

TT No.212: Andrew Gallon - Mon 9th April 2007; **Chasetown** v Stourport Swifts; Southern League Midland Division; Res: 1-0; Att: 252; Admission: £5; Programme: £1.50 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

The chances of these two teams playing each other again next season appear remote. Stourport seem doomed to relegation after this second Easter defeat and Chasetown, by winning, enhance their hopes of reaching the Southern Premier via the play-offs. If the Scholars don't finish in the top five, they could be forced, against their wishes, to move to the new UniBond League Midland Division for 2007-08. Chasetown, promoted from the Midland Alliance only last season, want to stay in the Southern League after an impressive debut campaign. They are wary of the inevitable extra costs awaiting them in the Southern Premier but are ready to take on another big challenge and remain adamant, whatever the future holds, that the UniBond is not for them. Only in non-league football...

Chasetown, a pleasant, semi-rural village for - mostly - well-heeled commuters, is enviably located on the northern fringe of the West Midlands conurbation and, in appearance, possibly has more of ecclesiastical Lichfield about it than workaday Walsall. Hard to believe, amid the affluence of outer suburbia, that this was once coal mining country.

The football ground is on the edge of the village at the bottom of the leafy cul-de-sac that is Church Street. Immediately beyond the ground, and a link to the Birmingham northern relief road, is Chasewater Country Park, a delightful oasis centred on a reservoir which acts as a magnet for wildlife, walkers, cyclists and sailors. A classic example of reinvention, this was once the Uxbridge pit of the Cannock Chase Colliery Company, who ceased mining here in 1940. Green, not grey, is the colour these days.

Chasetown provide a neat link between past and present because, in their original guise as Chase Terrace Old Scholars, they played at what used to be the colliery company's sports ground. They moved to the present site, then a rubbish tip, in 1983 and have been developing on and off the pitch ever since. It's an orderly enclosure tended with obvious pride. The tidy car park leads to a brick-built social club and dressing room complex. The one turnstile in use for today's game is to the left and brings you out on the side with most of the facilities. The main stand is merely a flat-roofed extension to the social club and has wooden tip-up seats. The roof is very low and the view akin to looking through a letter box. The social club is rather gloomy but has an interesting display of memorabilia, including a magnificent wall-length montage of photographs and programmes from the club's epic run to the first-round proper of the FA Cup in 2005. Oldham Athletic were held at the Scholars Ground in front of live TV cameras before Chasetown's headline-grabbing adventure came to an end in a Boundary Park replay. It's clearly the high point in Chasetown's history for, even today, a number of their officials

are wearing jackets commemorating the two ties against the Pennine professionals.

Densely-packed trees make a pleasing backdrop to the left and beyond the far side, adding to the rural feel. To the right of the open-air 'tunnel' is an intriguing wooden press/announcer's box, complete with gable and glazing. To the left of the turnstile is a collection of scruffy portable buildings and, because it's a Bank Holiday with a hint of warmth, an ice cream van holds court in the corner. Kit-built covered metal terracing guards the area behind the village end goal, with the opposite end open. Both have large strips of grass running up to the perimeter fence, leaving room for expansion if required.

Hardstanding runs right round the ground and, on the far side, forms a sunken pathway in front of a grass bank. Two dugouts - and a fourth official's cabin - have the dimensions and design of small conservatories, making viewing from the centre of this side, even at the top of the bank, all but impossible. The Scholars' floodlights are a mast and lamp arrangement, with the pitch enclosed in a blue and white post and rail fence containing white plastic panels. As with everything else here, it's immaculate. From the banking, you will glimpse more floodlights over to the left by the country park. These belong to the Burntwood RFC Sports Association, who cater for both codes of egg chasing, cricket and youth football as part of another neat set-up.

Bottom-of-the-table Stourport probably deserve a draw from this vital, though scrappy, encounter after a wholehearted effort. But they just don't get any breaks and are behind the eight ball from the sixth minute when a dazzling run by Mark Branch gives unmarked Karl Edwards the opportunity to prod home his 98th goal in Scholars colours. Few of the rest can have been so easy. The visiting defenders are shaking their heads, as is one of their elderly female fans in front of me who is just discovering that open-toed sandals without tights on an increasingly chilly afternoon was a poor sartorial selection. The doggedness of the Swifts, and some poor finishing by the hosts, ensures the outcome is in doubt right to the end of the considerable stoppage time an irritatingly fastidious referee opts to add on.

At this late stage of the season, points mean prizes and Chasetown's players are visibly relieved to take them all, despite most of their fans agonising about another unconvincing performance. "We haven't played well for months," moans one. On a personal note, it's my sixth successive game in which the away team have failed to score. I should be the one complaining. For the Scholars, an interesting summer is guaranteed, whatever direction the climax to their season takes, as they play out a major role in football's own version of North and South.