

## A question of perspective

**Lured by the promise of a cutting-edge viewing experience and a glass of something fizzy, The Leisure Review paid its money, donned the glasses and took its seat for the unveiling of international rugby on 3D television. Our man in the scrum, Mick Owen, reports on how the latest in technology compares to the other viewing options currently available.**

Such is the demand for tickets to watch England play rugby at Twickenham in a meaningful contest that the only legitimate ways to acquire one are by joining the union's supporters' club or through an affiliated club or constituent body. As the last is a euphemism for 'old boys' network' and both of the other routes involve 'ballots' it is likely that the armchair rugby fan is going to stay just that, armchair-bound, forced to endure Brian Moore, Jonathan Davies and a series of more recently ex-international players whose views, we are led to believe, are insightful. And all without the walk up from the station, the over-priced beer, the over-rated banter and the queues for the bar, the toilet and the train home. Perhaps if Billy Williams had thought to sell the RFU a cabbage patch slightly closer to central London the schlep to HQ and the £70 price tag might be a little less onerous for anyone north of Watford. But he didn't and with the move to 5 o'clock kick-offs the draw of Twickers has diminished.

As a young man this correspondent remembers travelling up from Southampton with colleagues from King Edward VI's first fifteen in an overfull Morris Minor on dual carriageways that could have been used to film a post-apocalypse drama with Max Beesley and that black actor who didn't get the Dr Who gig. In those halcyon days we shared a Watney's Party Seven and stood on terraces, the French brought bands, cockerels and Gauloises, the wind swirled unpredictably round the mismatched stands and England were largely rubbish. Now the stadium and the paying customers are sanitised, homogenous and available in one size only throughout the rugby-playing world and England have won a World Cup. If you have never been to a 6 Nations international at Twickenham, you should. The stadium is a cathedral, the atmosphere before the game is electric and the joy of rubbing shoulders, often literally, with fellow rugby people no matter what scarf they are wearing is tangible. But, given even all that, you only need do it once, especially when the modern game is so capable of dulling both heart and mind when left in the hands of the unimaginative and engineering works can strike the rail system at any point.

Sensible as the decision not to travel all the way to south west London may be, prior to O2's entry into the cinema market, the alternatives lacked excitement. Watching it from the comfort of home or making your way to a pub or rugby club with a big screen where you may or may not be welcome both seem mundane ways to witness Martin Johnson's assault on managerial immortality to accompany his 'legendary player' status, especially as this season's opener, at home against the Welsh, was to be the centenary of something or other and in addition to the 'white orcs on steroids' modelling an impossibly tautological 'new retro' outfit we were to get two for the price of one on Diana's offspring; BOGOF indeed. Who would look the more incongruous, Simon Shaw in a Harry Hill collar or a prince of the blood in the 21st century, was just one of the 'match ups' that those who took the O2 option were to be offered not only live, not only in full colour, not only in Dolby surround sound but somehow, for some reason, in three dimensions. Why? Well, there was only one way to find out: pay the £12.50 and get down to Manchester's Odeon cinema.

'Up for the cup' is an expression heard less these days than "Would you care to take my seat, Madame" but it captures the excitement of 'the trip'. Going to a rugby international should be a trip. It shouldn't be a trek (see above) but it should involve a coach or a train, other people, a beer in a busy hostelry and walking through city streets where civilians are gradually out-numbered by the flocking of fellow fans. The trip to the Odeon featured a train and a pub but, with only 250 seats sold, the press of England shirts only became even vaguely claustrophobic in the queue for the 'free' Carling that came with the mock aviator sunglasses and the O2 wristband. Quite who they were trying to keep out was a mystery as the Odeon's response to hosting "the first ever live 3D broadcast of a rugby match in the world" was underwhelming. But, like James Haskell as he supported Matthew Tait to score the winning try, we risk getting ahead of ourselves and missing the best bit of the day.

