

TT No.245: Andrew Gallon - Wed May 2nd 2007; Hinckley United v Workington; Conference North; Res: 0-0; Att: 1,092; Admission: £9; Programme: £2 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: *.**

My new ground phobia can't prevent me extending my season by another game. The decision to attend this Conference North play-off semi-final first leg at the utilitarian Marston's Stadium was made easier because Workington are the visitors. I spent five years working in west Cumbria in what now seems a previous life and, during that time, was a fairly regular spectator at midweek home fixtures for the Reds - though more because of a lack of entertainment options in the area than the quality of the football in the then-Multipart League. Still, an emotional connection was made and it's good to see the club moving back up the pyramid as they look to regain the Football League status, they lost almost 30 years ago to the day.

Hinckley moved to the Marston's Stadium in March 2005. Characterful, crumbling Middlefield Lane was sold for £3.5m, the brewery put another £250,000 into the pot for naming rights to the new ground and suddenly the Knitters had the sort of facilities of which they could only once dream. But function, as ever, was put before form and the end result is typically bland.

The ground is out of town - so much so, it's more on the south-western edge of Barwell than the north-eastern fringe of Hinckley. It lies at the foot of a shallow slope below Barwell. Access is easy but, if you're coming from the north, don't bother following the directions on the independent supporter's website bringing you in from junction one of the M69. They sentence you to circumnavigating the town which, at tea time on a Wednesday evening, is not a pleasant experience. Far better to arrive via the A47 from Leicester.

Trees and shrubs, now in full bloom, make the large car park, which extends round three sides, less spartan than it would otherwise be. The setting sun casts the whole site in a golden glow; surely, I'm seeing it at its best. The east end is a 14-step cantilever covered terrace with a lively, airy social club behind. There's also a glass display area out front containing a motorcycle and other products from club shirt sponsor Triumph, whose factory is just up the road. But the disconcerting roof angles at this end clash so badly I fear the architect may have been drunk when he drew up the plans. Rather like the chap who laid out the Workington to Barrow road.

The adjacent turnstiles are cute, gabled affairs and bring you out in the south-eastern corner. The view from here is a bit Burton-ish, a bit Northwich-ish. A single-storey building to the left houses the excellent club shop, with the 50-yard main stand beyond on the south side. Blue tip-up seats are placed in front of a line of executive boxes, with reds seats, flanking the tunnel, set aside for the management teams and substitutes. A tasteful foyer is to the rear and the club's

name is picked out on the red fascia. Shame the 'C' in Hinckley has dropped off and not been replaced.

Opposite, on the north side, are 11 steps of terracing running the length of the pitch, which is in a dreadful state. The centre circle comprises compacted earth. A cantilever roof provides shelter for the Knitters faithful. The far, west, end is simply a flat concrete strip backing on to the plain rear wall of some sort of administration block, still being finished. It's all rather drab and, perhaps, a peculiarity of this part of the world because neighbours Barwell's ground has a similar feature. Beyond this end are floodlit, artificial pitches which, tonight, are in full use.

Hinckley's distinctive red and blue colours are daubed on a good number of surfaces to brighten things up and the breeze block used in the construction is dressed in a sandy colour for a similar effect. On an evening as glorious as this, I have to say the place looks a picture - whatever my reservations about modern design and materials.

Workington have brought a couple of hundred vocal fans, which is just as well because Hinckley's, an infernal drummer apart, are mostly silent. The visiting supporters have more to get excited about in (and I'll be charitable) an unimaginably dire first half. It's scrappy, physical stuff with neither side able to do much with the bumpy, rutted surface. Having watched two Conference National games in the past week, this looks a long way below that standard.

Thankfully, the second 45 minutes is a whole lot better. End-to-end action seems more dramatic once the sun has gone down and the mast-pattern floodlights make their presence felt. Reds striker Craig Johnston goes close twice within a minute just after the hour. He has an angled drive deflected just wide and then cracks a 20-yarder against the outside of keeper Sean Bowles's left-hand post. Bowles has to dive full length to his right to turn aside a 25-yard free-kick from Gretna old boy Derek Townsley. Hinckley huff and puff but, despite having plenty of possession, never look like making a breakthrough. Workington are solid, pragmatic and not too concerned with what they're kicking. So, all to play for in the second leg up at Borough Park on Saturday in the battle to meet either Kettering Town or Farsley Celtic in the final.

A word about the Hinckley programme: an excellent effort, I felt, with plenty of informative reading and statistics. All it lacked was a picture or two inside, though the one on the cover changes from issue to issue, which is always a major plus in my book.