

**TT No.129: Andrew Gallon** - Sat 27th January 2007; **Gravesend & Northfleet v Stevenage Borough**; Conference; Res: 1-1; Att: 1,409; Admission: £12; Programme: £2.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

You don't need to be Dr Who and own a Tardis to enjoy time travel. Visit Stonebridge Road and you'll find yourself back in the 1950s - without having left 2007. This is a ground to be savoured: externally, a setting idiosyncratic enough to revive the most jaded eye; internally, an appealing collection of characterful stands and a charmingly old-fashioned atmosphere. One almost expects to require pre-decimalisation currency for admission and to discover the terraces are populated by 'Just William' schoolboys twirling wooden football rattles and shouting 'Up the Fleet'.

Northfleet is workaday, rather than Garden of England, Kent and Stonebridge Road is in a workaday location, very close to the docks and the Thames. Fascinatingly, industry clamps the ground in a grip as tight as any vice. There is scarcely room to breathe. A quite splendid red-brick turnstile block is the club's front window on the world, facing a busy roundabout with a pub, The Plough, on a corner. An industrial estate, car and furniture showrooms and a petrol station are immediately to the west, with a building site, complete with towering crane, and a railway line beyond. To the south, a car wash, a tyre factory and a grimy lane hem the ground in. The land rises sharply through a band of trees to a rather rough-looking housing estate, adding to the feeling of claustrophobia. To the east is a bus repair depot, the yard of a builders' merchant and, beyond, the cranes, chimneys and sheds of the docks. You can almost smell the river. The only spare bit of land the club own is behind the north end. A small, unsurfaced car park jostles for space with abandoned double-deckers and a huge electricity pylon which looms over this part of the ground like Jack's beanstalk. This is the sort of football territory we all know and some of us love; far removed from the out-of-town dislocation of the Airfix kit new stadia.

Interestingly, it wasn't always like this here. In the club shop on the Stonebridge Road side is a black and white view from the air taken in 1933 when the now-defunct Northfleet United played at the ground (Gravesend & Northfleet were a post-1945 merger of Northfleet and Gravesend United). The roads are recognisable but the surroundings are open, with the docks a couple of hundred yards distant. From the outside, the Fleet's historic stands look distinctly shabby - all rusting corrugated iron, as if determined to remain in keeping with the squalid landscape. Inside, the ground is one for the connoisseur. Through the turnstile block by the roundabout, there is an eclectic mixture of white-painted buildings, with the largest, huddled hard up against the back of the town end stand, being the social club. It's a cramped, low-ceilinged, rather gloomy structure and, frankly, not a place to linger. Head left down a narrow passage and the ground opens up before you. As is often the case with constrained sites, there is an unexpected feeling of

spaciousness when you finally get alongside the touchline. Most surfaces are painted red and white and, with a strengthening winter sun picking out the lush green of the pitch, the gem that is Stonebridge Road positively glows.

To run round the ground clockwise from this corner: a small area of terracing leads to a burger bar and the club shop, then to a cavernous stand built in 1959. Sturdy crush barriers are placed on the unusually broad steps with the stand's advert-covered overhanging fascia making it feel particularly cosy. A TV gantry in the middle of the roof squats above the halfway line. Past more uncovered steps you reach the Swanscombe End, which comprises open terracing, constructed in 1980 and dotted with thin metal crush barriers painted red and white. This is where the away fans are obliged to congregate. There is another turnstile block in the far corner. The ground's crowning glory, the 1914 vintage wooden main stand, is on the east side and bestrides the halfway line. It is flanked by two sections of open terracing. The stand is, inevitably, showing signs of age - many of its straight lines are deflecting - and its survival in these safety-conscious times is something of a wonder. Red tip-up seats have been placed on the original wooden benches and is the sole concession to modernity. It is set back slightly from the pitch, with seven elaborate roof supports and a narrow players' tunnel in the middle. The dug-outs are positioned in front, on either side of the tunnel. The town end stand was built around 1952 and runs the width of the pitch. Its timeworn terracing is no longer used and the front portion contains a block of red tip-up seats arranged in six rows. The words 'The Fleet' are painted in giant red letters on the white rear wall. Shades of Fleetwood Town. The four floodlight pylons are strangely slender for ones used in a corner layout and the seven lamps on each appear disproportionately large.

Today's game, between two teams hoping to make the play-offs, turns out to be a cracker. The Fleet, one of the smallest clubs in the top tier of the Conference, have surpassed all expectations this season and only a superlative display of goalkeeping from Stevenage's Alan Julian denies them another victory. The hosts make all the early running and Julian brilliantly palms a Ross Smith volley over the crossbar. But Borough score first in the 28th minute against the run of play. Mark Beard's brilliant cross-field pass frees Dale Binns wide on the left and his low ball in is met first time by Steve Morison, who tucks away his 17th goal of the campaign. Five minutes later, the Fleet are level. Stacy Long plays a low cross in from the left and the impressive Charlie MacDonald, surrounded by defenders, turns cleverly to cut back a 12-yard dink which completely wrongfoots a helpless Julian.

The Fleet dominate an absorbing second half in which Stevenage are always dangerous on the break. MacDonald's through ball puts Luke Moore in the clear but Julian rushes off his line to make a great block in a one-on-one. Mark de Bolla and George Purcell both hit the woodwork with low drives and MacDonald is just too high with a flashing volley, while Julian parries a MacDonald shot and, with five minutes left, produces a stunning reaction save to push aside Paul McCarthy's close-range header at the back post. Julian gathers a stinging Joel Ledgister

attempt from 25 yards at the second attempt in a frantic finish which also sees Morison balloon a great chance to steal all three points for Stevenage in the dying seconds.

A 'kids for a quid' scheme, along with a good turnout from Borough, boosts the crowd to the third-highest of the season. There is some discussion in the par-for-the-course programme (featuring one of the worst cover photographs I've ever seen) that the relatively antiquated facilities don't encourage people to support the club. The Fleet are keen to move and there are rumours about relocating to a site linked with the Ebbsfleet station development. But it is very much at the 'if rather than when' stage, which gives those who haven't enjoyed the delights of Stonebridge Road the opportunity to do so before the bulldozers do their worst.

Though tucked away, the ground is well signposted from the A2. Arrive early if you want to use the free, secure parking at the away end; otherwise, it's a case of join the scrum on the adjacent streets. And, unlike Dr Who, a female assistant and a robotic hound aren't obligatory.

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