

TT No.240: Andrew Gallon - Tue 24th April 2007; **Halifax Town** v Crawley Town; Conference; Res: 2-1; Att: 1,561; Admission: £13; Programme: £2.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

In time-honoured parliamentary fashion, any interest should be declared immediately. So, I'll admit to Halifax Town being my team. Many hours and even more money have gone into supporting a club I was first taken to watch by my late father in 1973. I left Halifax for good when I headed off to university 10 years later and have since put a lot of time and effort into overcoming various geographical handicaps to keep up with Town through thin and (mostly) thinner. But in recent seasons I have been rather less than faithful. Club policy makers - on and off the pitch - made a series of decisions which left me unhappy and seeking a divorce; an end to an obsession increasingly difficult to rationalise.

Times of crisis have never been far away for the Shaymen and this season has produced another, albeit entirely unexpected. The 2005-06 campaign climaxed with an appearance in the Conference play-off final at Leicester and an opportunity to regain the Football League status Town have, carelessly, lost twice. But Hereford United shattered the dreams of Town fans everywhere with a 3-2 extra-time victory. We were just 15 minutes away.

Expectations were high this season but the club is fighting for its very survival. The worst away record in any of the top five divisions in English football (18 defeats from 23 games) leaves Town on the brink of relegation to Conference North. A consortium is waiting in the wings to take over but insists the deal is off if Town go down. There's no money left, bills (as ever) to pay and so the drop will mean the end. We have, I know, been here before. Fortunately, because Town's home results have been of play-off place-winning quality, the last two games are both at The Shay. Crawley Town tonight, Stevenage Borough on Saturday. With Town plunged into the dreaded bottom four (shades of re-election battles from years past) by their latest two setbacks on the road, a minimum of four points is required for salvation. How could I stay away?

Everyone, I'm sure, loves going home. I'm no different. Here, the wild Pennine hills, softened by the budding of spring, raise spirits; a landscape (natural and human) hewn from millstone grit quickens the pulse. The Shay, much of me is sad to say, is not now the ground with which I grew up. Shoehorned into the narrow floor of a cramped tributary valley of the river Calder, it used to be a dump - but an eccentric, appealing one for its small band of regulars. We didn't mind watching from afar across the speedway track; didn't care too much that the terracing on the Skircoat Road side was too shallow for good viewing; turned a blind eye to the dust, squalor, weeds, pot holes and dodgy floodlights. Beacon Hill, rising sentinel-like behind the old Patrons Stand and so often lit spectacularly by the dying sun, was a sight to cherish. And, of course, Rochdale's ground was even worse.

Most of the changes have taken place in the last decade, leaving The Shay, well, pretty much like any other football ground. The track, along with the much-missed Dukes speedway team, has gone and the corners squared off. Two identical banks of covered terracing (proper terracing with proper crush barriers) have risen behind each goal and the new, all-seater, cantilever East Stand is under construction. This has been a building site for six long years. The money, even with an injection from new co-tenants Halifax RLFC, ran out midway through the work. Since then, games have been played in what amounts to a three-sided ground. The Conference authorities are losing patience but - finally, finally - inert landlord Calderdale Council has agreed to ensure the job is finished this summer. The only remaining part of the original ground is the Skircoat Road side. This cover, which leaked like a colander when I was a kid, once stood at Manchester City's Hyde Road ground at the turn of the century. When 19th became 20th, that is. It's a seated area now but is essentially mutton dressed as lamb. Beacon Hill can just about be glimpsed above the half-finished East Stand roof, which is three times as high as the one it replaced. But the foliage and blossoms are still lovely and the surroundings - mills, tram sheds, cobbled streets and the railway - remain largely unchanged.

Crawley, followed to this particular end of the earth by a coachload of supporters so fanatical as to be beyond all help, set their stall out from the kick-off. The Red Devils need a point to be safe and play with what amounts to a 10-man defence and a commitment to wasting time at every available opportunity. Can Town break them down? Come half-time and I can't see where a goal is coming from. The chap in front cheers everybody by revealing rivals in distress Grays Athletic are two-up against Kidderminster Harriers, who have had a man sent off to boot. Great. A fair few, grim yesterday' begin crowding the memory.

But Town come through in the end. With an hour on the clock, skipper Tom Kearney, engineer's space, for Matt Doughty to cross early from the left and Darryn Stamp rises unmarked in front of goal to head firmly past a hopelessly exposed Ben Hamer. Waves of relief ripple round the ground. Crawley, starting to panic, wake up, buck up and push up. But they don't leave enough bodies back at a corner and Steve Torpey's expert delivery allows Adam Quinn to arrive late and smash a downward header past the guardians of the goal-line. Nineteen minutes left.

Halifax manager Chris Wilder notes his men are cruising and, unaccountably, opts to change things. He brings on a couple of subs and, suddenly, Town are all over the place in defence. With stoppage time looming, Tony Scully spots Craig Mawson in no man's land and lobs Crawley a lifeline. The tension is unbearable. We all know Town concede more goals in the last five minutes than any other team in the history of the game. But not tonight. The players finish with what amounts to a lap of honour. Let's hope it's not premature. We still need a point from the Stevenage game to ensure life, of a sort, goes on. Guess where I'll be this weekend?

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