Train journey ticked off, your correspondent's party made its way to The Castle on Oldham Road to find a boozer from the days when Twickers was still a cabbage patch. From its tiled exterior to its nicotine-yellowed cornices to its stools made for a far smaller population, this is a determinedly unreconstructed public house. Having said that, the friendly, if scatty, bar staff, the range of local real ales, an idiosyncratic bar snack offer (Eccles cakes and pickled eggs) and a juke box that seems to offer little beyond 1970 means it has a 21st century novelty which makes it a haven of [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)



Technology is now able to create the impression of England moving the ball quickly

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individuality in an homogenised world. As one reviewer has written, referencing the quarterisation (or is that cauterisation?) of city-centre Manchester, "The Northern Quarter is a place that is determined to be the cool kid in Clark's shoes compared to the rest of the city. One pub that epitomises this feeling is The Castle Hotel." But time, tide and rugby in 3D wait for no man and with heavy heart our party left, wiped its feet and wended its way past an Armenian café, two hairdressing training emporia and a couple of sex shops till blinking it emerged into the bright light of day bouncing off the Arndale Centre. From a pub that has seen Elbow perform in its back room and refuses to allow anyone past its door if they're wearing a 'football favour' to a regiment of units flogging regiments of units to regiments of units and onward to a cinema with 23 screens, no sign of a soul and nary a reference point to explain the assault of light and noise that is the modern day cinema foyer. The culture shock was stunning and were it not for the attentions of a young lady sporting an O2 t-shirt with, inexplicably, angels' wings it is likely many of the middle-aged, middle-class audience members would have wandered back out or still be standing there now, bemused and slightly trepidatious with no idea what to do or where to go next.

Saturday afternoon cinemas belong to the young but if any of the replica-shirted oldies shown to their seats by enthusiastic young O2ers wondered what on earth they were doing there the first shots of the arena through the issued eyewear would have answered them. Rugby in 3D works magnificently. Twickenham is a soaring cathedral of noise and colour and, with 3D glasses from a seat right at the front, it looks it. With the camera at pitch level the stands rear up and keep rearing. This must be what it feels like to be standing at the centre of that monstrous rugby coliseum for real. And then the gladiators are released. Haskell is a barrel with added tree trunk legs. Toby Flood? A gangly youth. Ryan Jones is the epitome of the definition of the word 'solid' and Jones (Stephen) is taking his life in his hands going out there with those monsters. The extended preliminaries give the 3D audience every chance to feel part of the action. How many of them tell the PR woman to get out of the way when she walks between the audience and Princeswilliamandharry must remain unrecorded but about the same number reach out to pat the elder parasite's bald patch. It is all fantastic fun and then the game starts.

Does 3D make the action more realistic? By about a factor of thirty, not three. You can see them handling at the bottom of the rucks, you feel the crunch as the scrums engage and when Martyn Williams puts his foot on the gas to release the real speedster Tom James, Welsh or English you catch your breath. It is far better than television and almost better than watching it live because you have a constantly changing perspective. Some of those changes, it must be said, were a little quicker than bespectacled eyes could cope with and one or two views made everything look very strange indeed but as a way to watch a game of rugby it works. But not if you like 'atmosphere'. An intermittent fault on the sound meant that the auditorium kept losing the crowd noise, the Stuart Barnes sound-alike commentator and the pontifications of Dick Best, and when this happened the limitations of putting so few people in such a big room without the benefit of a handy bar were exposed. No atmosphere was discernible, other than that coming from the speakers, either during the game or on the long walk to and from the toilets at half time or at the end. Despite a public announcement from Sean Bean that shouting and singing was not allowed, it was expected. No friendly ribbing of defeated Welshmen, no shouting at Alain 'Taffy' Roland, no singing of Swing Low. No real loss, to be fair. The Welsh are always moody when they get beat, Alain wasn't listening and it's a dirge anyway.

Should you go to a 3D rugby international? At least once, yes. Is it as good as being there? Better in some ways and nowhere near as good in others. Is it the saviour of rugby union? Well, rugby union doesn't need saving and, truth be told, when England beat Wales by more than a dozen points and do so by converting a slovenly pass into a scintillating try with minutes to go and no way back for the men in red then watching it on a black and white portable with no aerial and a tendency to drift off signal would be just dandy. Will this correspondent be going again? Not if they have a television in the back room of The Castle and they'll let us stick it on if we're quiet, no.

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