**There are lies, damned lies and statistics – Mark Twain**

When it comes to match day attendances at Imperial Fields (and previously, Sandy Lane), there are many who would wonder whether the quoted attendance figures are correct. How often do you think to yourself, “I am sure there were more there than they said”? The study of statistics, or in this case attendances, at home Isthmian League games for The Terrors, makes for some interesting reading.

Full season attendance records are currently only available from and including the 1988/89 season. Before that, there are odd sporadic attendances recorded, usually because the away side reported the attendance in their next home programme. Attendances in the years before this were often very “round” figures, a result of the local sports reporter putting his best guessing hat on and arriving at 4,000 or 1,300 or 800. Didn’t those old turnstiles have a counting mechanism to record the number of people that passed through the gate?

A thorough study of attendances at home league games for The Terrors over the past 30 plus years reveals some interesting, some might say quirky, “statistics”. Numbers can be used to spin a good story, and the numbers associated with The Terrors home league attendances are no exception to this rule.

So where to begin?

From the start of the 1988/89 season through to the end of the Covid shortened 2020/1 season, there have been 679 completed league games. 150,294 people have been recorded as attending these games. This gives an average of 221 per game. The last 14 seasons at Sandy Lane, the last one being 2001/2, saw 48,358 passionate non-league fans pass through the turnstiles to watch 292 league games for an average of 165 per game. Between 2002/3 and the end of the shortened 2020/1 season, there were 387 games which attracted 101,936 spectators to Imperial Fields over 19 seasons. This gives an average of 263 per game.

Eighty-four different opponents visited Sandy Lane during these 14 seasons whilst to date there have been 99 different opponents at Imperial Fields over the first 19 seasons at the ground.

The highest attendance at Sandy Lane during the period surveyed was for the very last game played by The Terrors at the ground against Wealdstone when 968 people were in attendance. This was at the end of the 2001/2 season when Groundhoppers from afar came to bid farewell to what had once been one of the best non-league grounds around. If you remove the Wealdstone fixture from the numbers game, the next best supported game was against Aldershot Town in 1994/5 when 879 came to watch a phoenix club pass through the Isthmian League. The following two seasons saw 628 and 513 respectively watch this same fixture, the only other attendances to top the 500 mark during the period of this review. The next highest attendance was 312 against Chesham United in the 1990/1 season. The 1999/2000 season saw a new low when the highest attendance was 147 against Marlow. The average gate for games during this season was just 119.

Looking at the other end of the numbers, there were some low numbers recorded for a few games with the lowest being the 64 hardy souls that watched the game against Abingdon Town during the 1992/3 season. During this 14-year period at Sandy Lane, there were five other seasons where the lowest attendance recorded was below three figures. For the trivia buffs these are; 1998/9 (71); 1997/8 (72); 1989/90 (85); 1990/1 (87) and 1991/2 (97). Whilst the previously mentioned 147 against Marlow in 1999/2000 was the lowest “high” attendance during a season, the highest “low” attendance was 137 during the 1994/5 season.

Apart from Aldershot Town, which club tended to attract more fans to Sandy Lane? Woking only played one game during this period, a game which attracted 306 spectators. Carshalton, surprisingly, only played two games during this period. The 1988/9 game attracted 272 (a season’s best) and in 2001/2, 297 were at the game.

There were a couple of odd records spotted as well during this period at Sandy Lane. In 1992/3, Billericay Town attracted 245 fans (the season’s best), whilst just three years later, the attendance was 102, the lowest gate of that season. Marlow did their best to match this. In seasons 1995/6 and 1996/6, a season low 102 fans watched Marlow at Sandy Lane whilst in 1999/2000, there were just 147 present, which whilst low, was the highest gate for that season.

Aldershot Town in their three seasons in the division, attracted 2,020 fans for an average of 673 per game. The next best aggregate gate was brought in by Whyteleafe. 1,491 saw their nine games at an average of 165. Wealdstone only played at Sandy Lane twice during this period and boosted by their last game appearance, they brought an average of 611. The next best aggregate gate was brought in by Uxbridge whose nine appearances saw an average of 153. Worthing put in six appearances for a total of 1,165 and an average of 194. Slough Town and Newbury Town had an impressive average of 235, but only had two and one appearances respectively. Kingstonian played one game and drew what would probably be regarded as a poor gate of 247 for a local derby in 1988/9. Another local derby saw Dulwich Hamlet play four games for an aggregate of 1,161 and an average of 290. Bromley’s three games averaged 250. The lowest average attendance during this period was 82 by Hertford Town. They did though play just the one game in 1998/9 although Bracknell Town’s 71 that same season was lower.

