

**TT No.155: Andrew Gallon** - Tue 20th February 2007; **Crewe Alexandra v Doncaster Rovers**; League One; Res: 2-1; Att: 4,483; Admission: £10; Programme: £2.50 (68pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

All change at Crewe. Well, it certainly has since my last visit in the mid-1980s. Gresty Road has been transformed into the Alexandra Stadium. Not quite ugly duckling to swan but something of the sort. The club has lost a little but gained much in the process. As it used to be, Gresty Road was a bit of a dump, albeit lovable and characterful. All creaking wooden stands, telegraph poles masquerading as floodlight pylons and piles of cinders where concrete terracing should have been. In short, a Fourth Division home for a Fourth Division club.

But a revolution in the 1990s to equal the one on the pitch inspired by talismanic manager Dario Gradi swept away the antiquated and outdated. In its place has come a very orderly, largely pleasing 10,066-capacity stadium, with rebuilding on each side and both ends. Only the new main stand, a massive cantilever with 6,500 seats, sponsored this year by Air Products, jars on the eye. It is as out of place and out of scale as a liner moored alongside trawlers, towering above the rooftops of the tightly-packed red-brick terraced houses which hem the club in. One of these houses - charmingly - used to house the Alex's offices. Now they are part of the new stand, which is bland and functional in appearance and backs on to a large car park. Unusually, there are no dug-outs - each team is allocated an area of seats near the halfway line, with a wide area of tarmac between pitch and spectators. Tall as the stand is, it has to give second best in height to the huge tower block of the adjacent Rail House and the floodlight pylons of the nearby sidings. And that's good, for Crewe and railways go together like steak and kidney. We know exactly where we are. The three other stands are very similar. They are low-roofed and clad in grey corrugated sheeting, with red metalwork and seats giving a sense of unity and style. The newcomers may not be much to look at and lack the quirks of those they replaced but the club, undeniably, now has a ground fit for football in the 21st century. The Railway End has crammed a lot into an area which used to be a narrow, bleak, open terrace. There are 658 seats and, to the rear, six executive boxes. From here, you can see how steeply the pitch slopes from right to left. The Popular Side cover has become the Blue Bell Stand, with its 1,680 seats given over to away fans. Behind is the Alexandra Suite social club, a TV gantry perches on the roof and between the stands, filling in the north-east corner, is a large clock. The Gresty Road End, formerly an unappealing, partly-covered terrace from where I once glumly watched my team concede six goals, is now a smart area of 994 seats.

A real bonus for tonight's game is that Crewe have cut prices to just £10 for all areas of the ground. "We're sick of playing Doncaster," the woman in the ticket office told me, referring to the two recent meetings with Rovers in the ludicrous Johnstone Paints Trophy. The Alex give their supporters even more cause for

celebration by beating the Yorkshiremen at the fourth attempt this season, thanks to substitute Michael Higdon's well-taken last-minute winner. Michael O'Connor did well to win the ball back from Sean Thornton on the right flank and veteran Rodney Jack crossed

for Higdon to glance a close-range header wide of Neil Sullivan and into the bottom corner. It will help the unfavoured Higdon's rehabilitation with the Crewe faithful. A bill for that night's local Evening Sentinel newspaper outside the ground revealed 'Higdon aims to win over boo-boys'. Game on! It was no more than Crewe, whose football under Gradi is as tidy as their ground, deserved following a lively second-half display. Ryan Lowe wasted a one-on-one moments after the break and Luke Varney headed against a post when he should have scored. Rovers cleared the rebound for a corner but could not repeat the trick when the ball came back in and Ben Rix looped a header over Sullivan from the edge of the box. Doncaster levelled against the run of play when Billy Jones, on the intervention of a linesman, was judged to have brought down Lewis Guy and Paul Heffernan crashed a penalty into the roof of the net via one of Ben Williams's gloves. But Higdon went from zero to hero to clinch an important victory as the possibility of a return to Division Four began to loom, for Crewe.

The ground is easy to reach from junction 17 of the M6. Follow the signs for the station and you'll see the floodlights. There is plenty of on-street parking off Gresty Road. I found myself leaving the car on Dario Gradi Drive. How many people get a road named after them before they die? Legend.

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