



Photo Credit - Darren Williams

# SOMERSET PARK

THE DESIGN OF A NEW ERA

Gill Sherry

When David Smith, Owner-Chairman of Ayr United, considered plans to build a new North Stand at Somerset Park, he faced one specific challenge – how could they retain the terracing but still bring the stadium into the 21st century?

David used to watch Ayr United as a boy, travelling from Girvan with his father to stand on the north terracing and support his footballing heroes.

That terracing was part of the fabric of the stadium, a nostalgic representation of Saturdays at 3pm, before TV rights and plastic seats changed the face of football.

Fortunately for David, the team tasked with designing the new North Stand shared his vision. Steven Denham, Founder and Managing Director of Denham Youd, and his Architect friend and colleague, Colin Reynolds, both lifelong Ayr United fans, also had childhood memories of that all-important terracing.

“My grampa was the kitman at Ayr for 21 years,” Colin informs me. “My mum’s brother played for the club, and my dad’s brother played for the club. So I have a long history with Ayr United.”

“Sometimes I have to pinch myself,” adds Steven. “I used to get lifted over the turnstiles by my dad when I was a wee boy. To design the new North Stand... it’s pretty cool.”

Denham Youd first worked with Ayr United when they were asked to design a new purpose-built facility with the intention of improving staff and visitor facilities. Known as The Somerset Hub, it has proved a big success, providing a space for the community as well as being an important income stream for the club.

“Prior to that, there was nowhere on-site for the fans or the local community to gather,” says Colin. “It’s a great spot for people to go and meet before the games, and it’s used for events during the week.”

Designing the new North Stand, however, was more of a challenge, as Steven explains:

“The thing about the North Stand is... it feels to the fans as though it’s hallowed ground. It’s a lot of people’s favourite spot. Somerset Park has this charm... people love the fact that it feels like an old retro ground. It’s never really changed. So when we were looking at the design we were very sensitive to keep aspects of what was there and hopefully improve them.”

Colin adds: “What’s interesting and different about the development of the North Stand is that unlike most modern football stadiums, Somerset Park is not an all-seater stadium. It is a stadium where you are free to roam the terraces. That makes it quite unique and we have tried to preserve that character by keeping the standing area of the North Terrace and putting the seats up behind it. That’s quite unique to Somerset Park and it’s made even more unique by the fact that we’ve now covered that standing area and added a great new hospitality suite.”



Photo Credit - Denham Youd



Photo Credit - Denham Youd

And that’s not all. As well as the additional 748 seats, the new stand will also provide catering facilities, a business zone, an office zone, a media room, welfare facilities, level access, and those all-important pie stands.

The fact that Ayr United remains in the heart of Ayr has, Steven believes, helped to retain the history and character of Somerset Park.

“We’re lucky in a way that we didn’t build a soulless stadium at the edge of town. For me it’s important that the club sits in the heart of the old industrial part of Ayr, and whilst the factories closed down around it, Somerset Park remained unchanged. It’s like it’s almost been frozen in time, and now this is our time.”

The excitement certainly seems to be building in and around the town with many fans sharing Steven’s optimism and sense of anticipation. And the fact that the development was completed on schedule means that Ayr’s first two fixtures (friendlies against Celtic and Kilmarnock) will allow fans to experience the atmosphere of the new North Terrace at its best.

Needless to say, both men are excited to see the new terrace on match day. But they’re just as thrilled to be part of Somerset Park’s history, as Colin confirms:

“Somerset Park has remained largely untouched for almost a century, with the exception of new roofs added over the Railway End and Somerset Road End. The Main Stand on Tryfield Place has been the most notable addition. Built in 1924, it was designed by Archibald Leitch, the Architect responsible for the design of Ibrox and Villa Park. Now there’s the enclosing of the stadium and the addition of the North Stand. It’s developed slowly, but we’ve tried to maintain the charm and character whilst bringing it into the 21st century.”



Photo Credit - Alan Graham

Colin goes on to tell me that the project has also acted as a springboard onto other opportunities in the sector.

“Since we’ve been involved in that we’ve also worked with Townhead Community Sports Hub and Cumnock Juniors where we’re looking at a new stand and community centre. That’s where Ayr United Women play their games so there’s a connection there as well.”

“We’re doing a community project for Castlemilk Community Trust as well,” says Steven, “which is a nice renovation of an old council facility. It’s really enjoyable and interesting. Football stands or anything related to that, even grass roots... it’s just a nice thing to be involved in.”

And grass roots, of course, is where it all starts.

“What I have discovered,” Steven continues, “is the power that football has on communities. It goes beyond kids. You get men’s walking football, you get drop-in for those with mental health issues. There are so many areas where it can act as a hub as well. When facilities are getting closed down, it’s almost like this is a way to fight against that and find that space for communities to gather in.”

Somerset Hub has already shown the benefit that such spaces can have on a community and, as Colin points out, working class communities are an intricate part of football.

With the addition of the new North Stand, Somerset Park is now accessible and open to more fans than ever before. This is not only thanks to the vision, ambition and investment of David Smith, and the design expertise of Denham Youd, but also to the many other professionals involved in the project, not least the main contractor, Ashleigh (Scotland) Ltd, in particular Kenny Milliken (Project Manager) and Gordon McRae (Quantity Surveyor).

“Off the back of this project we have developed a really good relationship with Clancy Consulting,” Colin confirms, showing that teamwork extends well beyond those on the pitch at Somerset Park. “Duncan Docherty (Structural) and Steve McKergow (Civil) from Clancy are both fantastic professionals and life-long supporters, so collaborating with them has felt like a real family affair.”

“What will be interesting,” Colin continues, “is how, over the next five to ten years, the Hub and the North Stand will impact the club. The club is at a really exciting stage.”

“In all the time we’ve watched Ayr,” Steven concludes, “this is the most exciting time. This could really go somewhere.”

Let’s hope so!