

TT No.176: Andrew Gallon - Tue March 13th 2007; **Cambridge United** v York City; Conference; Res: 0-5; Att: 2,428; Admission: £12; Programme: £2.50 (52pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

March 26 is Cambridge United's date with destiny. An extraordinary general meeting of shareholders will attempt to chart a course through the stormy waters threatening to capsize the club. Among the proposals are abolishing the rule that one person may hold only a maximum 20% stake and increasing the number of shares to 50 million. A group of investors, including one from the US involved with the Seattle Sounders team, would then pump in £600,000 over two years. It doesn't sound much but, with United losing £300,000 each year and paying their landlord a punitive £200,000 annual rent, it would bring financial stability. Every little, helps.

The chap in the club shop was unequivocal about the prospects if these plans don't get the go-ahead. "It'll be the end," he said. That would render academic talk of a move to a new community stadium at Milton, even further out of town. United's plight, and possible demise, is of great interest to their landlord - a group of businessmen sheltering behind the moniker Bideawhile. It's an appropriate title. One of their number, John Howard, bought the Abbey Stadium for a cut-price £1.9m, a fraction of its value as a site for housing development, in baling out the club several years ago. He can now afford to sit back and play a waiting game. If United go under, Bideawhile will be quid's in. And, in the meantime, that hefty rental income keeps the bank manager happy.

On the pitch, United are in just as big a mess. When I was a lad, the Us were held up as a shining example of what ambitious small clubs could achieve. Having emerged from the backwater of the Eastern Counties League in the 1950s, they took the Southern League by storm and outstripped local rivals Cambridge City to win Football League status in 1970. Up and up they climbed, Alan Biley's golden locks, Steve Spriggs's industry and all, into the old Second Division and to the brink of promotion to the top flight. There the dream died and, after the pain of several relegations, United are in danger of re-joining neighbours City (also in dire straits, but that's another story) in the modern Conference South.

The wheel of fortune is turning full circle. On the evidence of this feeble display, United are as good as down. Clueless, hopeless and, some supporters might feel, increasingly pointless. Chants of 'what a load of rubbish' rang out at regular intervals, reviled manager Jimmy Quinn was jeered throughout and the loyal fans have clearly lost patience with a slack, jawed bunch of players who are not good enough and, worse, show little stomach for the fight. The whole lot were mercilessly booed off at the final whistle.

York are a solid, mobile and well-organised team but Cambridge made them look like world beaters. The Minstermen had already forced numerous corners before Craig Farrell swept them ahead gloriously in the 21st minute. The heads of the

home players, humiliated 5-0 at Altrincham (of all places) in their last game, immediately hit their chests. Clayton Donaldson, batting out his time at the preposterously named KitKat Crescent ahead of a summer switch to Hibernian, cracked the second into the top corner 12 minutes later and, when Aberdeen Angus-thighed Hungarian centre-back Janos Kovacs popped up unmarked at the back post to bundle in a soft third goal two minutes after the break, it was all over. United's Sam Page hit the crossbar with a looping header to prove there really is no luck when you're struggling but that served only to irritate York sufficiently for Donaldson to complete a hat-trick. A simply laughable

error from Jon Brady allowed the striker to volley in from close range (63) and he then got on the end of a Martyn Woolford cross to guide home a neat header (72).

Most reading this will, I'm sure, have been to the Abbey Stadium, so little in the way of description is required. After strolling along the sublime Cam by The Backs, historic colleges bathed in mellow early spring sunshine, it came as no real surprise (but was, nonetheless, strangely comforting) to discover the football ground finds itself out on a windswept ring road, cloistered not by the groves of academe, but by grubby semis and the faceless sheds of Homebase, B&Q and their ilk. Still, this is 'real' Cambridge - the reality for residents on the Town, rather than Gown, side of the great divide. It's not the vaguely outlandish theme park fantasy of elitist Trinity, King's and Clare. Hold on to it tightly. The ground's front window on the world is squalid - tumbledown portable buildings and potholed car park. But inside it's loved and cherished. Amber, black and white paint does much to smarten up a collection of utilitarian stands, with the relatively new cantilevered South Stand set some way back from the pitch on land eked out of stubborn allotment holders after a battle as grim and bloody as the Hundred Years War. The floodlights are unusual. The pylon tops do not face the pitch, so the lamps are angled acutely (or cutely, I guess) to give the players, rather than the stand roofs, the benefit of their illumination. The main stand, on the east side, is a structure of two halves, built in 1967 and 1980. Oddly, it has four tunnels, with the players using the most southerly of the quartet. The west side, behind the Habbin Stand, is delightfully rural, with the turnstiles accessed by various bridges over a brook and a meandering footpath and meadow backing on to Barnwell Lake, a flooded claypit. Very pleasant.

I was impressed, too, by United's programme. Editor Mark Johnson looks after the design as well as the words which means fans here do not have to suffer the sort of awful issues peddled by print service companies whose sole ambition is to demonstrate how many ugly, clashing fonts their computer software offers. There's plenty of interesting, relevant reading and, followers of this website will be cheered to hear, a Travellers' Tales section. Let's just hope next season Mark still has a club to produce programmes for.

06/20