**How To Move 3 Miles In 20 Years**

After 20 years, York City finally moved into a new ground, the LNER Community Stadium at Monks Cross on the northern outskirts of the city on the site of the old Ryedale York rugby league ground.

In that time, we’ve had 5 Wembley trips, one promotion, 3 relegations and 12 “permanent” managers.

**20 Years In The Planning**

The ground saga dates back to December 2001 when the then chairman Douglas Craig announced that the club was for sale and that the ground would be locked shut at the end of the 2001/2 season. With the board having split the football team from the ground, the team would be homeless. Step forward John Batchelor. A deal was brokered with Craig but it was a very short honeymoon. Batchelor was 2 timing City with his motor racing interests. Money was tight and administration followed. A Supporters Trust was formed which gained control of the club in early 2003.

Many dedicated individuals gave a lot of time and money to save the club. The work continued as a deal was struck with the Football Stadia Improvement Fund (FSIF) which saw a £2,000,000 loan and Bootham Crescent secured as part of a deal to move to a new ground.

Built in 1932, Bootham Crescent was in need of constant essential maintenance and had little in the way of non footballing revenue generating opportunities, even the tiny and cramped hospitality lounges overlooked the car park rather than the pitch. Given the commitment to move to a new ground, Bootham Crescent suffered a gradual, withering decline in its last years.

It is ironic to think that way back in 1932 City felt an out of town location, with potential for a 40,000 capacity ground was less appealing than a city centre ground at Bootham Crescent believing that was the way forward to attract more fans. In 1932, just 4 months elapsed between the decision to leave Fulfordgate and City playing a Division 3 (North) game at Bootham Crescent.

The search for a new home proved to be long and full of frustrations. The terms of the loan meant City needed to identify a site for a new stadium by 2007 and have detailed planning permission in place by 2009 to avoid financial penalties.

Around 40 sites were considered. York Eye immediately behind the railway station and the old Heworth Green gas works sites would have provided central locations, but both might have had the same failings as Bootham Crescent as being landlocked.

Working with the City of York Council was a long drawn out process, an outline business case, a part of an out of town shopping / leisure development, was approved in June 2008 and it was hoped to open the ground by 2012.

After much debate, the council finally granted planning permission in May 2012 (in the middle of City’s 2 wins at Wembley in a week season finale). The stadium was expected to be ready during the 2014–15 football season. Even then, some councillors argued development would damage the city centre economy and that the projected £50m development costs could be better spent.

Further delays ensued. In November 2012, construction was delayed until June 2014 for a completion date of July 2015. Another delay occurred within 2 months with the discovery of protected breeding newts. In October 2016, a judicial review of the development was launched by Vue Cinemas who objected to an extra screen being approved at the site.

The uncertainty and delays lead to increased cost forecasts and caused the main construction partner to withdraw. Another delay as a new contractor was sought.

Earlier indications were of an 11 – 13 month build phase. Finally on 4 December 2017, construction work started, an opening in time for the start of the 2019/20 season was expected.

Plans were put in place for the end of Bootham Crescent, a commemorative special last day strip in City’s iconic 1970s Y maroon shirt design was announced. Just before it was due to be worn, a further delay, of unspecified length was made known. Even then, a late bid to install safe seating had been scuppered at the last minute when, despite finance being in place, the necessary permissions could not be achieved in time.

As 2019 drew to a close, stadium completion was tantalisingly close. At a club Q&A on January 8, 2020, the club even announced 3 test events for later that month. Club confidence seemed high that City would be playing at LNER within weeks.

However, it was becoming clear that City (and York City Knights) were mere tenants, they had to rely on the City of York Council for information. January 11 saw the council announce handover was due by February 4, however, earlier in the same day, a 2,000 capacity junior football test event was cancelled by the organisers as they had had no confirmation of ground availability from the council.

In the absence of any real news, rumours abounded as to the reasons for the continued delays. Terrace elevation, structural problems, CCTV, exit routes and drainage issues included.

Come March 2020, coronavirus struck but some snagging work at the ground continued. In late July, meeting minutes stated that Monks Cross, although "practically complete ... remains a building site. The construction is almost complete ... people still working ... to progress the final stages of minor works, known as 'snagging'. All certification and testing will only recommence once Government allows the gathering of people to resume".

