



A new cathedral: The Salford City Reds supporters get their first competitive look at Barton ahead of last January's 'grand opening' v Leigh rphotos.com

Onward, Wilko's soldiers?

An unsteady 2012 came to a shuddering halt for Salford City Reds with the cancellation of their festive friendly with Leigh Centurions at the LSV - ironically the same team who beat the Reds in last year's opening fixture at their then brand new City of Salford Stadium. The postponement was announced on Friday 21 December, just four days after a public meeting intended to update fans on the club's worsening financial state. **GAZ SHAW** joined in the prayers.

A wicked poignancy accompanied Salford City Reds' public meeting on December 17. Less than a week after the city council rejected a £1.5million loan deal with stadium co-owners Peel Holdings, Pendleton Church was the site of a potential 'end of days' - 139 years after the boys of Cavendish Street Sunday School formed Salford FC (née Cavendish FC) in a church in nearby Manchester.

Like many of the Reds' special days in 2012, the weather blighted proceedings. On this occasion it was incessant rain, harsh even by local standards. Nevertheless, 250 or so supporters packed the pews to hear chairman John Wilkinson OBE pontificate.

The meeting was a long time coming. Bar the odd engagement via social media, Salford's communication with fans and the media was on lockdown. Black autumn. We knew little but the signs of clear and present danger were evident. For one thing, season tickets were not yet on sale. Why not? If the club desperately needed money, then was it not prudent sell them fast?

Wilkinson sat at a table in front of the altar, flanked by long-time director Howard Clague and club statistician David Clegg, moderator for the night; remaining director Iain Watson was conspicuous by his absence. Before taking questions - pre-submitted and from the floor - the chairman spoke long of his tenure at Salford and how the stadium development had come about.

 Leigh	P
 Salford	P
Pre-season friendly Sunday 30 December, 2012	

Ominously, it sounded like a eulogy, or perhaps a preemptive strike.

We heard about three offers to buy the club rebuffed ten years ago, all involving mergers or decamping. Criticisms of recently departed players and coaches were aired and

barbs flung at the media, who Wilkinson feels do not give Salford a fair crack of the whip; particularly the *Manchester Evening News* which, he alleged, allows union cohabitants Sale Sharks to vet their articles. That the newspaper's rugby league man, Neil Barker, was seated in the second row from the front did not go unnoticed.

Yet rather than rake over old ground, most hardy supporters simply wanted to know the severity of the current situation. "Critical," confirmed Wilkinson, with no guarantee that Salford would be able to start



A prayer for the dying? Pendleton Church was the scene of Salford's public meeting Louise Styles