

Crowded Out... Again?

*There has been an outbreak of ambitious talk from the board room of late. **Obronio** takes a look at how realistic this really is...*

Among the many behaviours that social media has enabled, it has encouraged many of us to offer our predictions to the world with a high degree of confidence, without ever bothering to check in with them afterwards. But it's good intellectual hygiene to reflect on the things we've said in the past, to review the opinions we've shared, and to see how well they have stood the test of time. It's one way that we can test and refine our predictive capabilities.

Just over 8 years ago, the prospect of Orient playing in the second tier felt more plausible than at any point in the preceding 2 decades. And this caused me to write an article for this very fanzine that examined historic attendance data to consider whether the Club could sustain itself in the Championship with the infrastructure it had at that time. You can read that article for free on our website [here](http://www.leytonorientear.com/CrowdedOut.html) (www.leytonorientear.com/CrowdedOut.html).

Although torrents of figurative water have flowed under the metaphorical bridge since November 2013, it's intriguing to consider how many things *haven't* changed in the meantime. Since Orientear #230 was published, Orient may well have suffered playoff heartbreak, two relegations, near extinction, rescue, revival, our first trophy in 49 years, tragedy, 18 months of inertia and a global pandemic, but we're still talking about Boris Johnson's habit of corrupting everything he comes in-



Fit for championship football?

to contact with, and whether the Orient could ever realistically compete in the second tier.

What's prompted me to revisit this topic now is the gentle signalling from our Board that they're starting to think again about how to take Orient to the Championship and keep us there. Perhaps our newer investors are part of the reason for the more ambitious tone - it's been said that someone on the Board now holds the brief of exploring options for expanding our capacity, whether on our current site or elsewhere. And in a recent interview, Mr Teague has suggested that he is in a minority on our Board in thinking that any such move should only happen after we have established ourselves in the second tier.

But the main conclusion from our 2013 analysis was that - at that time - no club could realistically hope to install itself in the Championship without routinely attracting at least 10,000 paying fans through its turnstiles whenever it played at home. With our capacity still capped somewhat below this level (and even 9,200 seems largely theoretical judging from the official figures from some well attended matches over recent years) it is clearly time to look at what's happened in the intervening 8 years, to see if this changes our earlier conclusions, and to test which hypothesis is more likely to be true: ours from 2013, or Mr Teague's current one? In short, which comes first: the chicken that is being an established Championship club, or the egg that is a stadium capable of accommodating more than 10,000 supporters at the same

Let's begin with a notable omission from our previous study: Millwall FC. One of my fellow contributors to the Ear (Judge Dredd) quite rightly pointed out that they should have been included last time, so I shall put that right here. Although it's arguable whether they are a "small" club in the same sense as the others included here, their geographic similarity to us still makes for an instructive comparison. So, since 1992/93 (which is as far back as our

original study looked) The Lions have spent a total of 18 seasons in the second tier, attracting an average crowd of 10,994 across those seasons. Although those seasons were punctuated by a couple of relegations to the third tier, it's difficult to find a better example of a club that has managed to make the second tier its default station with crowds that are so relatively small. That said, they have done rather better in more recent years – over the 8 seasons comprising the scope of the rest of this article, their average second tier attendances are actually 12,540.

Which other clubs of broadly comparable status to Orient have spent time in the second tier lately? Well, we will have to discount Wycombe for two reasons – firstly, because their dalliance with the heady heights was so fleeting that they cannot be considered to have "established" themselves there, and secondly, they were unfortunate that that solitary season was when the pandemic prevented supporters from attending all but a tiny handful of matches – so there is no meaningful data for us to refer to.

MK "monstrosity" Dons also managed a single season back in 2015/16, bringing in an average of 13,158 punters to their matches before being flushed back from whence they came. But this doesn't even tell us as much as the experience of Burton Albion, the first ex-non-league outfit to reach the second tier, who also managed to survive in their first season there. They averaged just 4,937 punters across their two seasons in the Championship, though this information is still of limited value as they couldn't really be said to have established themselves at that level, impressive though their recent history has been.

More illuminating examples are available in Luton and Rotherham – both of which also featured in our previous study. Since we last looked at Luton, they've been on an even more extreme ride than we have,



The New York stadium. So bland they named it once.

dropping further, spending longer at their nadir, and returning further and faster than we have. Even so, they are an interesting case study because, just as we aspire to be, they are a Club that has restored its previous status after a spell in non-league. Now in their third consecutive season back in the Championship, they've been averaging 10,048 bums on (or near) seats since returning there – which actually compares rather favourably with our findings from last time, when they averaged 8,064 during their earlier stints in the second tier around fifteen years ago. Although current attendances are already scraping the ceiling of what Kenilworth Road can cope with (10,356), this is the first indication that second tier survival is possible if you can somehow squeeze 10,000 in. Luton plan to move into a new, larger, and more centrally located stadium for the start of the 2024/25 season – though the timing seems a touch optimistic.

