

TT No. 121: Andrew Gallon - Mon November 19th 2007; **Hyde United v Solihull Moors**; Blue Square North; Res: 3-0; Att: 315; Admission: £10; Programme: £1.50 (60pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Location, location, location. Setting is as crucial to the grounds enthusiast as it is to television property gurus Kirstie Allsopp and Phil Spencer. Ewen Fields is bedded into quintessentially urban northern surroundings. Without any apparent trace of irony or self-parody, United's lively public address announcer played 'Matchstalk Men and Matchstalk Cats and Dogs', Brian and Michael's chart-topping 1978 tribute to artist LS Lowry, during the half-time break. Lowry's famously bleak paintings depicted the Salford area, on the other side of Manchester, but many of his subjects could have been found in Hyde. The same dense rows of red-brick terraced houses, the same slight figures bent against wind and rain, the same sense of unimaginably hard lives spent battling against poverty and bad health. In the context of Ewen Fields, the lyrics seemed entirely appropriate, acquiring a sharp poignancy.

Hyde's home isn't the sort of ground you stumble upon. It's well hidden amid a maze of identical narrow streets. One wrong turn and you could find yourself hopelessly lost. Worth seeking out, Ewen Fields is positioned behind a modern leisure pool - the sort where actual swimming is impossible and often actively discouraged. A tight, metalled lane to the right of the building leads to a small car park at the back of the main stand, overlooked by the back windows of red-bricks. There's no mistaking where you are. Every surface is painted either red or white and signs and logos abound. A new turnstile block between the main stand and the 1966 vintage single-storey social club provides access. The modern stand is a brick-built cantilever with red plastic tip-up seats and, at the rear, a generously glazed executive lounge (so called), boardroom and press box. The players' tunnel is off-centre to the right as you look at the stand. An unusual feature which raises the stand above the mundane is the pair of tripod-style floodlight pylons mounted on the roof - reminiscent of those once plentiful at Rugby Park, Kilmarnock.

From the seats, the pitch, falling perhaps three feet, slopes away towards the Leigh Street touchline. The rest of the ground is a fascinating mixture of ancient and modern. To the immediate right is a battered corrugated sheeting cover over steeply-raked steps of reprofiled terracing. It has an angled fascia, like the peak of a flat cap, and a good deal of complicated ironmongery keeping everything in place. Behind is the social club which, with a low ceiling, is cosy on a bitter night. There is a small bar and an even smaller club shop - not a place for claustrophobics to linger. The far right, Mottram Road, end has a very similar cover over much shallower terracing. To the rear is a snicket. The original pitch was skewed (presumably by accident) and when Tameside Borough Council replaced it with an artificial surface in the mid-1980s some squaring off was done, leaving the stand running at a different angle to what is now grass. This explains the tapering area of

tarmac in front. An advert on the roof features the legend: "It were proper football in my day, lad. Long shorts, footballs as hard as concrete - real man's game." Again, the sentiments feel entirely appropriate. To the left of the main stand is a flat area of tarmac with a large circular water container gazing out on the action.

The two other stands are modern cantilevers over new terracing. They're smart and tidy but not especially interesting. Oddly, the rear wall of the one at the Walker Lane end is placed outside the concrete panel perimeter fence with its roof straining over the steps like a giraffe reaching for a meal on a high bough. Squat dugouts, which look as if they have been supplied by a manufacturer of conservatories or double glazing, nestle either side of the halfway line on the Leigh Street side, behind which is a park and St Thomas's church. One very pleasing feature of the ground is the memorial wall to the left of the cover on this side. A number of plaques recalling now-dead Tigers fans carry moving salutations from surviving relatives. Beyond, near the corner, is a portable building dishing out refreshments and a gent's out of the Dark Ages. There are two types of floodlights. The traditional spindly non-league pylons, dating from 1968, are still in use on the main stand side, with modern masts in each corner opposite. Overall, Ewen Fields is a very appealing enclosure.

The game does little to ward off the chill though, mercifully, the forecast rain fails to put in an appearance. Injury-hit Hyde, who have to play four centre-halves at the back and go second in the table by winning, are far too good for a Solihull Moors side floundering in heavy seas just above the relegation places. The Birmingham club's 15 travelling fans in the Tigers' lowest league crowd of the season kick off with the best of intentions, chanting loudly, but are soon lulled into silence by the abject quality of their team's display. Nicky Clee, Hyde's left winger, is worth watching. An old-fashioned style sees him prepared to run at the Moors defence again and again. It doesn't always come off but the cheery home supporters, all rosy cheeks and broad smiles, seem quite happy to forgive the young dasher's odd lapse.

Two goals in five minutes put Hyde firmly in control. Chris Simm (21) nods the opener from almost on the line after keeper Matt Ghent diverts with one hand a Dave Morley header on to the crossbar. Morley (26) then switches roles, cracking a loose ball into the roof of the net after Moors make hard work of getting the ball away. Moors dominate much of the second half and bring several excellent saves, most notably denying sub Jozsef Jakab, out of Tigers keeper Craig Dootson. But Hyde's accurate passing and all-round pace makes them a constant threat on the break and bulky sub Matthew Tipton (74) capitalises on poor marking to head the third from a Nathan Wharton cross. Moors keep pressing - even the Hyde fans acknowledge they deserve a goal - but their finishing is terrible.

It's good to see Hyde doing so well for the football club have a key part to play in keeping alive the town's identity. The tidal wave that is Greater Manchester has swamped a great many communities once important in their own right. Just ask the citizens of Oldham, Rochdale and Swinton. I can imagine the indignation in these parts every time local lad made good Ricky Hatton is described as a boxer

from Manchester, rather than Hyde. And yet I don't recall anyone reporting Dr Harold Shipman, the daddy of all bad news stories, as ever practising in Manchester. It was always Hyde. Stinks, doesn't it?

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