Of the 84 teams that played at Sandy Lane during this 14-year period, 22 of them played just one game and 14 played just two games. The highest number of games played by any team was nine, achieved by three clubs; Uxbridge, Wembley and Whyteleafe.

How did The Terrors average gate compare with the rest of the division they were playing in?

In the 1988/9 season, The Terrors were in the Premier Division. The total attendances for all league games came to 141,270. Of this number, The Terrors contributed 3,900, or 2.76% of the total. The overall average was 306 across the division with Tooting’s average being 186 or 60.69% of the average gate for the division. (Mind boggling stuff isn’t it?)

After this, the numbers tended to look up with the exception of the 1995/6 and 1996/7 seasons when Tooting’s average gate was 162 and 148 respectively. This was Division 1 territory and Aldershot Town were busy passing through. Their presence pushed the gates up at all clubs. The average gate for the two seasons across the division was 273 and 302 respectively. The total attendances were 126,231 and 139,574 with Tooting’s contribution being 3,399 (2.69%) and 139,574 (2.17%). Tooting’s average as a percentage of the division’s average was 59.29% and 47.78% respectively.

In the 1993/4 season in Division 1, Tooting’s average gate was 181 against the division’s average of 170 meaning that Tooting achieved 106.33% of the division’s average attendance. Relegation to Division 2 didn’t help matters too much although the drop in the average gate at Sandy Lane wasn’t too dramatic. The 1997/8 season saw an average of 132 against the division’s average of 169. During the season, 78,257 spectators watched Division 2 games and Tooting contributed 2,764 or 3.53%. The following year, 1998/9, saw a total of 60,932 (Tooting 2,692) at an average of 132 (Tooting 128 or 4.42%). So depending on how you want to read the numbers, The Terrors could be said to be doing well – or not well. Tooting’s average gate against the divisions average gate was 77.88% in 1997/8 and 97.11% for the 1998/9 season.

The 1999/2000 season was worse (or was it better?) when compared with the two previous seasons. The average Sandy Lane attendance dropped to 119 per game. The division’s average was 106 meaning Tooting’s gate was 112.53% of the division’s average gate. Overall, the number through the turnstiles at Sandy Lane dropped to 2,505, and the division’s total number of spectators dropped alarmingly to 49,201, a drop of over 11,000 from the previous year. Whilst Tooting’s drop was modest, the percentage of the division’s ‘gate’ rose to 5.09%.

The 2000/1 season saw things improve for The Terrors, but not for the division as a whole. Total attendances dropped to 48,378 although Tooting’s share rose to 3,569 or 7.38%. As a percentage of the division’s average, Tooting’s comparison rose to 161.86%. Of course, winning teams always draw better crowds. So, with this in mind, The Terrors embarked on season 2001/2 in Division 1, their last at Sandy Lane.

Overall spectators through the gate rose to 5,501 for an average of 262. The division’s average was 224 so Tooting achieved 5.33% of the total division’s ‘gate’ of 103,283 and achieved 116.94% of the average gate. The last game for The Terrors at Sandy Lane attracted 968 spectators, the highest league gate over the 14 years that attendance records are complete. If the game against Wealdstone had only attracted an ‘average’ crowd, the season’s average would still have been around 228, better still than the previous 13 seasons for which attendance records have been reviewed.

And so, the end of an era arrived and the 2002/3 season saw the club move to their new ground at Imperial Fields.

Is your head spinning yet?

Let’s take a look at the numbers for the first 19 seasons at Imperial Fields. For the purpose of this research, attendances recorded in seasons 2019/20 and 2020/21 are included. They did happen, regardless of the fact that both seasons were cut short.

Croydon Athletic were the first league visitors and drew a crowd of 320. The season ended with an average league gate of 290, up from the previous season’s 262. The best gate of the season was against Carshalton Athletic when 534 were in attendance. There had been a bit of tinkering from the previous season with the divisions. Divisions 1 and 2 had merged to become Division 1 north and Division 1 south. It didn’t have any impact on the attendances. Division 1 in 2001/2 attracted 103,283 with an average of 224. The following season saw 102,455 attend Division 1 south games. There were two extra teams so the average gate dropped to 186 across the division. The Terrors attracted 6,674 through the gates for league games which meant that 6.51% of those attending games in the division came to Imperial Fields. A good start at the new home.

