

TT No.84: Andrew Gallon - Tues 5th December 2006; **Coalville Town** v Stratford Town; Midland Alliance; Res: 1-4; Att: 62; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

The appeal of the essentially modern Owen Street Sports Ground lies in how it reflects the community from which it was spawned. Coalville, a town with its sleeves rolled up, was once the beating heart of the small Leicestershire coalfield and it is appropriate that landscaped spoil heaps dominate the ground on two sides and the winding gear of the defunct Snibston Colliery - now a major tourist attraction - is clearly visible behind another. There was nothing here until a mining engineer from nearby Coleorton, one William Shenton, discovered coal in 1828 after which Coalville become something of a boom town, particularly once the Leicester to Swannington Railway, the first public line in the Midlands, had opened and the number of

pits mushroomed. Bust could have followed when the last mine closed during the 1980s but the town, like others of its ilk, is steadily reinventing itself and proving there is life after the abdication of King Coal. The football club dates back to 1926 and its formation as Ravenstone Miners Athletic - hence the team's Ravens nickname - but it really took off with the move to Coalville for the 1995-6 season after parish council planners refused permission for floodlights at Ravenslea in their home village.

The ground, a short walk from the high street, is spick and span. Access is rather unpromising down an unmade lane alongside dreary industrial units but it opens out to reveal a well-appointed little set-up. The presence of the towering waste heaps make it seem quite enclosed from this vantage point. Three small cantilevered covers, sheltering two rows of black tip-up seats, run most of the length of the far touchline and there is a similar stand opposite, behind which is the ground of Snibston Grange Cricket Club and, beyond that, the colliery headstocks. The dressing rooms - and cricket pavilion - are housed in a smart, two-storey, red-brick building in the near corner, with the turnstile and players/officials entrance blocks fashioned from identical materials and to a similar design. These were constructed to meet the grading requirements of the Midland Alliance when the club stepped up from the Leicestershire Senior League. The rest of the ground is open hard-standing, with a black and white-painted post-and-rail fence surrounding the pitch. Three portable buildings on the near side and at the turnstile end contain the boardroom, a well-stocked club shop and a media centre (no, really). There is plenty of space to expand, with a training pitch behind the three stands and plenty of grass to the rear of each goal. Foundations for a planned stand at the near end are already in place.

When I arrived in mid-afternoon, I got talking to a woman walking her dog. She told me: "There's nothing nice about Coalville." It turned out she wasn't local and was moving at the end of the week after just a year living there. Granted, it's not

Monte Carlo but the town centre, dominated by an impressive clock tower war memorial, is worth a wander and the old pit - now transformed into the futuristic Snibston Discovery Park (slogan: the interactive museum for all the family) -should definitely be checked out. Coalville's industrial past isn't romanticised. Life was hard here, and the story is told honestly - warts and all.

And so, to the game, Coalville's first league match with new manager Brendan Phillips at the helm and a re-run of a fixture earlier in the season abandoned when goalless because of a partial floodlight failure. On the evidence of this performance, Phillips, who has just replaced the long-serving Lee Harriman, has a big job on his hands. Another floodlight malfunction would have been a blessing for the home fans. "It's a Shambles," shouted one. Bad play did not, however, stop light and Stratford striker Tony Robinson, whose close control and pace were a constant threat, put on a one-man show, scoring all four of the visitors' goals. With better finishing, he could have doubled his tally. Coalville replied through Alvin Jarvis for a 1-1 half-time score but the second period was one-way traffic. On my watch, the referee blew for time slightly early. Perhaps he took pity on the Ravens?

If you like industrial archaeology, you will find Coalville interesting. If you don't, you may find yourself leaving town as quickly as my friend with the dog.

06/20