

THE HELLS OF ST. CLEMENTS

by the **Sod Jobber**

WHAT BETTER WAY to spend Easter Saturday than escorting a group of schoolboys to the Manor Ground where Oxford United would battle for promotion with Blackpool? For both teams the points were vital – Blackpool to stay above the pack, Oxford to stay with the pack. With few matches remaining until the end of the season, the stakes were high, too high as it turned out.

Sitting in the stands near the halfway line we saw everything. Away to the left, behind the goal, massed the United supporters, chanting rhythmic ditties to raise their spirits. The opposite stand was peaceful, leaving just the terracing over to the right, the only part of the crowd open to the skies, filled with Blackpool supporters. Strange that out of the four sides of the ground, the only uncovered accommodation was for the visitors; welcome! Fortunately it didn't rain.

The teams emerged on the far side like two columns of motorway workers, Oxford in a bilious yellow, Blackpool in tangerine. Roars of approval and applause greeted the entry while a rash of orange balloons tumbled up and over the goal line. Only being used to televised football you were struck by the size of the players and their proximity.

Instead of footballers, here were individuals, some with thighs like cooling towers, some with the musculature of a tuning fork, but all chewing gum.

Even the nearside linesman looked like a black colossus as he sprinted along the touchline, heels nearly touching his backside.

But soon pleasantries were over, the mascots were photographed, clapped and sent packing, and the whistle blew. Yellow versus tangerine, promotion within reach, season ending; we should have guessed that we were to be subjected to a game of oranges and lemons, albeit an energetic version, but the original must have been far more exiting. Dire was hardly the word. Pattern, such as there was, became evident right from the start. Attack, raise the decibels, lose the ball, retreat.

As play moved down each end of the field, the sound waves came in stereo: when Oxford attacked, the left ear hurt, when Blackpool attacked, the right one recoiled. Two spectators, however, made no sound; they were called goalkeepers. In the whole match, not a single save was made. One or two close shaves, the occasional sprawl just to convince the laundress, but that was about it. Both teams knew exactly what to expect and snuffed out any moves that hinted of danger. 99% perspiration. 1% inspiration, or as Macbeth said, "Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".

Half time was almost a relief. As far as our boys were concerned, the highlight to date was the hotdog. Scores were announced from all the other Division Two games, but ours alone was goal-less.

Perhaps the Easter Bunny would appear after the interval. No, that would smack of entertainment. The second half didn't improve. In front of us an old boy glared morosely at his programme, cradled his tea and muttered a few bitter profanities at the ref. There was nothing else for him to do but at least it showed us that the trainspotter breed was alive and well at football grounds.

Out on the pitch, oranges and lemons or hoof and hope, neither did much to the blood pressure. Hope declined as hoof reined. Oxford put on all three substitutes to break the pattern but still the game was crucifyingly tedious. And then came the goal. Yes, just one. Perhaps more by luck than good judgement the Oxford left winger swung a boot from outside the penalty area and next second the ball was nestled in the top corner of the net.

Three quarters of the ground erupted, the other went painfully quiet. This was not the noise of victory, just that of relief.

At last something of note had come out of the game. Which left just a further ten minutes of pattern, of puff and of goalkeeping inactivity.

Then the whistle blew – final relief.

Within minutes the crowd was gone. Stewards tackled the litter, groundsmen the divots.

Strange to report that as the ranks of supporters moved away from the ground, there was virtual silence among them. But then there was nothing to talk about.

Some things are best left unspoken.

The following was received too late for the last issue. but we are pleased to include it here.

Chipping Norton Music Festival

At the Festival on March 16th I was pleased to present the Rotary Trophy to the St. Mary's Youth Choir of Shipton-u-Wychwood.

This is the third year the club has presented its trophy. In 1994 it went to Madeline Evans who is now living in Upper Brailes and last year it was won by Amy Wackett of Fulbrook.

The trophy is awarded to the most promising performer(s) under 18 and the young choir at St. Mary's were worthy winners in 1996.

Being a local person myself, I was pleased with the result, especially as I was not involved in the judging – honest!

David Perceval,
Club President.