

SUMMARY OF A WHEELCHAIR USERS VIEWS OF VISITING RUGBY FOOTBALL NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE GROUNDS-MAY 2005

Background

My dad and I are supporters of Bristol Rugby Club and I use a wheelchair to get about. We have visited the majority of Premiership grounds before Bristol were relegated in 2003. Since then we have visited the majority of National League One grounds. During our visits we have made notes of the good and bad points for incorporation into a project I am undertaking in relation to the wheelchair user's experience of watching Rugby in the two leagues. This is to be constructive and help clubs make improvements rather than being critical or negative. The views expressed are personal and are not representative of any club or organisation. This summary is for national league one grounds only and is provided by request for our fellow supporters at Harlequins.

Exclusions

We have excluded reports from the two relegated clubs in 2005 namely Henley and Orrell. This is disappointing because both have good facilities for wheelchair users in terms of access and viewing. We have no experience of visiting the promoted clubs from national league two namely Doncaster and Newbury. Also Nottingham Rugby Club have moved from Ireland Avenue (this is good news as the club house terrace had approximately seven steps for access) and Penzance are proposing to move from the town to an undisclosed site near Truro. We have therefore excluded comments on Nottingham but included Penzance as their move may not happen in time for your visit during the 2005/2006. The only ground we have not visited (due to illness) is Sedgley Park (although there are good reports of the black puddings!!)

Information before your visit

Most clubs in National league one have little or no information for wheelchair users on their websites. Many have no advance booking for tickets and you have to pay on the day. But it is worth checking. We found that because our supporters often outnumbered the home supporters our club sometimes got an allocation to sell and this was easier for us as then we can pay online or by telephone.

We always rang and tried to contact the club at least a week before our visit to check out facilities and arrangements. We found the staff to be helpful and although many were unaware of the arrangements for wheelchair users they all got back to us with varying degrees of information. Sometimes this was not entirely consistent with what we experienced at the ground on the day.

It is worth noting that the majority of clubs in the National league one are semi professional and many do not have a full time office and admin set up.

So for example if you book a parking place it pays to ask for the name of the person on the gate that you should ask for on the day!

Because clubs are much smaller than their premier league counterparts it is really worth getting detailed directions. On more than one occasion we got lost (Coventry and Plymouth spring to mind) and because the grounds are not that well known often neither local people and in one case a policeman could not give us help!

Pricing policy

We found the pricing policy is very different to that which we last experienced in the premier league and that of our club. In our experience the majority of premier league clubs charge either the companion or the wheelchair user the full price and the other gets in free. In National League one both companion and wheelchair user usually pay the full price. Prices are generally lower than the premier league on average £12 admission. Car parking can be a bit of a lottery even if you have booked. Where we were able to park at the ground we paid £2 and £5.

Facilities in general

Facilities are not as good as the premier league and perhaps this is to be expected as it is a lower league. However many grounds have very poor facilities and viewing positions.

I use a catheter and a good clean disabled toilet is essential for my personal hygiene. We found that a number of grounds did not have disabled toilets (Coventry old ground, Nottingham, London Welsh, Birmingham, Exeter and Penzance) at these grounds we had to find a WC away from the ground and on two occasions I had to manage in the back of the car. Because there are often few toilets available for general spectators even where a disabled toilet is provided we often find it being used by others and not necessarily clean.

Viewing and covered facilities are hit and miss and could do with being improved. Some grounds for example Birmingham are situated in a playing field with a small a club house. In the middle of winter on a wet and boggy ground you need a strong companion to push the wheelchair and plenty of wet weather gear.

Access to bars and food can be problematic. We found at small clubs who might have an average crowd of say 500 people that they were not geared up for many visiting supporters. So even where we could gain access it was often difficult to get to a bar and be served.

Summary of comments on individual clubs

Exeter

Exeter Rugby Club is due to move to a new ground in time for the 2006/2007 season. This is long overdue as the facilities generally at their existing ground are poor and pretty much non-existent for wheelchair users. We visited in 2004 and 2005. In 2004 we were able to park on the speedway track that surrounds the playing area. In 2005 this was closed off for safety reasons as the club had anticipated a big crowd and thus the speedway track was due to be used for spectators. We booked a car park place and confirmed this by email through our club as we were travelling with someone from the Club. When we arrived we were told we could not park at the ground. We found a spot about half a mile away as did other supporters. But beware all cars except ours (because we displayed our blue badge) got parking tickets!

The club has no disabled toilets. There is a Sainsbury's store about a mile from the ground and at Exeter services on the M5 about 5 miles away. There is also no viewing area. We found the best place to view was behind the posts to the right of the main stand. It is elevated and can be accessed via a slope to the rear of a brick building the club use for corporate hospitality. Access to the club house to the left of the main stand is possible (up one step) and we did get food (best avoided) and a drink at the bar.

