

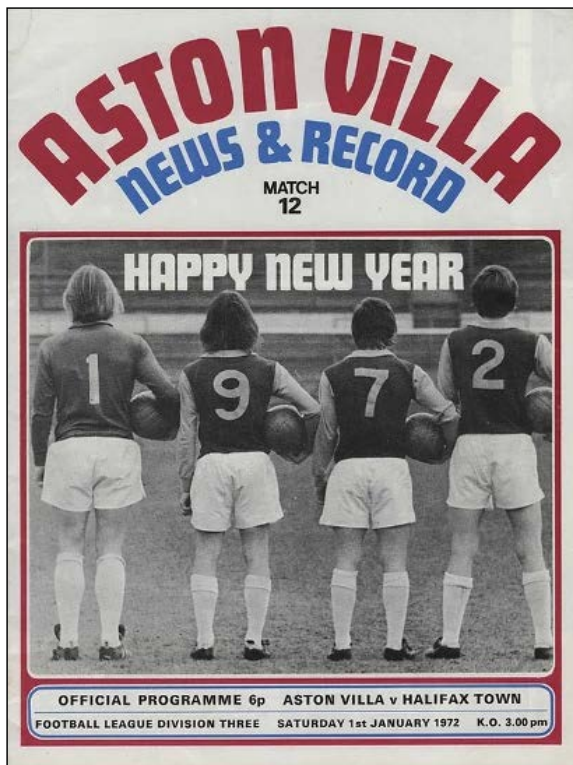
THE SHAY STADIUM (AREA 2)

JAY MASON-BURNS

During what can only be described as a whirlwind visit to Halifax, it was indeed fortuitous that the whirlwind weather we experienced that weekend held itself in abeyance for a brief while. It allowed me just enough time to photograph the home of Halifax Town Football Club!

Away from photography I've long been a vocal fan of football and my home town club, Aston Villa. During my brief research of Halifax Town I was intrigued to find out when (and indeed, if) Villa had last played against Halifax. It turns out it was quite some time ago, New Year's Day 1972 in fact, in the old Third Division! I was more interested in Thomas the Tank Engine back then!

On that day Villa won out in a hard fought 1-0 victory at Villa Park, despite a resilient defensive display by the Shaymen, with Villa's flying winger, Ray Graydon, scoring the late winner. Graydon also scored the only goal in the away fixture at the Shay back in October 1971 (see top image on right, below.)



1: Villa matchday programme cover 1972. 2: News images from Halifax Town v Aston Villa, October 1971.

Continued

From the records I've been able to find, Halifax and Villa have only ever played each other four times in their respective histories. In the Shaymen's first ever game against the Villa, Halifax triumphed by two goals to one in front of 5,845 excited fans!

The Shay Stadium has been home to Halifax Town since 1921. The club were formed just ten years previously and had played their matches initially on the site of an old munitions factory at Sandhall. Upon returning after the First World War the club were forced to look for a new home. Initially, in 1919, they leased the former home of Salterhebble Rugby Club at Exley on a temporary basis. Halifax local council then offered the club a patch of land just off Hunger Hill which had, somewhat inauspiciously, been the site of a local rubbish dump! I'm not making any jokes about that, after all, Villa Park was built on the site of a fairground, so.....

Halifax Town played in the lower divisions of the English football league for most of the 20th century. They adopted a blue and white kit in common with many other Yorkshire football and rugby teams. Indeed these colours are also those of the Halifax Panthers RLFC, who have ground-shared with Halifax since 1999. In an odd coincidence, Halifax Town briefly changed their colours to claret and blue in 1952, for which they had to seek permission from Aston Villa to wear those colours (to this day West Ham, Burnley and Scunthorpe routinely contact Villa each season to request the use of the Villa colours as a matter of historic respect). After 6 years Halifax abandoned the Villa colours as an unpopular idea and reverted to blue and white (let's just forget the tangerine kit.....).

Recent times have been hard for Halifax. After relegation to the Conference League in 2002, the club's finances spiralled out of control. In 2008 the club was wound up with debts of nearly two million pounds. Halifax Town no longer existed and the club's place in English football seemed lost. However a new club was soon formed, FC Halifax Town, and the directors successfully lobbied the Football Association to re-enter football competitions in Division One North of the Northern Premier League, three leagues below the Conference. In the intervening years since that low point, FC Halifax Town have been promoted 3 times on their way back up to the Conference league and they have also won the FA Trophy twice. Hard fought success at last!

This site of the Shay is an unusual one, the stadium is set below ground level on three sides, the ground level has evidently been cut into the steep surrounding hillside in the past. Although precise details of the site's history are a little sketchy, it is known that the grounds, the Lower Shaw (corrupted later to Shay) had once been the site of Shay Hall. This was a mansion, built in the Georgian style between 1760 and 1770 for Mr John Cargill, a man whose business dealings were intrinsic to Halifax's industrial prosperity. The house was opulently furnished with grounds extensively landscaped as a productive garden. Sadly it didn't stay in the family

for long; by 1806 the house and estate were available to rent and by the end of the 19th century the house had become so dilapidated that it was demolished.

Today the stadium is difficult, if not nigh on impossible to see until you are within fifty yards or so, and even then you can't see it all. Trees overhang from the steep hillsides above, obscuring it from the Skircoat Road whilst a concrete car park blocks any view from Hunger Hill. For the brief time that I was there, I tried to capture something of the flavour of the place. This meant taking images of the things that for me, mark it out as a working sports stadium, such as the turnstiles, the floodlights and the spectator stands themselves. I hope to go back one day to stand in the old Trinity Garage End, and shout out my support for the Shaymen of Halifax.

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