



An artist's impression of the proposed new look Huish Park from behind the planned new stand which will have community and social facilities

Fry again shows some of the bigger clubs the way to keep progressing

When Leeds United were relegated to League One in 2007, some of their more entrepreneurial supporters produced a T-shirt for sale bearing a well-known expletive and questioning the geographical location of Yeovil.

It was anything but the first time the Somerset club had been patronised since reaching the Football League in 2003 – after more than 100 years of trying – and was in many ways a compliment.

Yeovil Town, often antagonistically dubbed a 'village team' by the city slickers who would never admit it but must grudgingly admire their staying power, are about to complete their sixth successive season in League One.

For a town with a population of 42,000 – and a team who have had to compete over the years with rivals such as Leeds, Leicester City, Blackpool, Swansea City, Nottingham Forest, Sheffield Wednesday, Southampton, Bristol City, Norwich City and Millwall – Yeovil's is one of more unsung achievements in the Football League.

They may still be fighting a battle to stay in the third tier of English football, and crowds may have dipped this season, but, without burdening themselves with unmanageable debts and unattainable ambi-

tions, Yeovil have taught a few of the so-called bigger names the odd thing about how to run a football club.

But, while their achievements on the field and in balancing the books are admirable, even the wearer of the most green-and-white-tinted spectacles could not argue that the club has somewhat stagnated from a facilities and match-day experience perspective.

Huish Park was built as recently as 1990, yet the first-time visitor could be forgiven for believing it opened ten years earlier. Home supporters congregate for a pre-match drink in what is little more than a tent – and that is if they do not eschew the stadium altogether in favour of an off-site watering hole.

Yeovil are not alone, of course, in having an out-of-town football stadium with poor social facilities – but the Huish Park site totals 26 acres, much of which is barely used.

This week, however, the club announced significant plans to change all that. They revealed plans for a 3,500-capacity stand, with community and social facilities, that will replace the existing and bland away end.

The plans also include a retail element, which is fundamental to the stand being

financed and built, and would change the face and the image of the club.

John Fry, the long-serving Glovers chairman, has been working with property developer Chris Dawson and recognises the importance of succeeding in delivering the new facilities.

"This is absolutely essential if the club is to stay at the level it currently operates at and improve," said Fry. "We are a very happy club but you need a flagship building. There is nothing worse for supporters than turning up at a football club that looks half-built or not finished.

"It's a crossroads where, if we don't move on now, the club will fall backwards. People come up to me and say, 'Chairman, you've done very well with the football – but not as well with the provision of better supporter facilities'. I accept that. Supporters are always asking what we are going to do to provide a better match-day experience – and this is the answer."

Speculating to accumulate can be a precarious business in the lower divisions of the Football League, particularly when you see how many clubs have run into financial difficulties in the past.

But Fry, who took over as Yeovil chairman in 1996, be-



Chairman John Fry at Huish Park with chief executive Martyn Starnes

lieves it would be more of a gamble for the club to stick with its current facilities.

"Of course, you can be overambitious and break the club – but this is not about getting big ideas and spending money we can't afford," said Fry.

"We have proved over a number of years that a business like this can be run properly and not end up, like so many other Football League clubs, in administration or liquidation.

"This development would be

a reward to the supporters and a reward to Yeovil town itself. The retail development is going to enable us to do the stadium development. Without the retail aspect, we cannot build the stand or develop the rest of the site, because it has to be self-sufficient."

In these challenging times, Yeovil's story of League One survival, financial solidarity and now planned growth is a reminder that success in sport can be measured by more than simply trophies and banknotes.