OK, so this is encouraging news for our earlier hypothesis. So what about Rotherham? Since we parted ways with them at Wembley in May 2014 (we shall speak no more of that here), they have yo-yoed a little, but have enjoyed a total of 5 seasons as a Championship club, over a period which also covers three relegations and two more promotions. Those Championship seasons saw an average of 9,982 supporters attend matches at their (significant point klaxon) new stadium. What's more, during the two seasons that they survived their average was just above 10,000, and the two relegations saw the average dip just below it. Chickens and eggs come to mind here too, as cause and effect are both present in both poor results and reduced attendances, but it's a striking finding nonetheless.

Also noteworthy is the fact that they managed to hang on for four straight seasons at that level with average crowds of just 7,096 in their old stadium – though this was more than fifteen years ago. The comparison between Luton and Rotherham is intriguing – both are now attracting more punters than they did during earlier stints in the Championship, but only one has moved to a new stadium: Kenilworth Road can just about cope with crowds of 10,000 – Millmoor could not.

But there's more. Let's not forget that there are actually two other fellow "small" clubs that have not only established themselves in the second tier, but that have astonishingly managed to sneak all the way into the top flight: Bournemouth and Brentford. The first of these has been cited by Kent Teague as a model for our own development, because they managed to achieve that without any significant work on their stadium (besides finally restoring a fourth stand back in 2013, taking their capacity back above 10,000). So, what can we learn from them, apart from



Kent Teague: Big on reality - not sentimentality

how helpful it is to be fuelled by Russian petrodosh? Here's what we know: they survived in their very first season in the Championship with an average gate of 9,952, but they've never dropped below the 10,000 mark in any of the subsequent 7 seasons, which have all been played at that level or higher. That said, rather like Luton, their attendances have all fallen within a very narrow band during that time – the stadium can only fit in 11,640 bodies, and attendances have remained pretty close to that number irrespective of which of the top two divisions they've been in and what happened to them during those seasons. There is likely a real opportunity cost to them not having a larger stadium during these seasons – especially when we look back at less recent history: from 1992-2013, they were generally playing at a similar level to Orient, but were typically drawing crowds that were over a thousand bodies stronger than ours (5,551 vs 4,466). Obviously their catchment area is very different to our own, but this does raise some important questions about whether we would or should be more adventurous than they have been in the same situation. Their crowds have basically doubled through the transition from being a lower league to a higher league club, but they have done relatively little to lift the ceiling on their capacity.

This just leaves us with our newly ennobled chums from West London. Without a full season of data, we can't say too much yet about the impact that the new stadium and Premiership football has had on their attendances, but we do know that across the seven seasons they spent in the Championship their crowds were remarkably consistent, averaging 10,632, with no season average lower than 10,257.

During this time, Griffin Park could accommodate up to 12,300 so it is clear that for Brentford in the second tier, extra capacity was rarely needed.

So, what have we learnt? If I'm honest, when I was researching this article, I was genuinely gobsmacked at how well recent seasons have validated the main conclusion of our 2013 analysis. Since 2013, only Burton Albion have managed to survive in the Championship with crowds that were lower than Brisbane Road's current capacity, and that was only for one additional season. There is also little real indication that they will return to the second tier any time soon. Over the eight full seasons of this study, 7 clubs that qualify as "small" (according to my criteria) have been promoted to the second tier, with 9 promotions in total (because Rotherham have been promoted on three separate occasions since 2013). So, it's fair to say that one can expect one "small" club to rise into the second tier each season. This is broadly similar to the 23 promotions across the 21 seasons from 1992 to 2013 that we looked at last time, so it suggests that it is no more difficult for a "small" Club to reach the second tier now than it has been at any point since 1992. But we are beginning to see that it is getting harder to stay there: twenty years ago, you could enjoy a few seasons of shits and giggles at that level without needing to bring in so many punters, but it no longer seems possible to have more than a fleeting visit without having at least 10,000 bums in your ground whenever you're playing at home.

Whether this means we would need to redevelop at Brisbane Road or move to another site is a subject for another debate at another time, but filling the gulf created by significantly smaller matchday revenues with improvements in the distribution of broadcasting rights and increases to streaming revenue seems a very tall order from here. And that's before we even account for the opportunities of non-matchday income were we to own our own stadium.

Epilogue: The Watford Metamorphosis

I thought it worth taking a moment here to consider the example of Watford FC, who are undoubtedly the single best example of how a football club can be transformed from a perennial lower divisions outfit into one firmly established at a higher level. Before the Elton John / Graham Taylor revolution of the late 1970s, they had spent all but three of their first 59 years as a league club in one of the bottom two divisions. But since then, they've only spent two seasons outside of the top two. No other English league club can claim to have effected such a lasting transformation, and as another club that draws its support from London's fringes, it's worth us taking a moment to look at it.

One of the first things we see is that, even as largely lower division club from 1921-1979, their crowds were pretty impressive. OK, attendances everywhere in England were generally higher during this era, so it could be argued that Watford's success was due partly to them resisting the declining trend elsewhere in the country across the 70s and 80s, but they averaged 9,477 across this period (admittedly with a lot of variation). From 1979 until today, they've been bringing in an average of 14,498 punters, i.e. about half as many again – so you may not need a quantum leap in your attendances to make the quantum leap in your status...

Footnotes:

Attendances from the current season have not been included in this analysis

The calculated averages also do not account for 2020/21, because of the effect of the pandemic

Only league matches are taken into account

Data is all from <http://european-football-statistics.co.uk/>

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