



Darlington's Tin Shed takes pride-of-place at the Blackwell Meadows ground

ANDY POTTS

Home draw

DARLINGTON

Administration, an unprecedented demotion of four levels and exile to Bishop Auckland – it's been a tough few years for Darlington FC. But 2017 sees the Quakers back home, chasing promotion and thinking of a return to the Football League.

More than 3,000 fans thronged the Blackwell Meadows ground – home to the town's rugby club since 1994 – on Boxing Day for Darlington's 3-2 win at home to Halifax Town in the National League North. Darlo were back home after four years away; for the first time since leaving Feethams in 2003, fans could once again stand in the old "Tin Shed", a spiritual home for half a century and back in service after it was retrieved from the yard of a local plant hire company.

For manager Martin Gray, who took over during the club's worst time, in 2012, the homecoming was a big moment. "We've been waiting for this since day one, four-and-a-half years ago. You can't say too much about the importance of the football club being back in town," he said. Club director Richard Cook likened the opening day to the birth of a child: "We were a bit apprehensive because so much might have gone wrong, but in the end it was a fantastic day for everyone."

Gray played in front of the Tin Shed at Feethams in the mid-1990s and was on the coaching staff at the club following their move to the 25,000-seat Darlington Arena under the flamboyant stewardship of then chairman George Reynolds. A former safecracker who'd had several periods in prison before his association with the Quakers, Reynolds was later to receive a three-year jail term for tax evasion. By the time Gray took over as manager in 2012, Reynolds' ambitions for the club had long since collapsed, saddling them with a white elephant of an arena that fatally undermined their finances. In and out of administration, the Quakers dropped into the Conference in 2010 and finished 2011-12 rock bottom and penniless. Worse followed: the club exited administration without a company voluntary

arrangement and the FA refused to recognise the new, supporter-owned Darlington 1883 as the successor to the original team. Demotion put Gray and his team in the Northern League Division One, the ninth tier of English football.

"When I took over as manager I said I'd like to be the man to take this club back to the level where they were," Gray added. "Back then we'd just been relegated from the Conference to the league we're in now, so I feel we've achieved that first target. Now the idea is to get back into the Football League one day, and with the set-up we have as a club it's definitely plausible."

During Darlington's rapid rise through the lower leagues – three promotions in four seasons, with one play-off defeat – the club were pulling in four-figure crowds against opponents who averaged a couple of hundred at best. It underlined the Quakers' potential; attracting Virgin Trains as shirt sponsor was also a statement of intent. Now, back in town and looking at a settled future groundsharing with Darlington RFC, that support can be harnessed towards a continued revival as the team chase a play-off spot this season.

"Another year at Bishop Auckland would have crucified us financially, especially at the

level we're now playing," Cook added. "Playing at Blackwell Meadows gives us sustainability – and it's a good deal for the rugby club as well." For Gray, meanwhile, coming home is a key development for the rejuvenated club. "When I was offered the job, I was always confident we would quickly go back up through the leagues," he said. "The fear was wondering how long we would have to stay out of town and how much that might impact us. We had people working from day one on getting us back home, even when a lot of people were maybe a bit reluctant to get involved because we were in Bishop Auckland. Hopefully [Blackwell Meadows] will encourage more people to back us."

Although Darlington's future looks brighter than it has done for years, Gray is keen not to forget the past – and the way fans rallied round to save their club. "There's been numerous people, now and in the past, who worked really hard to help the club survive," he added. "I'm thinking of the cheques that were handed across the table to the chairman and directors back then. If the club hadn't survived back in 2012, we wouldn't be here today talking about coming home."

Andy Potts

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