In late September, with the big day seemingly ever closer, the council advised City that the stadium would not play host to York City Football Club games until after 9th October (no year was mentioned, but presumably 2020 was intended). Three weeks later, a Christmas 2020 completion date was announced.

**Pre Covid:-Farewell Bootham Crescent**

A depressing 4-1 home defeat to Hereford on March 3rd 2020 proved to be the last Bootham Crescent home game played under normal circumstances (I mean with fans, not a defeat to a struggling team). Most fans went home that night disappointed about the result but with no idea it would be the last time they ever saw a game at Bootham Crescent. Covid struck.

**Post Covid: 2020/1 – Empty Grounds**

An empty ground witnessed the Altrincham play off defeat in July 2020.

The 2020/1 season started at Bootham Crescent in an empty ground.

As covid restrictions lifted, City’s Bootham Crescent safety certificate had expired, meaning that once fans were allowed back inside grounds, a further 2 games were played behind closed doors before fans were allowed back inside Bootham Crescent for 2 games in December. Just over 1,000 supporters saw 2 “covid test event” games.

Monks Cross completion was announced just a few days before Christmas 2020, even then, City’s move was further delayed due to a wrangle over matchday parking.

At the second game, 627 fans saw City beat Guiseley 1-0 on December 28. A day later plans for 800 for the next Bootham Crescent (Bradford PA, January 2nd 2021) game were announced, but almost immediately scuppered by new covid restrictions, even then the game was expected to be played behind closed doors and to be the last ever Bootham Crescent game. A frozen pitch saw the game postponed.

With the parking wrangle resolved, it was announced that the AFC Fylde game (January 12) would be the last ever Bootham Crescent game. Guess what, postponed, coronavirus in the visitor’s camp. At the time it seemed the home venue was being decided on a game by game basis.

The saga of the last home game at Bootham Crescent had been long drawn out.

Programmes were produced for both the Bradford PA and AFC Fylde games, neither gave any indication of the possible historic significance of the game. It was another example of a lost commercial opportunity, although a farewell brochure was produced a little later.

**Welcome LNER**

With games succumbing to covid, City managed to make their LNER game debut on February 16th 2021. A disappointing 2-1 defeat to AFC Fylde played in front of an empty stadium as safety certification had not been completed. It was perhaps fitting to see chairman Jason McGill in attendance making a rare appearance at a City game. He was one constant person in the near 20 year saga to secure a new ground but had become distanced from the club for various reasons which deserve their own article in a later issue. It was doubly disappointing for him as the game saw his son, striker Gabby McGill pull on a City shirt for the first and last time, only to be subbed early in the second half.

To compound matters, the season was voided a few days later and all 2020/1 season results (including the first LNER and last Bootham Crescent games) were expunged.

**Bootham Crescent – Lingering Death**

Meanwhile, the demise of Bootham Crescent lingered on.

City had arranged for Hull City to play a number of reserve team games at the ground in early 2021. The first went ahead, behind closed doors, with no publicity. Cue outrage, to many supporters, the thought of other clubs playing the last ever Bootham Crescent game outweighed any facility fees on offer (City had netted £3,000 a game a few years earlier in a similar arrangement). City withdrew from the arrangement after the first game.

The last days of Bootham Crescent proved to be a damp squib. Ambitious plans which included a pop concert (Shed Seven anyone?) and a tented sportsmans’ dinner fell by the wayside due to a combination of uncertainty over the exact move date and covid. None of the expected end of the ground events went ahead, no celebratory friendly or other fund raising events.

An auction and sale of ground artefacts proved popular, many fans bought seats they and their family had sat on over many years. Gala Fairydean Rangers found a new home for over 100 (in much the same way as the first seats in Bootham Crescent’s Popular Stand came from Maine Road, Manchester in 1974. An ”Everything Must Go” clearance sale in June 2021 in the car park concluded the dispersal.