Finally give yourselves plenty of time to get to the ground as on both our visits we queued from the M5 into Exeter and it took us about 45 minutes to travel about 5 miles.

Plymouth

Plymouth moved to a new ground in 2003. It is the old Devonport set up and is still a temporary facility that will be developed over the next few years to premiership standard (that's what we were told). Getting to the ground was difficult as they had just moved and the directions were not very good. We booked a car park place ahead of our visit but when we arrived we parked in an adjacent pay and display which was very convenient. The ground feels like a tented village with lots of marques used as bars and for corporate hospitality. Because of this we had good access to bars and food.

The club house which is up a slope behind one set of posts is accessible via a ramp at the rear. It had a disabled toilet shared with women users and had a long queue! They opened a viewing area in 2005 for wheelchair users. The viewing area we used was just in front of the clubhouse and because it was elevated above pitch level we got a good uninterrupted view. As an aside there is a picture proudly hung in the club house of the first black rugby player to play for England. The chaps name was Peters and he also played for our club.

Penzance

As we have said above the club are planning to move to a new set up near Truro and rename themselves as the Cornish Pirates? Just in case the move does not happen in time and you visit the Menyane Field we have included comments here. We were lucky to visit the Pirates on three occasions in two years. On each occasion we stayed over to make it a long weekend as did many other supporters and a great time was had by all!

The ground is easily found at the far end of the promenade heading out of Penzance towards Newlyn and is just 500 yards from the sea front. If you book in advance you can park in the small club car park at the clubhouse end of the ground. The ground is uneven gravel but you can access the club house via a ramp at the rear adjacent to the car park. On each of our visits we booked up with friends for a pre-match lunch which was great value. The club chairman is a fish importer and the fish lunch was superb.

On the down side there was no disabled toilet and the nearest facilities were in the town located at the public car park. We used the Tesco which is about 3 miles away on your way into the town from the A30.

There was no allocated viewing area and we made do with a pitch level position just to the left of the posts at the club house end. The view was adequate but not great.

Otley

The longest trip for us in the league we found Otley too far to travel in one day. So for the trip this year we stayed over in the dales and this was a very good idea. Cross green looks as if it has not been touched since the North beat the All Blacks in 1979. However it is a lovely old club with very welcoming members. We found the best way to access Otley was to avoid Leeds and travel to the town via the M1 (not the M621 into Leeds). If you come in on the Harrogate road the ground is on your right.

We booked a car park space and had no trouble parking. There is level access from the car park into the club house. We booked a pre match lunch on a table of 10 for £15 a head including wine and this was very good value. There is a shared disabled toilet in the clubhouse which is adequate.

For our first visit in 2004 the weather was very wet and because there is no shelter or viewing area for wheelchair users I had to be carried up a number of steps to sit on wooden benches in the main stand. This was not very practical, but we did get a good view and we were out of the freezing rain. In 2005 we managed to get a spot on the half way line adjacent to the Otley dug out. Good view from here albeit at pitch level and you can get the perspective from the Otley coaching team including Peter Clegg (head coach) who is a real gentleman.

Finally avoid the pie and peas but do try the black sheep beer from a local brewery at Masham.

Coventry

Thank goodness Coventry have at last moved. My dad said the old ground hadn't been touched since David Duckham ran out in the 70's (I asked him who is David Duckham)! However the new ground has one thing in common with the old one in that it is difficult to find. If you don't know Coventry you can bet you will be lost on a ring road. So be careful with your forward planning.

The new ground is partly developed and has a new stand that reminds me of the East stand (the one with the club house) at Quins. The down side of this is if you are seated at the front you have a concourse in front and have to put up with spectators moving about in front of you. We moved and got a perfectly adequate pitch side position.

Unlike the old ground the new one has disabled parking (book in advance) and toilets and good access that you would expect with it being developed in accordance with building regulations, DDA and the premiership in mind. The club house was good and had good access to drink and food.

That said we did find it lacked a bit of soul and needed to find its feet as a rugby club and not just an arena.

Bedford

We found Bedford easy to find but the booked car park place did not materialise and we finally parked in the local hospital in a disabled bay. This was about 750 metres from the ground on a level walk. There was level access into the ground and to the bar area. We had a meal before the game in a small café area and the food was excellent quality and value. We were told there were disabled toilets but we could not find one and the bar staff directed us to a gents toilet and offered to stand by the door to prevent others from accessing whilst we used it. Not a very good idea when masses of rugby supporters want a pee! We found a public toilet in the town about a mile and a half away.

