was no fault of the Wanderers.

Now the health authority is again able to go ahead with a plan to close Booker Hospital and move wards for the elderly to a new building below Tom Burt's Hill.

In a sense, I suppose, the delay of many years has worked to the benefit of the Blues who, in their ascending prestige in the football world (and how well they're doing!) finally accepted an offer they could hardly refuse and got a fine, purpose-built new stadium at Adams Park – not, admittedly, the generally applauded location but the best they could come up with in all the circumstances. The Sands of time!

Now, inevitably, there are cries of woe from some quarters that Booker is to be closed. Well, you can't please all of the people all of the time.

It is not for we laymen to know whether or not the hospital project is sound; time alone will tell. By all accounts it is justified on financial grounds, but as usual there are other considerations. We should take comfort in the words of the Hospital Trust's chief executive when he says: "This plan offers a way of reinvesting in better premises and even better care for local people as the end of the century approaches."

With that precious gift of hindsight which we all possess we might say that it was not the wisest of decisions to build the hospital in its present location in the first place.