



## CHESTER FC: THE JOURNEY IS ONLY JUST BEGINNING

**On March 10, 2010, it appeared that 125 years of footballing history in Chester had come to a sorry and tragic end in a 30 second hearing at the High Court in London.**

However, as we now know, that heartbreaking day in March was not the end but a new beginning.

Football clubs are not limited companies or PLCs. The heart and soul of any football club lies firmly with its loyal supporters. Weary from the chaos of 20 years of mismanagement, Chester fans once again rallied for one final, mammoth battle to rescue their club from the abyss.

The demise of Chester City FC was a slow, agonising experience and there were many contributing factors which have been well documented. In this report we will instead focus on the events that followed and the emergence of a club that our beautiful and historic city can be proud of.

Condensing the story of the past 12 months into a few pages is a near impossible task. So much work has been undertaken by so many people and it is difficult to appreciate how far we have come in such a short space of time.

It has been a fantastic journey that has presented us with many challenges and given us even more moments to cherish. Every member of City Fans United should feel immensely proud of what we have achieved together but recognise that there is still much work to be done.

## CITY FANS UNITED



the board their plans to re-launch a club should it become necessary.

Over 500 supporters packed the Guild Hall in Chester on February 18, 2010, with the crisis nearing its conclusion to hear from

Those present are unlikely to every forget the stirring presentations given by representatives of Supporters Direct, FC United of Manchester and, in particular, AFC Telford United.

Speaking from the heart, they shared their experiences of forming new fan owned clubs through adversity and proved beyond doubt that supporter ownership was the way forward.

The next three months saw huge activity as the board put a business plan together with assistance from Supporters Direct and three supporter owned clubs. Their guidance and support enabled us to put the structure in place to form a new club following the events of March 10.

The lease to the Deva Stadium was secured from Cheshire West & Chester Council on May 6 and Chester Football Club was



formally re-launched on May 20, again in front of a packed Guild Hall. The new club crest was unveiled and several former plays gave amazing encouragement on an evening filled with emotion, hope and excitement.

Membership of City Fans United rose sharply during the first half of the year as the phoenix first emerged tentatively from the flames and then soared and took flight. We now have almost 3,000 members and we should all be striving to increase our membership base.

## A THRIVING FOOTBALL CLUB

Neil Young was appointed as manager the day after the Guild Hall meeting and promptly began the tough task of assembling a squad capable of achieving promotion.

As it happened our first promotion was achieved before a ball had even been kicked as we successfully appealed against the decision of the FA Leagues Committee to place us as Step 5 of the National League System.



After a long pre-season campaign, we played our first competitive game against Warrington Town on August 24. Over 1200 travelling supporters witnessed a hard fought 1-1 draw with Rob Hopley scoring our first goal as a reformed club. The result was immaterial, what mattered was that Chester were well and truly back. Our first home game on September 8 proved to be a very special occasion as a crowd of 2,734 witnessed a sensational 6-0 victory over Trafford.

At the time of writing we are nine points clear at the top of Evo-stik League Division One North. It is no secret that our target at the start of the season was promotion and we recognise that there is still work to be done.

However credit must go to Neil, his coaching team and the players who have contributed to what is a very special season.

It has been hugely pleasing to see Chester-born George Horan wearing the captain's armband with such distinction. We recently launched a youth team that represents the first stage in our plan to develop a flourishing youth development programme.

## A COMMERCIALY STRONG BUSINESS

While football is our core business, it is of paramount importance to our future success that we are as commercially strong as possible.

Building strong relationships with local businesses, maximising on our existing revenues and exploring new revenue streams will allow us to increase our investment in the team as we progress through the pyramid.

Securing MBNA, the largest employer in Chester, as our main sponsors lent us significant credence within the city. In addition to sponsoring our shirts, they also temporarily seconded lifelong supporter Steve Ashton to the club as our full time chief executive officer during the crucial set-up period. The appointment of Pat Cluskey as general manager further enhanced our commercial position.

Exacta came on board as stadium and east stand sponsors with Evans Halshaw and Chester and District Housing Trust sponsoring the south and west stands respectively. The club has sold out of match day, match ball and programme sponsorships and the feedback from sponsors has been exceptional.

We have sold over 1000 season tickets, a 20 year high, and attendances at home are at the highest level since the Conference winning season of 2004. Merchandising sales have also surpassed expectations with sales of over 1000 replica shirts.

Commercially the club is in the best position it has ever been and it is essential that we strive to maintain this.

