

TT No.111: Andrew Gallon - Saturday November 10th 2007; **Bottesford Town v Tadcaster Albion**; NCEL League Cup Rd 2; Res: 2-1; Att: 50 (h/c); Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (28pp); FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

You've got to feel a little sorry for Bottesford Town. Their charge up the pyramid in the last couple of years has coincided almost exactly with neighbours Scunthorpe United's astonishing transformation from ugly duckling perennial lower division strugglers to swanlike respectability in the Championship. It means the Poachers haven't had the recognition they, and inspirational veteran manager Raz Clayton, deserve for clambering through both sections of the Central Midlands League and into the Northern Counties (East) League First Division. Indeed, before and during this entertaining League Cup tie, the main topics of conversation among Town's small band of fans centred on United's midweek game against Stoke City ("we were robbed") and the progress of today's visit to Blackpool ("we never do well there").

While the out-of-town Iron enjoy unprecedented interest and excitement over at Airfix kit Glanford Park, the Poachers, whose pleasant Birch Park ground is secreted deep in Scunthorpe's south-western suburbs, are content to beaver away quietly and effectively. They are finding this debut season in the NCEL slightly tougher than life in the CML but are making good progress on and off the pitch. Formed only in 1974, and graduates of the Lincolnshire League, Bottesford now run three open-age sides, along with 11 for boys and a remarkable seven for girls. They achieved FA Charter Standard status in 2003.

The ground has improved no end of late. The club house, which offers two bars, and the dressing rooms, located in a sports hall in the car park, are both outside the perimeter fence. The sports hall is terribly drab, and its grey lines could have been modelled on a communist regime design. Access via a pay box brings spectators out in the north-west corner. To the right - west - is the main accommodation. This is a low cover running between the two penalty areas. There are 90 wooden bench seats on three levels in the middle, while the height of the concrete hardstanding is below that of the pitch, and therefore a bit unsatisfactory. Using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, the stand has 11 roof supports which make obstruction-free viewing difficult unless you're right at the front. The stand, in common with the metal sheeting perimeter fence, is painted dark green. Though neat and tidy, it must make for a gloomy atmosphere on the few occasions it's cloudy in 'Sunny Scunny'. Behind are the dreary sheds of South Park industrial estate.

In the near corner at the north end is a portable building for hospitality and club officials, with concrete hardstanding running round behind the goal and up the east side. The players emerge through a gate in the perimeter fence by the goal, having crossed the car park from the sports hall. The dugouts, substantial and neat with an artificial surface in the technical areas, dominate the east touchline.

Behind is an unkempt tarmac five-a-side pitch, an area of rough ground and, beyond, new-build homes in a range of styles. The south end, by contrast to the enclosed nature of the rest of Birch Park, is completely open. The turf stretches away into the distance to take in a cricket ground and another football pitch, with more new-builds fringing the outer limits of the site. Spectators are not permitted to use this end which will, presumably, handicap Bottesford's attempts to remain upwardly mobile. The immaculate pitch, its colour echoing the green of the paintwork, is surrounded by a breeze block wall, save for the north end, where a white metal railing is used as a barrier. There are five floodlight masts on each side, with five bulbs on each. The system isn't great and much of the second half is played out amid a nicotine yellow glow.

Bottesford (for whatever reason) have abandoned their traditional blue and yellow striped shirts in favour of West Bromwich Albion's away kit. This is the all navy number with red and white diagonal sashes on the shirt front. It's a classical retro style recalling the 1970s and looks fantastic. But, clearly, nobody told the programme editor of this decision because the Poachers (fairly average) issue still features blue and yellow stripes on the cover. Tadcaster Albion, seemingly always among a group of habitual no-hopers whose sole ambition in this league appears to be to fulfil the fixtures, provide the opposition and are immediately under pressure. As chance after chance goes begging, Clayton, more than 40 years in football management, surveys the scene with a frown, muttering under his breath. He needn't have worried. The visitors don't know a thing about shape and marking, and a Bottesford goal is inevitable. Two come along in three minutes. Jamie Leech plays a ball down the inside right channel and Phil Jackman (36) gets to it ahead of an onrushing Tom Ryder, pushes it past the Brewers keeper and taps into an empty net. Albion, all at sea, then fail to clear their lines and Kev Larvin (39) drills a low shot from the edge of the box across Ryder and into the far bottom corner. And that looks like that.

Totally against expectations, however, Tadcaster take the game by the scruff of the neck in the second half. They play the ball around nicely but can't find a decisive final pass. Bottesford continue to look dangerous on the break, so it makes for end-to-end action. The introduction of tiny substitute Phil Smith in the 76th minute adds pace and daring to the visitors' armoury. Smith supplies the pass for Ashley Hill to crash a sublime drive past Sam Slocombe to make it 2-1 with seven minutes (plus stoppages) left. We are treated to a helter-skelter climax, and Bottesford are grateful to hear the final whistle as they avenge a league defeat by the same score at Tadcaster on the season's opening day.

First instincts wouldn't necessarily associate North Lincolnshire with dynamism and forward thinking but Bottesford Town are just one, of a clutch, of clubs flying the flag for the area with distinction. Where Scunthorpe United led, the Poachers, along with the likes of Brigg Town, Winterton Rangers, Barton Town Old Boys and Grimsby Borough, followed. It makes for a lively football scene, and one worth exploring.

