

TT No.148: Andrew Gallon - Sunday February 11th 2007; **Arsenal** v Wigan Athletic; Premiership. Res: 2-1; Att: 60,049; Admission: £43; Programme: £3 (84pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

If you can afford to shop at Harrods, you buy the best; if you can't, you have to compromise. And so, it is with football stadia. The likes of Doncaster Rovers had to go for the cheap option and ended up with a soulless shed in an industrial wilderness. But fat cats Arsenal, since the advent of art deco Highbury, the style gurus of the game, and now bloated with the sweet meats from satellite TV's dinner table, were able to respect their traditions and order a top-of-the-range model.

The Emirates Stadium is, in my opinion, the pick of football's new homes. It's not perfect but is a worthy successor to the Highbury legacy of architects Claude Waterlow Ferrier and William Binnie. Importantly, the Gunners (their controversial relocation from Plumstead in 1913 notwithstanding) did not have to uproot from the inner city. Highbury, a building site with only the west gateway flats and the rear walls of the east and west stands remaining, is but a couple of hundred yards away. Walking up St Thomas's Road onto Gillespie Road from the Finsbury Park direction, it's as if nothing has changed. The street hawkers, back-garden salesmen and burger vans are all there, and the fans still pour from the Arsenal tube station in a red and white tide. But their destination now gleams over to the west; a glass and steel lozenge crowning a rise between the railway lines at Ashburton Grove. This used to be an industrial estate and a waste plant. For a rounded view of what Arsenal's move there meant to businesses and residents, I'd recommend David Conn's eye-opening book 'The Beautiful Game? Searching for the Soul of Football'.

The worst bits of the Emirates Stadium are encountered first. The boxlike ticket office and megastore on Drayton Park are simply hideous, and the blocks housing the museum and toilets little better. But the rest is sumptuous. The use of logos, so much a part of Highbury, is superb and tells the world this is where Arsenal FC play. Individuality and fine detailing are the key. Among the many thoughtful touches around the stadium, my favourite was the field guns at the main Holloway Road entrance in front of The Armoury megastore. From this vantage point, the stadium is seen at its best. After nightfall, all lit up, it is a palace for footballing royalty. And also, it has to be said, a glittering monument to the greed and excess of the Premiership. While Arsenal rake in Sky's millions, and pay their players accordingly, part-time neighbours such as Hendon are denied any trickle-down cash and eke out a hand-to-mouth existence. It's not right. Frankly, it's immoral.

Inside the stadium, all that money has been well spent. Again, lots of logos, bright colours and illustrations. The cheery concourses invite the customer (as fans at this level are described these days) to linger and, from the west upper tier, the views through the floor-to-ceiling picture windows across the city are magnificent. Once in your (padded) seat, there is a chance to admire the sleek lines of the

rollercoaster roof, the sweeping seating tiers and, despite a week of snow and rain, an immaculate pitch. Arsenal's trophy-winning years are picked out in white stencils on the middle-height red tier fascia's and this helps to add character, though it is nothing to the splendid montage of Foxes faces at the Walkers Stadium in Leicester. Even from the upper tier, I felt close to the action - and to celebrity Gooner Rory McGrath, who was sitting about 10 yards away on the next row down.

I hadn't expected much from this almost-top versus nearly-bottom game but it was, in the words of Match of the Day's Adrian Chiles, fabulously entertaining. Wigan were full of energy and, at times, showed they could play as sexily as their hosts. With better finishing, they would have had the points sewn up long before Arsenal stole them with two goals in the last nine minutes. In a remarkable display of foresight, the opulent programme revealed the Gunners have outscored their opponents 20-0 in the last 10 minutes this season. Make that 22-0. Dutchman Denny Landzaat's 25-yard screamer into the top corner which put Latics ahead was sublime. Team-mate Emile Heskey, back from injury, was a constant threat to an Arsenal defence looking hesitant without the suspended Philippe Senderos and could have scored a hat-trick. I had a good view of Mathieu Flamini's clumsy challenge on Heskey which left manager Paul Jewell so angry when referee Phil Dowd waved away penalty appeals. For me, Heskey, a big man, went down too easily. The striker could have kept his feet and been in on Jens Lehmann. But Arsenal undeniably dominated the second half and their late strikes - a Fitz Hall own goal from a cross delivered by an offside Flamini and a flying Tomas Rosicky header - made for a rousing, thrilling climax. The fact the home fans were screaming for the final whistle indicated what a close call it had been. Everyone leaving the ground was buzzing with opinion - always a good sign.

To add my two penn'orth to the list of transport options to the Emirates Stadium: If arriving from the north by car, it's handy to come in by the over-ground train to Finsbury Park from Potters Bar. There is plenty of free parking within a five-minute walk of Potters Bar station, which is close to junction 24 of the M25. The fare is £5.50 return. After the game, you avoid the awful queues for the Arsenal tube. Following a brisk walk at the final whistle, I was able to head straight into Finsbury Park station and jump on to a waiting train. A 1600 kick-off and back in Potters Bar for 1834. Not bad!

06/20