Season 2003/4 saw an almost identical number attend all games in the division, but Tooting’s share dropped to 4.88% of the total with just over 5,000 passing through the turnstiles at Imperial Fields.

The following season was of course different for all clubs in Division 1 south. The division average doubled from the previous season to 364. A total of 168,134 attended all games. Tooting’s share was 7,893 or 4.69% of the total. The reason was of course AFC Wimbledon who were busy passing through the divisions en route to membership of the Football League. In the second last home game of the season, Tooting achieved their record crowd for a league game at Imperial Fields when 2,637 were in attendance for a 1-1 result against the champions elect. As Tooting had drawn the away game 2-2 earlier in the season it meant they had the distinction of being one of a very few clubs that had not been beaten by AFC Wimbledon in a league fixture. But that statistic is not what this research is all about. The next and last home game of the season saw Bashley attract just 263 through the gate. Tooting’s average league gate was an impressive 376 a figure that as at the end of the shortened 2020/21 season remains the best at Imperial Fields.

The next three seasons saw averages of 292, 307 and 316. Each season saw Tooting’s average better the average for the division as a whole. The last of these three seasons, 2007/8, saw Tooting’s only other crowd in excess of 1,000 to date when 1,041 attended the home league game against Dover Athletic. There were of course in excess of this number the previous season in the division play-off final against Hastings United, but this research focuses purely on regular season games.

The big time returned for season 2008/9 with promotion to the Premier Division. The average gate improved up to 352, but this was well below the division’s average of 418. The following three seasons in the Premier Division failed to see an upward trend in form and average gates fell to 269 in 2011/12 when The Terrors were relegated back to Division 1 south.

During these four seasons in the Premier Division, the two best gates at Imperial Fields were 630 and 654, both against Sutton United. Excluding the two previously mentioned attendances against AFC Wimbledon and Dover Athletic, the best attendance has been 697 against Carshalton Athletic in 2016/7, the game that effectively sealed promotion back to the Premier Division. There have been just five games where the crowd has been in the 600s. There have been a further seven where the crowd has been in the 500s. There have been no league attendances that have touched the 700 or 800 or 900 mark. Only two games have attracted figures like this; both at Sandy Lane; 968 v Wealdstone and 879 v Aldershot Town. Aldershot Town also attracted 628 and 513 in their other two games at The Lane.

The lowest attendance for a league game at Imperial Fields is 97 against Egham Town in 2003/4. This is the only league fixture in 387 games where the crowd has dropped below three figures.

Excluding the already mentioned 2004/5 season where all clubs benefitted from the presence of AFC Wimbledon fans at their grounds, the next best average gate for a full season was 2008/9 with 352 on average at each game. The same season also saw the highest “low” attendance of 191 against Harrow Borough for a full season. More on that later.

The first season at Imperial Fields saw 6,674 people pass through the gates, giving an average of 290 per game. 2007/8 saw 6,639 people at league games for an average of 316. The difference between these two seasons was that there were 23 home games in 2002/3 and 21 for the 2007/8 season.

Horsham have played 12 league games at Imperial Fields with 2,982 spectators for an average of 248. Kingstonian have played just seven league games for an aggregate attendance of 2,946 and an average of 420. Dulwich Hamlet have attracted 3,127 for their eight games and an average of 390. Excluding AFC Wimbledon, Sutton United have the best average attendance (610 from three games) whilst Dover Athletic follow close behind with 541 from four games.

Carshalton Athletic have topped the pile with 3,892 fans at games they have played in for an average of 486 from their eight games.

For number of games played, Corinthian-Casuals and Hastings United have both appeared 11 times with an almost identical average per games – 253 and 250 respectively. Leatherhead have appeared in one game less but have a better average of 291.

Eighteen teams have played just the one league game at Imperial Fields and 21 teams have appeared twice.

Seasons 2019/20 and 2020/21 have both been affected badly by the COVID pandemic. So how do the numbers look from these two seasons?

Season 2019/20 was cut short by six games. Based on the 13 games played, Tooting attracted a total of 3,526 spectators at an average of 271 per game. That’s the highest average attendance since the 2010/11 season when the average was 302 per game in the Premier Division. The average for all games in the division was just 135, so Tooting’s numbers were 200.57% of the average. 38,405 people passed through the gates of all the clubs, meaning that Tooting’s share of that number was 9.18%. If we now project these numbers to reflect figures and averages based on a “full” season, we see that Tooting would have attracted 5,153 people through the turnstiles. The total for all clubs would have been 51,387 with Tooting’s share being just over 10%.

