

TT No.191: Andrew Gallon - Tuesday, 27th March 2007; **Stotfold** v Wootton Blue Cross; Hinchingsbrooke Cup first round; Res: 1-2; Att: 80; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

The splendidly named Roker Park is another ground living on borrowed time. Nothing has been signed and sealed but Stotfold expect to be on the move to a site on the other side of the village within three years. Houses are earmarked for council-owned Roker, with the authority to use some of the cash raised by its sale to part-fund a new stadium incorporated within (as the jargon goes) a multi-sport facility.

It's a shame because Roker, in use since 1911, is one of the few places in expanding Stotfold with any sense of history. While not unpleasant, the village has too much modern architecture to quicken the pulse of anyone seeking signposts to the past. The Green is a hardy survivor from a bygone era and Roker - easy to find only for orienteers - is accessed off it via a narrow lane. Compared to the blandness of the rest of Stotfold, the ground, in a rural location on the north-eastern fringe of the village, has many attractions.

Past a wooden pay-hut, a large car park of timeworn tarmac opens up behind the near goal. The single-storey, brick-built social club and dressing room complex squats snug in the corner to the left, like an old man, pint in hand, watching the world go by from a cosy hideaway in an old-fashioned boozery. There is a wooden hut beyond serving refreshments. The main stand, a modern cantilever affair with amber and black tip-up seats, bestrides the left touchline, behind which runs a line of tall firs, a modern housing estate and a metalled footpath leading down to the river Avel. The side to the right is a sloping tarmac bank (there's no terracing) backing on to an unruly hedge. Breeze-block dugouts (nicer than they sound) are positioned amidships. The far end is dominated by towering poplars and features an aggregate pathway and a broad grassy knoll. Beyond are two floodlit artificial five-a-side pitches and then - joy - open fields. The twittering of nest-building birds can be heard above the constant hum of the adjacent A1; to incurable romantics such as me, the Great North Road.

Most clubs at this level are about individuals, and Stotfold are no exception. The main stand is dedicated to Eagles stalwart Bill Clegg, an elderly man of many parts whose present preoccupations are co-ordinating discipline and tending the pitch. In a really heart-warming gesture, helpers who have now died are remembered in the social club on a series of wall-mounted plaques. It's part of the charm and scale of non-league football which the professional game has lost for ever. At Stotfold, you're a name; not a number.

Tonight, United Counties League Premier Division rivals Wootton are here for a Bedfordshire derby in the Hinchingsbrooke Cup, a trophy whose size matches the longevity of the competition: vast. Blue Cross make the early running but Stotfold,

now just about clear of relegation worries after a weekend win over S&L Corby, force their way into the contest. Callum

Donnelly shoots inches wide and Simon Drury heads just as narrowly over before, with 32 minutes on the clock, Dave Drury's clumsy challenge on Paul Lawrence gives Darek Joswiak the opportunity to put Wootton ahead with a well-struck penalty. Dave Drury makes amends early in a wonderfully feisty second half by heading a Leon Cashman curler off his own goal-line.

Ex-Arsenal forward Ian Allinson (born in nearby Stevenage) manages Stotfold but is away in Denmark, so assistant Ian Donnelly is the one charged with urging on the home players. If there were a litmus test for bad language, Donnelly would rate pure acid. But his lads, possibly out of sheer terror, respond and pour forward. The nearest they get is when Blue

Cross's Paul Reynolds heads away from under his own bar following a wayward punch from disoriented keeper Matt Jones. The tie looks over when, in the 74th minute, sub Darrell Elliott takes keeper Nigel Blower by surprise with an 18-yard volley. Four minutes later, action man Dave Drury's free-kick from the right flank bypasses everyone in the six-yard

box and creeps in at the back post. No 2 Donnelly's decibels edge towards Motorhead levels but it is Wootton who create the best chances in the closing moments. Joswiak produces two wild finishes when a little more composure would have finished off Stotfold's challenge.

Programme hounds will enjoy sniffing around Stotfold's issue, edited by chairman and former manager Phil Pateman. It was programme of the year in the UCL in 2006 and, though I've seen one or two better in this league this season, it's still of a high standard. Content is clearly more important than design to Phil but reading matter is plentiful and interesting. Amusingly, the cover picture (from, apparently, the Stotfold-Wootton league game a couple of weeks ago) depicts four infringements. You, the purchaser, are the ref, seems to be the implication. All in all, a night which began and ended with a smile.

06/20