

TT No.211: Andrew Gallon - Sat 7th April 2007; **Saffron Walden Town v Great Yarmouth Town**; Eastern Counties Division One; Res: 1-0; Att: 213; Admission: £3; Programme: 50p (56pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

I've had a fancy to get along to Saffron Walden's Catons Lane ground since Nick Hornby wrote about the club in his iconic 1992 book *Fever Pitch*. Arsenal's most famous celebrity fan (after Rory McGrath, maybe) was an occasional visitor during his student days in nearby Cambridge and described the home of the Bloods as "one of the nicest" places he'd ever watched the game. And so, it is.

Saffron Walden (so named because, in medieval times, the saffron flower was grown extensively for use in cooking and as a dye) is an outstandingly attractive little town and, after the joys of its historic, timber-framed buildings and quaint, narrow streets, discovering the football ground holds equal appeal provides a wonderfully pleasing sense of symmetry. The Meadow, as the location was known when Walden moved here in 1890, has many delights. Access is via the narrow Catons Lane, after the chap who once lived in the big house at its foot, with the ground tucked away at the foot of a shallow valley.

Its most striking idiosyncrasy is the side-to-side slope of the pitch. The height difference corner to corner used to be an astonishing 15ft 2in. That got the Bloods, the oldest senior club in Essex and 23rd most venerable in the world, booted out of the Isthmian League in 1996. A season's hard graft reduced the slope by half and allowed Walden, after a stint in the Essex Senior League, to re-join the Eastern Counties League following a 20-year absence.

The classical view of the ground features on the front cover of the programme, with the camera lens looking up and across the slope to the 1978 vintage stand on the top side and, beyond the trees, to the magnificent parish church of St Mary the Virgin. This is the largest church in the county and its 193ft spire forms a stunningly elegant backdrop to the football.

The near end is the only element which lets down Catons Lane. The turnstile and groundsman's shed are made of white painted breeze block and are positioned next to a circular steel slurry container and two grey portable buildings, one of which contains the club shop. From here, to the left, a flat, girder-framed cover over red tip-up seats and integral dugouts is cut into the banking. There is hardstanding on either side and the edge of this marks the level of the original pitch. Hard to believe.

To the right, three old-fashioned buildings house the boardroom, the social club (be sure to check out the old photographs) and a refreshment kiosk. The social club is an ex-RAF hut put up in 1972. On the halfway line is the original grandstand, a museum piece dating from 1937 and comprising wooden benches and corrugated iron roof and sides. The dressing rooms, added in 1958, are in a brick extension behind and the players emerge from a rather incongruous caged tunnel.

Curse of the ground graders! Behind this side is a dry stream bed and the town's cricket ground, which is similarly engaging and also enjoys a fine view of the church. A 40-seat stand, a smaller version of that on the top touchline, is being erected behind the far goal. Seats, you may like to know, are available for sponsorship. Mature trees tower over the right side and far end, while rising fields of oil seed rape fill in the horizon with brilliant dabs of colour. On a sunny day, does it get any better than this?

Walden, one of the best-supported teams in the whole league, are in a six-way battle for three promotion places. Great Yarmouth have nothing to play for but, from the off, make it clear they are not going to roll over. A hard, bumpy pitch ensures the going is tough for both sides. The Bloaters show, in flashes, they can play a bit but are happy to let Walden take up the running. Half-time is reached goalless, though only after Brad Green (later taken off with a ghastly knee injury) clears the bar by inches with a sumptuous 18-yard volley and Bloods colleagues Ben Riches and Ben Newman make a pig's ear of stoppage-time sitters.

Steve Leys shows them how it should be done with 64 minutes on the clock, placing a 20-yard volley just inside Nick Banham's right-hand post. It's mostly Walden for the rest of the contest and, nine minutes from time, Tommy Butchart slices horribly wide after a Leys run and pull-back puts the chance on a plate for him.

It's not, in all honesty, much of a match and the edge is taken off the afternoon when I get back to the social club to discover my other choice, Bishop's Stortford v Dorchester - has been a seven-goal thriller. I must be getting harder and harder to please! Still, aside from the game, it's been a memorable visit: lovely weather, a smashing town with plenty to see (don't miss the largest publicly-owned turf-cut maze in England) and a ground so pleasant, you'll find yourself running out of superlatives when describing it. As Nick Hornby observed of the surroundings, players and fans at Catons Lane: "Teams like Walden inspire sentiment."

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