

TT No.200: Andrew Gallon - Mon 2nd April 2007; **Woodford United** v Stourbridge; Southern League Midland Division; Res: 1-0; Att: 108; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Not bad for a village. That's how one Woodford United official described the set-up at Byfield Road to me. His pride was justified because the Reds have taken giant strides in the last couple of years. FA grant aid worth £750,000 enabled them to transform their ground last summer in preparation for Southern League football after pipping Potton United to the United Counties League title in 2005-06. Victory in this game against promotion rivals Stourbridge kept alive hopes of a play-off place and Premier Division status next season.

Before all this recent excitement, Woodford Halse's sole claim to fame was as an important junction on the old Great Central Railway, a role which lifted it above the milieu of other attractive villages which line the road between Daventry and Banbury in a particularly bucolic part of Northamptonshire. Dr Beeching put paid to the railway in the 1960s and the huge station site - seemingly out of scale in such a small community - is now occupied by a supplier of garden decking. Not much of a swap.

United, successors to a club with strong railway connections, are to be found on the edge of a village whose original character is, in common with so many others, being submerged by modern development. A stony lane leads up to a small car park behind the splendid social club and dressing room complex. The social club is a model for others to follow - a tasteful spot to linger and chat. Beyond are three more football pitches (United run 10 teams) and a cricket square; then rolling fields lead the eye to the low hills filling the horizon.

The ground has a delightfully rural atmosphere, which is both a relief and a surprise given the proximity of an industrial estate and an electricity sub-station. Mature trees fringe both ends and the Byfield Road side, with grass strips and banking separating the hard standing from the wooden perimeter fence. Distant hills, and the village glimpsed through the branches, form an attractive backdrop.

The main stand, one of those lightweight, kit-built affairs now popping up all over the place, sits atop banking on the near touchline, with an area of concrete leading down to the neat pitch surround (plastic mesh suspended from white railings) and the large brick dugouts. To the left of the turnstiles is a smaller stand, which is merely aged bucket seats plonked on concrete with a corrugated iron roof. The near corner of the open right-hand end contains a 30-yard long low cover. The rest of the ground is open. The lights are the familiar non-league pattern pylons - three per side - with four lamps on each. The pitch slopes slightly down towards the Byfield Road. Rather like Woodford itself, the ground is a little bitty - the inevitable consequence of haphazard evolution - but, unlike the village,

it is immaculate in every respect. The whole is definitely greater than the sum of the parts.

No shortage of tension in this competitive encounter as we approach the denouement of the season. The teams are as evenly matched as their positions in the league table suggests. One goal always looks like being enough and Nicky Gordon gets it for Woodford in the 47th minute, latching on to a long ball from the back, rounding keeper Lewis Solly and slipping a 12-yard shot into an empty net. Stourbridge have spells of pressure before the final whistle but never really threaten an equaliser.

On and off the pitch, Woodford feel like a club going forward. Good organisation, enthusiastic, friendly officials, developing facilities and a team used to winning. No, not bad for a village.

06/20