

TT No. 113: Andrew Gallon - Tues November 13th 2007; **Newport Pagnell Town v St Ives Town**; UCL Prem Division; Res: 3-1; Att: 38 (h/c); Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Prior to discovering the United Counties League a couple of seasons ago, I regarded Newport Pagnell merely as a service station on the M1, of no more or less interest than Leicester Forest East, Trowell or Tibshelf. But expanding personal horizons and acquiring knowledge are among the many joys of this hobby and, having visited the place, I now know it's much more than a layby. The football club's Willen Road ground is on the very south-eastern tip of town, close to the A422 bypass, itself handy for the motorway, so it's not really necessary to go into Newport Pagnell if you're watching the Swans. But it would be a shame not to because, to my utter astonishment, I discovered it's a charming little place.

It's easy for jaundiced Northerners to think of glass-and-metal Milton Keynes, a sort of Pompidou Centre for Buckinghamshire, as swamping its satellite communities with futuristic but soulless architecture and a lifestyle based on badminton and easy parking. Think again. Newport Pagnell retains the air of a country town. Its High Street, five minutes' drive from the football ground, boasts several splendid Georgian town houses (check out numbers 73 and 84) and a couple of timber-framed buildings. The Swan Revived, an atmospheric oak panelled hotel, is also worth a look. But the real highlights are at the bottom end. The ornamented parish church of St Peter and Paul, an interesting, low structure, is perched atop a grassy knoll. Next door, in Church Passage, can be found Revises alms-houses, which date from 1763 and are quite magnificent. Below, in a shallow valley, is the infant River Great Ouse in the early stages of its long journey to The Wash. A short drop through fragrant woodland leads to a splendid bankside stroll. Bear left and you soon reach a confluence of waterways beyond which sheep chew pensively in peaceful fields watched over by a Lilliput Lane farmhouse. Submerged in the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, it's unbelievably rustic. Can this really be a mile from the M1?

Spirits soaring, I make my way to the Willen Road Sports Ground, a council-owned site which hosts cricket and tennis as well as football. There are four municipal footy pitches and the tennis club, hatches battened down for the winter, boasts four artificial courts. Newport Pagnell Town, formed as recently as 1963, moved here in 1972 and are located in the south-west corner. The utilitarian building on the right, a side-foot pass away from the confines of the ground, houses the social club (as drab inside as it is out), the dressing rooms and the match officials' accommodation. A railed off path ensures the players can negotiate the 25 yards to the pitch without getting lost. Even so, and I kid you not, one of the late arriving St Ives players asked me how to get there as he looked for somewhere to warm up. Perhaps he hadn't spotted the blazing floodlights. Spectators are credited with more intelligence - their path to the pay box, slightly over to the

right past a patio with picnic tables, is un-barriered. Emerging into the corner nearest Willen Road, underneath a large oak, I discover a tidy, if unspectacular, ground. Conifers, which grow with a uniform thickness round all but the near portion of the east side, are the dominating feature and provide the curious feeling one has, after hours of searching, stumbled finally upon the centre of a giant maze.

There are two stands, gazing admiringly at each other across the halfway line. That on the right was originally a cover for terracing but has been converted and now shelters three rows of green and white plastic tip-up seats. It is made of brick and painted apple green, with a roof fashioned from metal sheeting. Rather too many supporting columns make the view from here less than ideal. Modern Perspex dugouts are positioned on either side, adding to the spectator's problems. The other stand is a characterless kit affair, offering four rows of plastic tip-up seats in an all-too familiar arrangement. The remainder of the ground is open hardstanding. A broad concrete path encloses the pitch, with a tussocky strip of grass leading up to the omnipresent conifers. A white post and rail fence, supplemented by triangular wooden blocks for advertising hoardings, surrounds the flat pitch. An impression of unity and neatness is reinforced by the green and white diagonal stripes on the goal nets. The floodlights, switched on in 1991, are a mast system. There are five on both sides, with a couple of owl eye lamps on each. Quiet this ground isn't - traffic on the adjacent Willen Road and Newport bypass hums away in the background like a wasp in a jam-jar.

I'd handpicked this game with the care of a hungry schoolboy selecting the biggest doughnut in the cake shop. Both clubs are in the upper reaches of the UCL Premier Division and by the end of a hard-fought contest Newport had extended their unbeaten run to five games while ending at seven St Ives' sequence without defeat. The Swans were clearly up for this one and took a grip worthy of the Boston Strangler with three goals in seven first-half minutes. Lively teenager Drew Mitten (19) struck an angled opener into the bottom corner from 18 yards after Scott Mulkern and Martin Kelly had seen efforts charged down. Gangly skipper John Thorpe (21) gleefully lashed home the second when a throw-in from the right wasn't cleared and Saints, before play beaten just twice in the league this season, had a shellshocked look about them when Mitten (26) capitalised on more sloppy defending to skip through nimbly and shoot low past advancing keeper Carl Mackney.

Saints, ponderous and relying on the long ball, needed a helping hand desperately and got one when Newport midfielder Richard Armstrong was sent off in the 58th minute for some off-the-ball retaliation following a clumsy challenge by Dan Pilsworth, whose card colour was restricted to yellow. Saints captain Will Fordham (67) made things interesting when he floated a brilliant 20-yard free-kick into the top corner of Josh Hill's goal. Scott Fielding (72) was denied by Hill in a one-on-one (a terrible shame for the neutral and a decisive moment) and Fordham (86) thumped the Newport crossbar with a close-range header. But the Swans, that bit

sharper and more inventive, deservedly took the points. Any other outcome would not have reflected the balance of power.

I've come across some decent programmes during my wanderings through the UCL - but Newport's does not, I'm afraid, count among them. To be scrupulously fair, however, I understand their issues for weekend games are rather thicker than this After Eight Mint offering. More disappointing was the attendance. I always like to imagine televised Champions League football has an adverse effect on midweek crowds at this level. But for an enticing fixture such as this, with only the nonsensical Johnstone's Paint Trophy as competition on the box, a mere 38 (and probably not all those paying spectators) was very poor and some way below Newport's average. Yes, it was distinctly chilly but you'd have thought a town this size could produce more fans than that.

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