

28/09/05 TT No.58: Stephen Harris - AFC Totton (Wessex League)

Saturday 24 September 2005; AFC Totton 2-1 Paulton Rovers; FA Cup; Attendance: 150, programme issued, admission £4.

My requirements for last Saturday were an FA Cup fixture on a ground I had not previously visited, that was far enough away from home to feel like a proper day out, but which could be reached relatively quickly. AFC Totton seemed to fit the bill, and provided a match between two clubs who can rarely, if ever, have played each other before. In fact, the supposedly quick journey down turned into a gruelling three-and-a-half-hour nightmare of delayed trains and shambolic bus transfers past engineering works. This meant I had to walk rather briskly to the ground to see the kick-off, missing all the sights of Totton. A local spectator later told me that there were no sights at all, absolutely none whatsoever; so, it seems I did not miss much. He used the word 'chav' more than once in describing the nature of the town.

Testwood Park is a pleasant venue with quite a bit of character. The pitch is enclosed by a white rail and a concrete pathway, with tall, dense *Leylandii* hedges flanking each side. The middle third of one side has a low, blue 1980s stand with four rows of blue and white bench seats and the words 'AFC TOTTON' neatly labelled in white on the fascia. Opposite this is another length of blue-painted (in fact everything in the ground is blue-painted) cover, housing two terrace steps. This too has the club name on the fascia, but is set well back from the touchline and it is mostly used by the groundsman as an equipment store. Only one spectator chose to stand here, whilst two others used it as a handy place to park their bicycles during the game. One end has the dressing rooms, clubhouse and tea bar, the other provides distant views of the tower blocks of Southampton. Perhaps the most striking feature is the floodlights which are of a unique design on short, white poles. I have always felt that a decent non-league ground should have a good number of mysterious huts and sheds dotted about the place, and Testwood Park features no less than eleven assorted caravans, huts, sheds and containers in various shades of blue and states of dilapidation. A grand sight.

The crowd for this game was comprised mainly of rather mature gentlemen, with a far higher proportion than usual of chaps in blazers and club ties - especially amongst those who had travelled from Somerset. At half time, there was the rather startling sight in the clubhouse of white wine being 'sipped' from real wine glasses. You don't get that kind of thing on my usual East London circuit. Unfortunately, all this gentility was not replicated on the pitch, where the two teams put in one of the dirtiest and games I have seen for a long time. The language was bad! The fact that Paulton have defenders nicknamed 'Chopper' and 'Killer' tells you all you need to know about them - and Totton were little better. Within minutes of the start a Paulton forward collided with the home keeper, resulting in both needing treatment and the keeper's name going in the book.

Three minutes later an identical collision between the same two on the same spot resulted in lengthy treatment for the forward who eventually departed the field on a stretcher and later left the ground in an ambulance. In all, the trainers were on at least six times in the first half, whilst neither goal was really threatened. Astonishingly, the referee deemed all this to be worthy of just two minutes injury time - I was expecting at least ten. The second half was just as dirty and goals looked increasingly unlikely. Then all of a sudden, we had a cracking last fifteen minutes and an unlikely 2-1 home win which was greatly celebrated by almost all present.

The match programme was a fairly standard issue, with an attractive cover, for £1. FGIF Match rating 2* .

03/20