The viewing area is just to the right of the main stand. It was not great because it was open and had people moving about in front of us. We moved in the second half and got a pitch side position opposite the main stand. We think we recall this was on grass so a bit difficult to access but nevertheless a decent view.

Rotherham

We visited Clifton Lane in 2004 upon Rotherham's relegation from the premiership and their return from the football ground. It was quite a difficult place to find but the very detailed instructions we were sent helped and we did not get lost.

We pre booked parking and this was fine as we parked behind the posts opposite the clubhouse end. This proved to be a bit of a risk as penalties and conversions landed perilously close to our car. If you get a choice park by the corners for less risk! To access the club house you can either walk around the cricket pitch or exit the ground and re enter up a slope to the clubhouse end of the ground. We took the cricket pitch route and this was fine.

There was ramped access to the club house and disabled toilet which was fine. The clubhouse was packed so we got a drink from a small bar outside. The stewards were very helpful and showed us the viewing options. We opted for a pitch side position initially on the half way line on the cricket pitch and then behind the posts opposite the clubhouse. This allowed us to get a hot drink from our car which was nearby.

We enjoyed our visit to Clifton Lane and emailed the chief executive to thank the volunteer stewards who were very friendly and helpful.

Birmingham (Pertemps Bees)

Probably the most underdeveloped ground that we have visited at this level. It would be fair to say that many of our junior clubs in Bristol have much better facilities than Birmingham. We first visited in 2004 and it was a sad day as the son of a club official had tragically collapsed and died during a match the previous week.

The ground was quite tricky to find in the suburbs of Solihull however the directions we got were good and we arrived without getting lost. We parked by the squash club but some of the members were not very happy about this.

The car park is very uneven and full of holes and deep puddles which covered the wheelchair with mud. The club house was accessed via a step but we were able to get a drink as it was a small crowd. The food was limited and poor on the day. There was no disabled toilet.

They had no seating facilities for our first visit however in 2005 we saw a temporary stand had been installed. There is no area for disabled viewing under cover or hard standing. We navigated our way through the mud to get a half way line position behind a white rail separating the playing area from the spectators. It was a relatively poor view into the corners as we were bunched up with a few others who had to lean over to get their view and thereby blocking ours. We did not enjoy our visits to Birmingham and

unusually for us we left quickly after the game to find a disabled toilet on the M42.

Sedgley Park

Sedgley Park were promoted in 2004 so we didn't get a chance to visit them in our first year in this division. As we noted above we missed the trip in 2004/2005 because of illness so unfortunately we have no information other than reports of friendly supporters and black puddings. When they came to visit us in Bristol they brought free black puddings for our supporters!

Nottingham

We visited Ireland Avenue in 2004 but as we mentioned above thankfully they have moved to a new ground and this we are told has much better facilities. However we found the stewards and officials very friendly and hopefully they can take a very good rugby atmosphere into the new ground.

London Welsh

Being just up the road from the stoop Quins supporters should know Old Deer Park fairly well. We visited in 2003 and 2005. We found the ground easy to find (because we have passed it many times on our visits to Twickenham). On both occasions we were able to park at the ground and there is level access to the club house at the rear by the toilets. The food and drink were OK but despite being told there was a disabled toilet we found it to be a gents! The staff did offer to stand by the opening to the toilet and block people entering but this was not acceptable.

There is a 300 metre walk across the grass to the pitch side. This was boggy and hard work. The first year we had a pitch side view opposite the main stand. This was OK but was open to the elements and we had to leave early to retreat to the clubhouse for a hot drink to warm up. The second year we stood on a hard terrace just below the left hand side of the main stand as you look at it from the pitch. This was a decent view but had the advantage of being sheltered from the wind.

Henley and Orrell

Sadly both clubs have been relegated and so you probably won't visit unless you fail to get promotion (unlikely) and they come back up from National League two.

We visited both clubs twice during our spell in national League one and had good experiences at both grounds. If you would like more information please let us know.

Conclusion

Despite the disappointment of being relegated in 2003 we were pleased to still have a club and the chance rebuild in National League one. Our experience of the facilities was mixed and was on the whole no where near the standard of the premiership. What you will find is a welcoming and friendly atmosphere at most clubs and some really nice places to visit like Otley, Rotherham and Penzance (our personal favourites).

With a little bit of expenditure and grant aid from either the lottery, Wooden Spoon or the RFU these grounds could be hugely improved. This is why I will be completing my report and will make recommendations to National League one clubs.

We hope this short summary will be helpful to your visits and enjoyment of your season in National League one.

Matthew and David Lawrence

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