

**TT No.201: Andrew Gallon** - Tues 3rd April 2007; **Forest Green Rovers** v Grays Athletic; Conference; Res: 0-0; Att: 782; Admission: £11; Programme: £2.50 (52pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

It may be the Cotswolds but, to me, there's a whiff of South Wales or the South Pennines about the Stroud Valley: deep, narrow, tree-lined gorges with bubbling streams on their floors and houses clinging precariously to dizzying contours. That Forest Green, famously so insignificant it doesn't even feature on the map, boasts a team in the top tier of the non-league game is another of football's minor miracles. It's a bit like finding a Conference club in, say, Cross Keys or Hebden Bridge.

Rovers have gone up in the world this season, ice axing still higher on the steep hill out of Nailsworth after selling The Lawn to a developer and moving to a new stadium. Sadly, for the ground's enthusiast, it's a familiar tale. The Lawn, though quite modern in parts, had quirks enough to gladden the eye and warm the heart. But, The New Lawn, as it's predictably known, is a fairly typical off-the-shelf stadium for the 21st century. There are some saving graces: the setting, with panoramic vistas across the plunging valleys, is even more magnificent than the previous one and the breeze block facings have been dressed in the honey colour of the locally-quarried stone, so it blends with the landscape.

Having engaged second gear and rack railed your way out of Nailsworth, you pass on the left the site of The Lawn, now an estate of Redrow three and four-bedroomed homes dubbed Forest Rise. You could be anywhere. A few hundred yards further on, just as you start reaching for the oxygen mask, the new stadium, complete with its own mini-roundabout access, comes into view on the left.

It could be better; it could be worse. The North End (sponsored by Rockwool Insulation; appropriate because tonight it's blowing a gale and is bitterly cold) faces you and is a steeply-raked terrace of 14 steps and black crush barriers sheltered by a cantilever cover. The Main Stand (sponsored by Western Thermal; you're getting the picture) is to the left and is a cantilever-roofed single tier of 12 rows of black tip-up seats with FGR spelled out in white. A line of hospitality boxes runs along its rear. In another sign of the times, the accommodation behind houses the Five Valleys Leisure and Conference Centre. As well as being a nod to the topography, this community-friendly arrangement puts bikini waxes and facials before footballers. No space for dressing rooms here - they are in a single-storey block in the south-western corner. Same design as the toilets; bog standard, you could say. The Green Man, Rovers' social club, is at the south end of the Main Stand and has all the appeal of a branch of Starbucks. A few signs, depicting the club's badge or name, are badly needed to make things a little more homely.

The opposite side, backing, delightfully, on to a rising field filled with sheep, is uncovered. There are seven steps of terracing and black crush barriers, with

Perspex dugouts in front. Grays' manager Justin Edinburgh, the former Tottenham defender, nervously patrols this area throughout the game but finds time to share jokes and smiles with the home fans. Great. He hasn't forgotten where he came from. The South End (possibly still awaiting a sponsor capable of keeping out the chill) is under construction and will be a carbon copy of the Rockwool. The south-eastern corner is filled by a mobile phone mast (a sure indicator of altitude) and what appears to be a slurry container. Supplies for the groundsman, maybe. Parking is as much a problem here as it was at The Lawn and Rovers have shoehorned in various bits of tarmac and flat earth around three sides to cope with demand. It's not ideal and reveals how constrained, for a new ground, the site is.

Rovers' worst league crowd of the season eschews the counter-attractions of Champions League action on the box and a warm front room for this nose-numbing relegation battle. It's not pretty. Two poor teams struggle to cope with the gusty wind in such an exposed spot and appear determined to leather the life out of the ball. Neither can keep possession for more than a couple of passes. The match sponsors choose goalkeeper Ryan Robinson as Rovers' man of the match, which suggests how fortunate the home side were to get a point.

Robinson makes two draw-salvaging saves: in the 34th minute, he reacts brilliantly to palm away a stinging 20-yard volley from Ben Harding; in the 69th minute, he denies Aaron O'Connor in a one-on-one to turn a rising drive over the crossbar. Rovers contribute little to a tense encounter but go close eight minutes from time when Alex Lawless gets away on the right side of the box and beats advancing keeper Danny Knowles, only for Andy Sambrook to race back and hook the ball off the goal line. Still, a point is useful for both teams. But not for my club, who are one of the few below these two in the table. Hard to believe we've become this bad.

An evening short on fun, then, but the advertising hoardings in front of the Rockwool do raise a smile: a scaffolding firm ('Get a Better Erection') is juxtaposed with a florist ('Don't Forget the Other Half').