

TT No.88: Andrew Gallon - Sat 9th December 2006; **Banbury United v Mangotsfield United**; Southern Premier; Res: 1-2; Att: 318; Admission: £8; Programme: £1.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Banbury do not have their troubles to seek just now: This was their ninth home defeat of the season; crowds have dipped so alarmingly that chairman David Bennett has been on TV to appeal for more support; key players are side-lined by injury; manager Kevin Brock is unhappy with the state of the pitch; recent gales blew down the roof at the Town End; and the website editor is ready to quit after copping hurtful criticism from readers. Just as well, then, the Puritans are survivors.

The club, who began life as Spencer Villa in 1934, almost went bust during the 1980s before being rescued in 1990.

Their functional ground may not be much to look at but perhaps we should be grateful bulldozers did not raze it in those lean times. Even the most imaginative of estate agent would have a hard job talking up the Spencer Stadium's location. Sandwiched between a canal and the main Oxford to Birmingham railway line, its access is down a narrow lane by the

side of the station car park. Past an oil depot, sidings, a truck repair centre and engineering workshops, you eventually arrive in an unmade car park pockmarked with water-filled pot holes. The ground facade does little to raise spirits. Behind three different sorts of fencing - wooden boards, wire mesh and stone blocks - the back of the social club looks like a scout hut. Once through the turnstiles, it's all a bit of a 'hotchpotch', despite a brave attempt to provide some unity with liberal splashes of the club's garish, but appealing, scarlet and gold colours. The utilitarian main stand, built in just seven weeks for the 2000-01 season, sits to the right of the near side halfway line, with the social club and boardroom, painted a much more attractive white on the business side of the entrance, to the left. In between are the dug-outs. The Town End cover, to the right, has partially collapsed and is out of bounds for safety reasons, leaving fans, for now, able only to use the terracing in front. Behind are dreary industrial units. The far side is open hard standing, with terracing on the town side and a fenced-off grassy area stretching back towards the canal. Opposite the Town End, the atmosphere contrasts markedly. The open terracing, crumbling in places, backs on to a stream and open fields - as rural an aspect as the rest is industrial. Dotted about, rather untidily, are various sheds, huts and portable buildings. Some are in use, some not but between them they provide accommodation for the club shop, snack bar and groundsman. The square floodlight pylons, four on each side, are unusually sturdy and came from the old Oxford City ground. At least they stood up to the recent stormy weather!

Don't think this is a 'knocking' exercise. This is a ground and a setting bursting with character, where the grime and clank of industry beguiles. The social club is far nicer inside than out, boasting an interesting collection of scarves and pennants from other clubs, as well as a photo montage of Banbury's 2006 Oxfordshire Senior Cup final triumph. The huge trophy, which would dwarf the European Cup, takes pride of place on the boardroom table. The programme is also excellent and reflects great credit on editor David Shadbolt. Too many issues these days put design before content but David strikes a happy medium and gives buyers plenty to read. The club's youth and women's teams also get plenty of space and this reflects the Puritans' community status.

For much of this largely scrappy game, a goalless draw looked likely. Robust and direct Mangotsfield, second in the table before kick-off and with the best away record in the division, hit the post in the first half and the crossbar in the second before burly striker David Seal finally broke the deadlock by scoring in the 72nd and 74th minutes. His first was a bullet header and his second a tap-in after veteran keeper Alan Judge had palmed a testing cross on to the bar. Banbury, a small side who tried to play on the floor throughout, pulled one back, a header, six minutes from time through their tallest player, Matt Hayward, to set up a tense finish which the increasingly panicky visitors just managed to negotiate.

A trip to Banbury would not be complete without taking a look at the cross of nursery rhyme fame. The original one was destroyed in the 17th century by the Puritans (the real ones, not early football hooligans) and rebuilt by the Victorians, who never, it seems, missed a chance to rake in some cash. To find the cross, turn right out of the station approach and keep going forward through the bustling, if rather scruffy, town centre for about 10 minutes. In a real comment on modern life, the cross now effectively forms a mini-roundabout. But it lives on and so too, I feel sure, will Banbury United, despite their present problems.

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