

TT No.70: Andrew Gallon - Sat 18th November 2006; **Barwell** v Arnold Town; FA Vase Second Round; Res: 2-1; Att: 89; Admission: £5; Programme (36pp) £1; FGIF match rating: ****.

Memo to myself: watch more of the Midland Alliance. This was only my second visit to a club from this league and the impressions received were the same as for the first - good football, good facilities, good fun. In all honesty, it came as a bit of a surprise because my heart sank as I drove into Barwell. I'd spent the morning exploring the picturesque lanes and villages to the north and poking around the site of the Battle of Bosworth Field. On a radiant autumn day, the countryside, complete with local hunt, was picture postcard perfect. Barwell, however, has clearly seen better days. Memories of the boot and shoe manufacturing industry which made its name and prosperity are now simply that - memories.

A plaintive sign in a window said it all: "Shop local and keep Barwell alive". Thankfully, the football ground, on the north-eastern tip of the village, where traditional terrace gives way to Barrett new build, contrasts starkly. The Canaries are based at an attractive sports complex - on land once owned by a boot and shoe magnate - which also houses cricket and indoor bowls. Driving in off the Kirkby Mallory road, you pass a whitewashed club, in which the players changed during bygone days, and follow the boundary of the cricket pitch. The football ground is immediately behind the cricket pavilion, complete with Leicestershire fox weather vane, with the indoor bowls club beyond. All is tidy, trim and tasteful. Bowls isn't really my thing (and, judging by the average age of those playing, neither is it the thing of anyone under 60) but I had a peek inside. It really is magnificent, and extremely well patronised - both on and off the artificial greens.

The football ground is the jewel in the crown. Barwell may not have anywhere near as many fans as neighbouring Hinckley United but those they do have obviously care deeply about the club. Everything is lovingly maintained. Through the rather cute turnstile block, pots of miniature firs line the base of the cantilevered main stand, opened in 2001 by sometime England goalkeeper Chris Kirkland. Eight rows of green tip-up seats are steeply raked for a great view of the pitch, which slopes noticeably from right to left and top to bottom as you look out at the action from here. There is a small, cantilevered cover for standing spectators to the right of the main stand, with the rest of the ground open hard standing. The pitch railings are painted green and white, with netting suspended from poles at each end and from the four slender floodlight pylons on the far side, where the dug-outs are located. There is plenty of space to expand on the top side and behind the right-hand goal, with broad areas of grass running up to the perimeter fence. The only section of the ground which jars on the eye is the end to the left of the main stand. The rear wall - green, blank and cold - of the bowls club has an institutional air and leaves space only for a narrow strip of concrete.

Trees, decked in autumn shades, fringe the ground, with an identikit modern housing estate to the rear.

With the fading sun filtering through the leaves, an expectant crowd gathered and a seasonal nip in the air, the stage was set. And the players responded by serving up an excellent cup tie. Barwell, playing with a confidence garnered from a run of five straight wins, dominated all but the last 10 minutes of the first half. But their profligate finishing left them with just one goal to show for their efforts. That, too, was a fluke, full-back Lee Colkin using his local meteorological knowledge to flight a 45-yard free-kick which ended up in the net when be-capped keeper Lee Broster was dazzled by the setting sun. Arnold, clearly on the wrong end of a half-time rollicking, came out a couple of minutes early for the second period - and scored within 60 seconds of it starting. Former Football League striker Chris Freestone crowned a superb Chris Hall run and cross with a spectacular diving header. The visitors then had their best spell of the game but Barwell regained the lead very much against the run of play with an even better goal. Kevin Charley and Reece Lester combined sweetly for the latter to glide the winner home from 16 yards. Barwell did not relax their grip and both skipper Danny Spencer and Martin Fox struck the woodwork in the last 10 minutes as the Canaries finished the game as they began it - on top.

Barwell's officials all seemed very friendly and, in common with this desire to please, pinned the team-sheet on the boardroom window. Always welcome. The only negative point was the relatively small number of programmes printed. Arnold brought a good number of fans to swell the gate into three figures but only the early arrivals beat the sell-out. Perhaps the teenage lad I asked for directions "to the football ground" in the village before the game should take note. "Hinckley?" he replied. "No, Barwell," I insisted. They are alive my friend - and very much kicking!

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