City opened the gates to Bootham Crescent one last time in November 2021, over 2,500 fans had a final walk around the now derelict ground across 2 days. Seats had been ripped out, many artefacts removed and the pitch was in an overgrown state and partly dug up following 2 digs that unearthed urns containing the ashes of about 11 fans.

**2021/2**

Roll on the2021/2 season. What could go wrong? York City Knights got into the stadium and hosted fans for the first time on June 6th 2021. . Matchday experiences varied as some noted teething problems like car park vouchers and turnstile scanning not working properly. Other fans reported being over policed by over zealous security with taped off sections where people couldn’t get to their seats and being told to put their masks on whilst eating their food and drink. Others enjoyed the experience, including drinking in local pubs and strolling to the ground whilst kerbside parking was freely available.

Despite further home game for the Knights, the issues remained unsolved by the time City played hosts to Newcastle in a friendly on July 18. What was hoped to be big crowd was capped at 2,000, home fans only, and no beer (covid restrictions prevented beer sales but not the sale of other drinks). 2 further friendlies and the first 2 home games in August were played with a nominal 2,000 capacity limit (stated as 2,000 plus anyone else who subsequently bought a season ticket).

Given the much delayed moving date and covid restrictions, a much heralded opening City friendly match proved difficult to arrange.

Early August 2021 saw the ground host a behind closed doors 2-2 friendly between Leeds and Villareal. Cllr Nigel Ayre tweeted, "Premier League, Europa League quality facilities right here in York", just a shame the game was played behind closed doors so that the York public got absolutely no benefit.

By the end of August, the capacity has been increased to 4,000 and a full 8,000 safety certificate was obtained in November.

Once inside the ground, the general opinion was that it was a stadium largely fit for purpose with much improved facilities over Bootham Crescent, even if food and drink was highly priced.

That said, given ongoing problems with the online ticketing system, both season ticket holders and match day spectators had problems, both accessing the online portal and at the turnstiles.

Quite why these problems weren’t ironed out in the 6 weeks the Knights played games at LNER before City opened the doors to spectators is unclear.

So far, concerns over accessibility have largely been allayed after a compromise was reached over parking in the adjacent retail park. Those who begrudged a £5 parking charge when on street parking was freely available around Bootham Crescent have found plenty of kerbside parking. Public transport has largely managed to serve the ground whilst The Supporters Trust has linked up a with a local Working Mens’ Club to provide a pre match hostelry with much cheaper beer than LNER albeit a bit further than the WMC directly opposite Bootham Crescent.

**Next**

It just remains for the sale of Bootham Crescent to Persimmon Homes to be finally completed and funds released to City. With a large amount of money due to Jason McGill, it will allow him to crystallise his financial position and stay true to his commitment not to take all the accrued interest that he is due. It will also offer him an exit strategy if that his desired option.

Meanwhile, despite the often febrile atmosphere (centred around the disenfranchisement of the Supporters Trust and the club’s board’s (in)actions), LNER continues to attract decent crowds, if not quite at the oft quoted level of between 3,500 and 4,500 break even figure based on a standard £20 admission fee. Despite indifferent form and stayaways, the crowd creeps above 3,000 whilst a December 2021 game attracted 4,500 with one off £5 ticket price.

With many long standing fans disillusioned and staying away (some from home games only whilst the current board remain in situ), the support is still there for a united York City, even if the club is on the lowest rung of the professional ladder.

For a ground that hosted Yorkshire CCC, baseball, Alvin Stardust, the 1936 Berlin Olympics (or at provided the set for a Bollywood movie celebrating Indian’s first Olympic gold medal) as well as many memorable giant killing acts it was a very sad ending, many supporters being unable to see the final sunset.

**Pictures**

See [www.yorkcitysouth.co.uk](http://www.yorkcitysouth.co.uk) , and see if there are pictures you can use, especially:

<http://www.yorkcitysouth.co.uk/xdb-bc011.htm>

<http://www.yorkcitysouth.co.uk/xdb-bc012.htm>

<http://www.yorkcitysouth.co.uk/xdb-bc018.htm>

<http://www.yorkcitysouth.co.uk/xdb-19545.htm>

As an inset, you might like to include <http://www.yorkcitysouth.co.uk/xdb-mx.htm> , something I wrote in late 2019.