

**TT No.74: Andrew Gallon** - Tues 21st November 2006; **Holwell Sports** v Causeway Utd; FAV Second Round Replay; Res: 0-3; Att: 110; Admission: £5; Programme: 50p (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

There aren't a great many options in midweek at the back end of November but this FA Vase replay presented the opportunity of a voyage into - for me, at least - the uncharted waters of the Leicestershire Senior League. I didn't have much idea what I'd find at a club on rung seven, of the Non-League ladder, and Holwell Sports comfortably surpassed the lowish expectations I had. I should have had more faith.

Holwell are essentially Melton Mowbray's senior team and have their roots in the local ironworks which once dominated the Wreake valley. At its peak, the works employed 1,500 but nowadays it is a much-reduced operation, in both size and manpower, and - surprise, surprise - has switched to foreign ownership. The ground is located in the hamlet of Asfordby Hill, almost two miles west of the attractive market town of Melton which, with its handsome Georgian buildings, is worth an hour of anyone's time. Head up the A6006 from the centre in the Loughborough direction, turn right into Welby Road at the first roundabout and the ground is 200 yards on the left. And what a ground! A vivid splash of green in a semi-rural landscape, with everything in apple (or, being Melton, should that be pork?) pie order.

The main features are at the Welby Road end. A corrugated iron (appropriately) cover sits behind the goal and, with its low roof and high front, is very similar to the 'bird hide' end at Desborough. It is painted a sumptuous dark green, with the letters HSFC picked out in dazzling gold on the front wall. A wooden shed, once 'Pearl's Pantry' but now the PA announcer's box, separates the stand from a really delightful corner pavilion, which houses the dressing rooms and bears an uncanny resemblance to that which, until the mid-1980s, served a similar purpose at the Whitehaven rugby league ground. To the right, a small, whitewashed wall-backed cantilevered cover provides shelter for a couple of rows of tip-up seats, with room for fans to stand at the rear. Behind is an absolutely immaculate - even in late autumn - bowling green and further down this side, past a brick building containing the boardroom and refreshment hatch, are tennis courts, discreetly hidden by a line of firs. The bottom end of the ground is grassed and open, with high netting protecting a line of trees. The side to the left is grassed and has the dug-outs, and backs on to the red brick walls of a racquets club and neighbouring Victorian terraces. This is the only part of the ground not pleasing aesthetically but then even a Persian carpet is allowed to get away with a single flaw. These disparate elements are neatly unified by the green paintwork and a spotless post and rail fence round the pitch - the posts painted white and the rails green. Parking is very limited. If the small area behind the Welby Road end is full - and it soon was with this bumper crowd - and you don't fancy risking a wing mirror out on the main road, your best bet is to go down the left-hand side of the Stute social club and

find space behind the racquets club. Also, of note is the relatively high number, for a club this size, of advertising hoardings - a clear indication Holwell are respected in the community. The views from the ground are impressive because of its lofty location. Hills are visible to the north and south, with the rooftops of Melton away to the east, behind the Welby Road end.

As for the game, Holwell never looked like beating Midland Alliance Causeway but were better value than the score suggests. The higher-ranked visitors from Halesowen were stronger all round, making the hosts seem hurried and harassed pretty much throughout. And in tricky winger Dan Priest, Causeway had the game's outstanding player. Chris Bladen gave Causeway an early lead, slipping a low shot past advancing keeper Paul Burton after a telling through ball from Hugh Sproston. Holwell, with only two league wins all season and a glut of injuries, struggled to put together anything deserving of the adjective constructive and then, calamitously, conceded a silly penalty on the stroke of half-time. Priest enticed Holwell skipper Steve Smith into a rash challenge and Danny Cox stroked home the spot-kick with aplomb. Holwell were far better after the break, with Luke Frost desperately unlucky to hit a post with a crisp 20-yarder. To add insult to injury, late substitute Sam Yafai scored Causeway's third in stoppage time, adroitly flicking in a corner with his first - and possibly only - touch.

At least the disappointed home contingent could console themselves, on a bitter night, with the thought they now avoid a third-round trip to the wilds of Consett in December. Brrrr!! I'll certainly try the Leicestershire Senior League again, and hope some of the Melton people who attended this entertaining replay will do the same because several around me admitted to "not having been up here before".

06/20