

Interviewee: Gemma Teale
YOB: 1980
Born: Ealing
Parents: Father worked in Print Shop, mother in a college
Date of interview: 9.3.2020
Location of interview: Griffin Park
Interviewer: Natasha Joslin
Summary: Celia Holman

This is a thoughtful and wide-ranging interview, from the point of view of first and foremost a fan “bewitched by Brentford”, and also that of the founder of the Brentford LGBeeT supporters’ group.

Having played football from the age of 5, Gemma became “obsessed” with Brentford as a teenager, when she started to hang out with school friends who were Brentford supporters.

Her earliest memory is standing at the front of a stand, half watching the game, half “nattering” and of the crowd singing ‘Hey, Jude.’ The school friends went their separate ways, but Gemma remained a Brentford supporter - “I’d found my team” - often attending matches on her own.

After time spent away at university, Gemma returned to supporting Brentford ‘full-time’, and started to meet fellow supporters on Facebook and Twitter - “a whole great big Brentford family”

c.2015 Gemma set up LGBeeT. Initially she had been reluctant to get involved, but seeing the work that ‘Pride in Football’ and other groups were doing gradually changed her mind. She designed a logo and set up a Twitter account. Brentford supporters’ group BIAS and Beesotted retweeted her tweet and soon the direct messages started to come in: “I thought I was the only one.”

The club “engaged fairly openly right from the start” and there is a ‘hybrid’ Brentford/Pride LGBeeT flag flying at the ground. It’s “very important not just to fans, but also to players” as it is telling people “we’re here if you need support.” Gemma acknowledges that a lot has been achieved “in terms of visibility” but there can still be aggressive, homophobic language at matches, and there needs to be “proper processes” in place for reporting it. Rather than sanctions per se, she would rather there be “a bit of a chat” to help people understand the impact of what they are saying - “we’re letting everyone down by not being clearer.”

Gemma talks about other supporters’ group: FSA, BIAS (of which she is a committee member) and Bees United. She was also part of the umbrella Stadium Action Group, established to support the Lionel Road stadium planning application. 500 fans showed up at the planning meeting, waving small posters saying ‘YES!’.

Some highlights of her time as a Brentford fan: “getting the flag up”; having Buzz [club mascot] appear at Pride festival; and bringing her son at 3 months’ old to a match - “that was something different!”

She has watched people growing up and growing older on the terraces - “no idea of half of their names” but she has talked to them more regularly than some of her closest friends. There is “tremendous comfort” in having a “connection” to those around you. It’s “more like church, or a church”. Even when the stadium is empty you “can still feel what’s been in it, all the people.”

Evening games: “best thing in the whole world” and she describes the scene both physically and in terms of the “energy”.

Away games: “great fun”. Gemma remembers decanting ‘gins in tins’ into Sprite bottles to create “Special Sprite” for the journey to “places you wouldn’t go otherwise”

Chants: “we’re not the most vocal fans” and the chants have “lost some of the creativity” as TV shares chants more widely amongst different fan groups.

She describes some of the changing demographics to be seen in the stadium and welcomes the move to the new stand.