#### THE WEMBLEY TOURS…..WHAT A TIME TO TRAVEL

In the later part of the 1970’s the finances of the association were somewhat precarious, relying heavily upon ever dwindling gate receipts at County matches, annual affiliation fees from local associations and grant aid from the three main local authorities. Income generated was fully utilised and by the end of the season the County association had very little in the way of funds to start the new season.

To a large degree the generosity of Bill Jordan of Jordan’s Coaches, official transport for the County teams, in presenting very late accounts for the season or in certain cases forgetting to bill the association for specific matches helped enormously to keep the association financially afloat. The financial position did however limit the option of playing additional matches as a home game meant a bill for catering for the visiting teams and their officials and an away game an account for a coach plus any miscellaneous expenses. And it was from this background that the Wembley visits were born.

Malcolm Berry, our stalwart ESFA regional representative, had for many years advocated that individual schools could support the national finances by taking groups of students to Wembley Stadium to watch the England schoolboy side compete against the best of the home countries or on occasions against the best of our continental neighbours. The first visits were strongly supported by the middle schools in South Northumberland SFA and East Northumberland SFA and a contingent of twelve coaches made up the first entourage to travel under the Northumberland Schools’ FA umbrella. A successful, expanded group of some twenty two coaches left the north east the following spring with coach companies contracted from across the north east region.

Schools now wanted a better standard of travel and executive transport with on board coffee machines, toilets and video entertainment was the order of the day. Demand was outstripping availability and additional forms of transport had to be considered.

The decision in the early 1980’s to book a train through British Rail and fill 720 seats for the March international was the start of what was to become, for a number of years at least, an annual pilgrimage from the North East to London by both coach and train. Students travelled from across the region and at last some of the local high schools joined the visit. Apart from the school pupils travelling to Wembley, via King’s Cross and then special underground direct to Wembley, more and more seats were sold to groups of mums who spent the day shopping in Harvey Nicholls and Harrods whilst their husbands and partners visited Wembley with the children.

Trains were booked for both the March and the June international matches and the ESFA played their part by arranging fixtures with more exciting continental and South American opposition. In 1984 such was the demand for places that British Rail’s single biggest customer nationally was Northumberland Schools’ FA. The princely sum of £28,800 was paid to them for three trains, a figure many times higher than British Rail received from any travel agent in the country.

The profit margin was shared with local associations on a pro-rata basis and both County and local associations benefited directly from the “Wembley tours”. Local schools who participated received football strips, local associations finance to support their inter district matches and Northumberland SFA was able to invest funds with National Savings at an excellent rate of return which allowed income from investments to support the additional pressures that came from having successful County sides.

Thesuccess of the County teams was becoming nationally recognised and many national associations offered Northumberland invitations to play at both under 15 and under 18 level. The County treasurer was now in a position to support team managers who wanted to extend the number of matches that the U15 or U18 side played, to purchase new sets of strips and customised track-suits. The benefits of having a sound financial base were soon visible and Northumberland County Schools’ FA soon became the team to beat at U18 in the national competition.

The Wembley era of the late 70’s and early 80’s was an opportunity to put the Northumberland Schools FA finances on a firm footing and allowed the Association to bypass the vagaries of the diminishing grant aid from the local authorities. Careful husbandry, by a succession of able treasurers, has ensured that Northumberland SFA continues to provide football competitions for both girls and boys at all stages of mandatory schooling and the post 16 years. Many have benefitted directly from the legacy of the “Wembley Tours”; Who can tell how many others will follow in the years that lie ahead?

# Stuart Todd