

**TT No.206: Andrew Gallon** - Friday 6th April 2007; **Chelmsford City** v Hampton & Richmond Borough; Ryman Premier; Res: 4-0; Att: 2,008; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (64pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

There can't be many teams scoring as freely at home as Chelmsford City. After this crucial win against promotion rivals Hampton & Richmond Borough, which keeps alive the Clarets' title tilt, their goals sequence for the last five games reads four, seven, five, five and seven. The fans have certainly responded to the glut and today's crowd is easily the best of the season for a Ryman Premier game at the Chelmsford Sport and Athletics Centre.

But would you want to come here every week? Probably not. Watching football at an athletics stadium is never satisfactory and, great though it is to see the Clarets back in Chelmsford after a debt-induced exile lasting almost a decade, this one, sadly, is no different. It is a smart, modern, tasteful venue, made more pleasant by a sylvan parkland setting, but it's just not a football ground.

Chelmsford are trying hard: temporary terracing is placed immediately behind each goal to give at least some supporters that close-to-the-action feeling. But, generally, you're either too far back or too low down to get the authentic football experience.

The stadium is located in the north-western part of the city, close to a utilitarian council estate in the Melbourne area. Salerno Way, a narrow lane, leads past a vast expanse of pitches, a handful of tennis courts and the 1950s vintage Festival Pavilion (changing rooms for Sunday League players) into a large, keenly-stewarded car park. Through the turnstiles, the social club, shop and dressing room complex is on the right. It all seems very new - perhaps a little too much so. Beyond is the all-seater main stand, a metal and brick 'Legoland' construction with a propped cantilever roof and glass screen ends. A strip of flat tarmac runs in front, with access to the seats round the back via several stairways. The view from this stand is the best in the house, though the near touchline is 40 yards away across a three-lane pole vault runway and an eight-lane tartan track. Opposite, a small number of seats are squeezed in front of the side wall of an impressive, state-of-the-art sports hall and indoor athletics facility. A propped cover provides shelter in a similar fashion to the 'snooker club' side at Warrington rugby league club's old Wilderspool stadium. The treetops of an attractive neighbouring copse poke above the sports hall roof and help soften its futuristic lines. Beyond the far end, a grassy bank and colourful shrubs lead up to a string of modern houses.

There are two big pluses at this council-owned stadium: all the signs (whether by accident or design) are in City's distinctive deep claret and white colours and all the brickwork is of a pleasing light-yellow hue. Both elements help to provide uniformity and a sense of belonging. City are clearly making the best of a bad job

but I guess their fans, after 'loan spells' sharing with Maldon and Billericay, aren't too bothered.

This is the biggest game of today's non-league schedule, with third entertaining second. It doesn't, however, play out like a top-of-the-table encounter. Hampton & Richmond, possibly fazed by a crowd the size of which they can only dream about, look distinctly average and struggle to give Clarets keeper Ashley Harrison any meaningful work to do.

The match, played in warm sunshine and favoured by a cooling breeze, takes a long time to get out of first gear and finally does in the 34th minute when, in one of the few moments of quality in a low-key first half, Ricky Holmes finds the top corner with a sublime 30-yard thunderbolt from the blue. Chelmsford ease away after the break. Some Kezie Ibe trickery by the corner flag results in a cross which sees Jamie England test Matt Lovett and, when the Beavers keeper finds the shot too hot to handle, Jeff Minton rams home the loose ball. Ibe then produces more dazzling footwork to dribble round three defenders and Lovett for a stunning third before a visiting defender heads into his own net from a back-post corner to complete another rout which takes Chelmsford back to the summit.

I'm not too familiar with the Ryman League but there surely can't be many better programmes than City's; a splendid mixture of current affairs and blasts from the past. Excellent value for the cover price, the savings from which will come in handy for regulars considering investing in a pair of binoculars to get closer to their heroes. Harsh but true.

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