

TT No.58: Mike Latham - Mon 30 Oct 2006: Conference North. **Hinckley United 3-1 Leigh RMI**. Attendance: 564; Admission: £9; 44pp programme: £2; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

I saw my friend Rachael's dad walking around Rivington on Monday morning and thought back to the days when he was a stalwart of the Scratchin' Shed at Grundy Hill, the lamented late home of Horwich RMI.

With his pals Rachael's dad liked nothing more than standing on the windswept slopes of Grundy Hill, the magnificent views across to Rivington Pike stretching into the distance watching opposing teams attempt to come to terms with the pitch that sloped not only downwards but from side to side.

Local folklore had it that Chris Bonnington used to practice for ascents on Everest trying to climb up to the far goal until he gave up the unequal struggle. Just like Everest Grundy Hill had its own micro-climate and sorted out the wheat from the chaff. And if the cold didn't get to you, Rachael's dad and his pals did. You had to be a good player to escape their mockery or wrath.

Horwich lost its football club 12 years ago now when Grundy Hill was sold for housing and the club acquired Hilton Park from the administrators acting for Leigh rugby league club. Moving a few miles away to a town where the oval ball dominates not only saved the Leigh rugby club from going out of business but enabled RMI, named after the Railway Mechanics Institute in the old railway town, to stay within the pyramid system and, on the field, prosper as they attained the dizzy heights of a top-six place in the Conference despite pitiful gates. Rachael's dad and his mates did not follow them. They have never been to a soccer match since.

Monday evenings used to be Horwich RMI night and a chance to savour the best meat and potato hotpot in the football world, a far more consistent concoction than that served up on Grundy Hill's slopes. Now renamed Leigh RMI and, almost unbelievably, still surviving in the Conference North despite almost total apathy from their adopted town, a Monday night 12 years following RMI on meant travelling into Leicestershire to the new Marston's Stadium home of Hinckley United.

The excellent programme helped fill the time before kick-off and a two-page history of the visitors brought back happy memories of the day in 1987 when RMI defeated Weymouth 2-0 in the GMAC Cup Final and the £2,000 transfer fee that Bolton Wanderers paid RMI for their striker, Tony Caldwell.

Now Wanderers are the new team in Horwich which has become a football town again since the Reebok Stadium development in 1997, and million-pound players from Greece and France fill the jerseys formerly worn with pride by Storer and Caldwell. What a pity that RMI couldn't hang on a few more years and develop

maybe a second ground on the Middlebrook site that grew up from a vast area of wilderness known as Red Moss.

Caldwell became a Wanderers hero, scoring five goals in one of his first games, and one of his former team-mates was to be found in the home line-up. Stuart Storer, 40 next January, used to run up and down the wing at Burnden Park laying on crosses for Caldwell. Now he is a right-back with 267 Hinckley games under his belt and looking like he could play on for another ten years.

The tragic death of Matt Gadsby earlier in the season united the Hinckley club and the wider football world in grief and the programme has plenty of news over forthcoming events for the defender's dependants with a poignant picture on the front cover showing the Hinckley players taking part in a minute's applause before a game as a mark of respect.

The Marston's Stadium is everything that Grundy Hill was not - a neat well-manicured ground with an immaculate flat pitch and a feeling that you could be anywhere in the country. Witton Albion set the trend for sanitised characterless new stadiums when Wincham Park was developed in the early 1990s and Hinckley's new ground follows suit.

With a cantilevered main stand and shallow covered terracing on two sides with a flat standing area behind the other goal it is very similar to Northwich's new ground and countless more. Situated a couple of miles out of town on the Earl Shilton Road past a huge supermarket development, it has few memorable and defining characteristics.

It costs £1 to park on the spacious car park at the ground and the facilities are pretty impressive. Catering is above average and there is a neat club shop with a good array of programmes, souvenirs and second hand books for sale. The match programme, 'Knitters News' is a terrific effort packed full of information and statistics and with some interesting articles such as Simon Blyth's Away Days. His entertaining account of a recent trip to Hyde begins: "The week leading up to the Hyde game was quite physically draining. Demand for quarry products was very high and overtime was requested from myself and my co-workers." Terrific stuff.

Conference football, my friend Rupert says, is like kissing your sister. Often, he says, it is neither one thing nor the other. I thought of Rupert as the game unfolded. And then the thought struck me. I am sure he is an only one.

Hinckley won a decent enough game 3-1 in the end though Leigh RMI, an anonymous looking lot in a horrible yellow strip had two men sent off for second yellows from a fussy referee in the second half. It all seemed a long way away from Grundy Hill and its hotpot all those Monday nights ago.

Rupert had assured me that the A5 from J12 of the M6 motorway towards Hinckley was one of the finest roads in the kingdom. "Don't forget it is Watling Street, built by the Romans, straight as a die," he said. But the Romans did not have to contend with road works, contra-flows, speed cameras and the imposition of roundabouts that seem to try to tempt you on to the M6 toll motorway. It was a nightmare

journey made worse by the car park attendant enquiring: 'Are you from Leigh?' as I proffered the one-pound coin. My travelling companion chinked with laughter. Actually, I was born at the old Firs Maternity Home in Leigh but didn't realise it was that obvious. Maybe I should try and conceal that 'Made in Leigh' tattoo on my forehead.

We ignored Rupert on the way home and travelled via Burton-on-Trent towards Stoke and J15 of the M6. We both agreed that, despite the friendly enough welcome if all football grounds were like Hinckley's then the magic of ground-hopping would be lost forever. Do one and you've done 'em all. And you could never say that about Grundy Hill.

Out early morning with the dogs on Tuesday, I passed Rachael's father clocking up the miles, alone with his thoughts of Tony Caldwell, hotpot and stuffing Weymouth. He wouldn't have enjoyed the trip to Hinckley and, truth to tell, despite seeing Stuart Storer defying the ageing process and the excellent programme, neither did I.

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