

TT No.122: Andrew Gallon - Sat 20th January 2007; **Leamington FC** v Bemerton Heath Harlequins; FA Vase Rd 4; Res: 4-1; Att: 1,045; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (34pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

A sleeping giant is stirring in Warwickshire. Time was when AP Leamington were one of the top non-league teams in the country and founder members of the Alliance Premier League, playing in what is now the Nationwide Conference between 1979 and 1982. But the original Windmill Ground was sold by club owners Automotive Products and razed by developers in 1988, with the club folding. Leamington FC, formed in 2000, have since picked up the baton and are now really getting into their stride at a shiny new home.

They are the league record-breaking leaders of the Midland Football Alliance, with their only two defeats this season coming in cup competitions. Healthy crowds indicate a high interest rate in the town and a four-figure attendance at this game saw the Brakes (one of the all-time great nicknames) ease into the last 16 of the Vase for the first time. The fans must be keen because the New Windmill Ground is very much in the back of beyond, set amid pleasant rolling fields between the south-eastern outskirts of Leamington and Harbury village. It's a rural venue which is clearly improving all the time. The large car park is covered with a railway ballast-type aggregate and superbly policed by stewards who are efficient without being overbearing. Not a jobsworth to be seen. Full marks to the club for not charging fans to park at an out-of-town ground accessible only by car. They also lay on a free bus service from the town centre. League clubs take note. Having parked, there is a chance to take in the grass, floodlit training pitch to the left before entering a ground which runs at right angles to the adjacent Harbury Lane.

The turnstile block appears to be a large garden shed, as does the nearby club shop (exceptionally well stocked), confectionary hut and burger bar. All these structures, along with the slender floodlight pylons (four on each side), are painted a dark matt green. Very neat. The dug-outs, a small TV gantry, three commemorative wooden benches and 50 seats in a temporary open stand are also located on this east side. Behind the Harbury Lane end goal is a spotless cantilever stand running the width of the penalty area. There are seats to the right as you look out at the pitch and a broad area of hardstanding to the left. To the rear is a splendid social club and dressing room complex. Though a modern single-storey, red-brick building, the club has a homely feel inside. Scarves and autographed shirts from other clubs adorn the walls, with some marvellous press cuttings telling the tale of the old ground's sad demise and the stage-by-stage development of the new one. The players climb steps in the bottom right-hand corner to access the pitch. The main stand - a mini cantilever containing four rows of seats laid out alternately in the club's gold and black colours - sits astride the halfway line on the west side. From here, because the ground is built on a grassy knoll, there is a sumptuous landscape panorama, with the spires of Leamington visible in the

distance. The hardstanding which runs right round the ground is augmented by slightly raised areas covered with wood chippings. The far end rises up a grass slope to the wire mesh perimeter fence and is rather fancifully called the North Bank. A heavy-duty plastic post and rail fence surrounds the pitch.

Everything is dutifully tended, lovingly maintained and positively sparkles in the bright winter sunshine. Ground staff toiled for hours to ensure the pitch passed an early inspection. There are areas of sand and it is clearly very soft but stands

up well to the punishment. The players also have to contest with a strong wind blowing from the south. It affects the quality of the football, though that improves in the second half when the gale abates a little. Leamington are favourites to lift the Vase and Salisbury-based Wessex Leaguers Bemerton Heath show them plenty of respect. The Brakes, with the elements behind them, spend the opening 45 minutes virtually camped in the Quins half. The deadlock is broken in the 22nd minute when Ben Mackey is quickest to react to a scuffed Darren Crowfoot goal-kick and spurts away to round the crestfallen keeper and find the empty net. A minute before the break, Quins equalise. To say it comes against the run of play is an early contender for the understatement of the millennium. The referee, who irks the home fans throughout, rather harshly decides Adam Knight has bundled over Matt Baker in the box following a penetrating cross from Joe Sanger, who has just come on as a sub. Jason Pearcey dives to turn away Jack Slade's nerve-wracked penalty but instant impact man Sanger turns the loose ball into the opposite corner of the net. There is time for Leamington's Tom Bates to hit the crossbar from 20 yards before the teams go off.

The second half is dominated by Leamington, who score three times to ease through. A great pass from Bates seven minutes after the restart gives Mackey the chance to fire a low drive inside Crowfoot's near post and Martin Thompson puts the outcome beyond reasonable doubt from a similar position in a one-on-one with the keeper with 13 minutes left. Graham Mankin then heads wide when it looks easier to score and Brakes sub Dave Pearson punishes the Quins midfielder in the 84th minute when he uses his pace to engineer a shooting position on the left side of the box before

steering the ball past Crowfoot. Comfortable in the end but the visitors deserve credit for a dogged effort. They never gave up.

Before kick-off, a trophy presentation was made to the 10,000th "paying customer" (as the excellent programme has it) through the New Windmill turnstiles this season. Remarkably, the recipient is a surprised groundhopper - all the way from Bexleyheath. He tells the crowd in a pitch-side interview broadcast over the public address that he has been to more than 600 grounds, and is rewarded with gasps of astonishment and a round of applause. Leamington are a club on the up and will be playing Southern League football next season. They're geared for success and who would bet against them going even higher? Try your Brakes!