## OUR CITY, OUR COMMUNITY, OUR CLUB

Chester Football Club is founded upon the Club motto, "Our City... Our Community... Our Club..." Having a club that is a cornerstone of our community is of paramount importance. This not only includes working with local schools but also embracing the local footballing community and reaching out to the wider community.

We have worked with our local schools; our community coaches have been into over 40





different schools and worked with over 3000 children. We have given away over 2000 tickets to schoolchildren, and worked with local schools to incentivise challenging children.

We have worked with children within our areas and delivered a seven-week year 8 PHSE course on making new beginnings. This course was delivered with the local Fire authority, and will be rolled out to other schools within the area over the coming months, this time with involvement from Cheshire Police.

The Deva Stadium, for so long the pariah of the footballing community within the city, has become the hub. Local amateur and junior leagues use the facilities for meetings, Cheshire FA refereeing courses are regularly held at the ground and all of the Chester and District FA finals are to be held at the ground this year. This includes two days of junior and mini soccer finals, where over 400 children will get the opportunity to play at the best stadium in the city.

We are encouraging the children and youth of Chester to shape the future of our game too, with 21 local 16-year-olds currently on an apprenticeship scheme in sports management at the club.

We have also worked hard to build up strong relationships with our local health authority, who use our facilities during the week for drop in clinics and for a less formal environment to engage their mental health patients.

Our successful Think Pink day raised almost £4000 for our local breast care unit. They are one of many local charities we work with.

Whilst we see a benefit from our community programmes in developing a stronger supporter base, we take real heart in receiving letters from our members telling us of their pride that the club they support and own is making a real difference to people within our society.

## A STADIUM TO BE PROUD OF

With the lease to the Deva Stadium secured, it soon became apparent that there was much work to be done. The stadium had been neglected and was in need of both investment and some TLC.

Throughout the summer months many of you displayed outstanding commitment to the cause by giving up your time to paint, scrape, brush, wash and polish. The board also wish to acknowledge the assistance of CDHT, who have provided both manpower and materials to ensure that the Exacta Stadium is a worthy home for our club.

The freezing temperatures of December and January not only played havoc with the fixture list but also caused a significant number of burst pipes at the stadium. Significant expenditure was required to repair this damage.

We have recently refitted the stadium kitchens, again with the help of CDHT, to ensure that our catering offering is of the highest possible standard and we continue to look at ways to improve our facilities.

One area we are currently investigating is the potential to expand the Blues Bar and Legends Lounge. It is fantastic to see so many of you using the bars and we have taken on-board your feedback about the limited space. We have already introduced an outside area to provide additional space and we are currently exploring a number of options to extend these facilities.



## SUPPORTER INVOLVEMENT THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

A major part of our business plan relied on our ability to utilise volunteers. We recognised that there risks attached to this as we all have other commitments that can impact upon our motivation and availability. However we have been overwhelmed by the sense of pride and belonging you have displayed.

We have a volunteer database that provides hundreds of work hours per month for free. Our volunteers do everything and anything. In recognition of their contribution over 120 volunteers attended a Christmas party at The Exacta Stadium.

There is a real cooperative, roll up your sleeves spirit at our club. Over 25 people turned up in minus 2 degree temperature to lay pitch covers. This feeling of being in it together, a family, was what we had missed all along. The football almost becomes secondary, as the club becomes the focal point.

## WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

We should all be immensely proud of how far we have come in such a short space of time. However we must recognise that need to maintain our progress and to continue to grow and develop our club.

Our goal is to regain our place in the football league but there are many challenges to be overcome.

As we move through the leagues it is inevitable that we will need to increase our playing budget significantly. Therefore we our aims must be to grow our supporter base, increase our commercial income and development new revenue streams.

We wish to acquire a long term lease for the Exacta Stadium that will allow us to progress our plans to improve and develop the

facilities. In addition, we have held preliminary meetings regarding the possibility of developing a training complex that will be a great asset to the club and the community.

The nature of football dictates that there will be highs and lows and ups and downs along the way. But together we can accomplish our aims and reach our goal.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The board would like to place on record our thanks to Supporters Direct, AFC Telford United, FC United of Manchester and AFC Wimbledon for their immense support and guidance.

Above all however, we wish you to thank you for the tremendous support you have given our club. The efforts of everyone are now being well rewarded.

We have got a long way to go, but out of massive adversity, Chester now has a football club to be proud of.