Whilst Tooting was a shining light in the South-Central division, average crowds for the North division were 199 and for the South East division, 238. The projected attendances for a “full” season for each were 75,584 and 90,428 respectively.

The projected figures for the South-Central division showed an increase of around 10% over the previous season. For the North division, the increase was just 1% and for the South-East division, the increase was a huge 21%.

Tooting’s highest league gate for the 2019/20 season was 378 and the lowest was 165.

The 2020/21 season was very much shorter. Tooting played just four home league games. Non-League clubs benefitted from bigger clubs (primarily those in the Football League, the Premier League and the National League system) not being allowed to have many or any fans attend their games. Fans needing their “football fix” were drawn to Non-League games. Numbers were restricted depending on which level in the Pyramid a team played. Tooting was limited to 400 fans attending their home games. Had Tooting been in the Isthmian League Premier Division, the limit would have been 600. Ground capacity played no part in deciding how many people could attend a game. A club in the Premier Division with a capacity of 1,500 could host 600 spectators, whilst a club in Division 1 with a capacity of 4,500 could only allow 400 through the gates.

Some clubs were well supported and this included Tooting. In the four home games played, 1,341 fans came through the turnstiles giving an average of 335. Projecting that average across a “full season” would have seen 6,370 people through the gates. That would have made it the best season since 2009/10 when 6,614 were in attendance at league games. At the early cessation of the season, some 12,337 people had watched Division 1 South Central league games, a figure that projects out to 64,220 had the trend continued for a “full season”. Tooting’s share for the second projected season running was around the 10% mark. Tooting’s four home games attracted 315; 295; 400 and 331. The average gate for the division was 169, so not all clubs benefitted from the need for fans to get their fix. It was though around 25% up on the previous, slightly longer, season.

The Premier Division saw no growth whilst the Division 1 South East saw a very modest growth in the average gate, but their projected aggregate attendance was “down” because Guernsey had to withdraw from the season. The Division 1 North average grew by almost 22%.

Conclusion

So, what have you learned from this trawl through the numbers game of attendances at Sandy Lane and Imperial Fields? Is it that your capacity to take Aspirin is greater than you thought possible – from necessity of course because all these numbers have given you a giant headache? Is it that perhaps Mark Twain’s original saying of ‘lies, damned lies and statistics’ is just another way of saying that you can read anything and everything into a set of numbers? Or perhaps nothing at all?

Whatever your take on this research, it’s no doubt given you some food for thought.

Footnote

By the way, in case you thought there was no more room for any attendance statistics, here are some more numbers for you.

The highest attendance for any game at Imperial Fields is 3,321 for the Premier Division final between Dulwich Hamlet and Hendon on 7th May 2018.

Dulwich Hamlet also had three other attendances during their short tenure at Imperial Fields over the 1,000 mark.

* 14th April 2018 – 1,003 v Thurrock
* 28th April 2018 – 1,266 v Margate
* 3rd May 2018 – 1,285 v Leiston

On 13th April 2011, Chelsea Ladies lost 0-1 to Arsenal Ladies in their opening league fixture at Imperial Fields before 2,510 enthusiastic fans.

In the 2009/10 season, Tooting’s best FA Cup attendance at Imperial Fields saw 687 fans attend the Eastbourne Borough 4th qualifying round game which led to an appearance in the 1st round proper.

On 26th April 2007, Imperial Fields hosted the London Senior Cup Final with The Terrors beating near neighbours Bromley 4-2. The crowd was from memory 710.

Tooting’s two Play Off Finals against Hastings United and Cray Wanderers attracted crowds of around 1,132 and 939 respectively.

Disclaimer

This research has been carried out diligently with the goal of bringing you, dear reader, some statistics around The Terrors attendances for league games over the past 30 plus years. If anyone has any attendance figures for season 1987/88 or before, please share them in order that they can be analysed to death. If anyone spots any errors in these mind-boggling numbers, please send your contribution or thoughts to ewen@thenearpost.com . The data available through the unofficial website; [www.tmu-fc.co.uk](http://www.tmu-fc.co.uk) ; shows many attendance figures covering, in the main, the same period covered by this document. At the date of this research, June 2021, no cross checking has been done with that data. That joy lies ahead after a good lie down with a hot cup of tea, an Aspirin and a Custard Cream for the purposes of dunking into the aforementioned hot cuppa!