

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN OVER. THE MATCHES PROVED COSTLY. IN HIS DEFEAT, GARDNER HAS SECOND TO ATTENDANCE: 5,173

Too much hot air leaves Gardner with a pitch battle

GROUNDSMAN Jim Gardner faces a repair job on the Adams Park pitch after the hot air balloon which was used to get last Sunday's cup tie on burned the grass.

Gardner, who was Division Two's Groundsman of the Year last season, fears parts of his prized pitch will now need resowing to repair the damage.

He said: "The heating system did its job and got the game on but I do not like the system. It did a lot of damage to the pitch and burned the grass in the penalty areas and it will not recover this season. It will probably have to be re-sowed in the summer."

Hiring the balloon cost the Blues £5,000 but the club say it would have cost them between £5,000 and £8,000 in wasted programmes and catering expenses if the game had been called off on the day.

The club received the pitch covering from

Scottish first division club St Johnstone on Thursday but even then it was far from plain sailing as the groundstaff were confronted with disaster after disaster.

On its first day in operation the industrial heaters working beneath the balloon tripped the electricity causing a 50 per cent power shut-down. Gardner, who lives at the ground, discovered the problem in the early hours of Friday morning and was on the phone to chairman Ivor Becks at 5am trying to sort out the problem.

Worse was to come later as high winds on Friday night split the balloon tearing strips off it and blowing them around the terraces.

Replacement covers were rushed down from Leicester Rugby Club on Saturday where they had been used by the Tigers to get their European Cup semi final against Toulouse on.

Then as the heating system was doing its job

thawing out the pitch the match was nearly ko'd by problems elsewhere in the ground as pipes burst in the tea bars and disabled toilets.

Gardner said: "It was a real team effort to get the game on. Even the chairman was down here lugging bottles of Calor Gas around. I collapsed in the bar on Sunday night. For the last three days I had been working from 5am until midnight."

Blues boss John Gregory said: "A lot of people worked extremely hard to get the game on. We moved heaven and earth to play the match and we got punched on the nose by Bradford."

■ A further freeze on Sunday night after the Bradford game put paid to the Blues reserve game in the Capital League.

They had been due to play Stevenage Borough at Adams Park on Monday night but the fixture was called off.

WANDERERS ROUND-UP

It's not all smiles for the boys as they also make an exit from the cup

NEIL Smillie's youngsters are out of the FA Youth Cup after they were beaten 5-1 by Norwich City at Carrow Road on Tuesday night.

The Blues went 1-0 up against the run of play with a Martin Rowlands free kick in the first half but their lead lasted only two minutes.

Norwich added three more in the second half to finish convincing winners.

Wycombe's youngsters still have cup action to look forward to, though. They are in the semi-final of the Southern Junior

Floodlit Cup where they will play the winners of the Charlton/Crystal Palace encounter.

■ Blues' postponed New Year's Day league match away to league leaders Brentford has been re-arranged to Tuesday, March 4.

■ Wanderers travel to Thatcham on Tuesday night in the first round of the Berks and Bucks Senior Cup, (ko 7.30pm).

■ Stuart Cash, who played for the Blues in their FA Trophy win six years ago has joined Slough Town from Chertsey.

Meanwhile, Mark West, who scored the

Blues winner in that game and is now at Slough, is out for the rest of the season with cruciate ligament damage, the same injury that has put Wanderers' Keith Ryan out of action.

■ John Gregory blasted the Auto Windscreen Shield as a waste of time even before the Blues went out on penalties.

He doesn't like it because he says club's lose money from it and can book up suspensions which carry over into the league.

He said: "I don't think bookings or sendings offs collected in this competition should

be carried over."

■ Members of Wanderers Amateur Cup finalists team of 1957 are being sought.

A reunion, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the trip to Wembley, is being planned at Adams Park in April.

Blues lost the encounter with Bishop Auckland 3-1. The game was watched by a crowd of 90,000.

Anyone involved with the team at that time should contact Derek Draffan on (01296) 614115 or Ray Howson on (01494) 527979.