

TT No.148: Andrew Gallon - Sat 22nd December 2007; **Oadby Town** v Oldbury United; Midland Alliance; Res: 3-2; Att: 64; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Christmas came early with this cracker of a basement battle. A cut and thrust second half lit up an increasingly wet, murky and cold afternoon, with Oldbury twice battling back from two goals down and then going

desperately close to forcing an equaliser in a thrill-a-minute finale. Oadby bossed the first half but had only Carl Adams's ninth-minute opener, a glancing header from an in-swinging corner, to show for their domination. Lee Miveld, with steadier finishing, could easily have grabbed a hat-trick, while United keeper David Rimmer denied Matt Moore superbly with his legs just before the break.

When Moore struck a low shot into the bottom corner in the 51st minute for 2-0, the contest looked over. But Oldbury, relishing the steadily worsening conditions, staged an amazing revival. Sean Pugh, a glam rock striker who one wag in the crowd suggested should be booked for his haircut alone, pulled one back five minutes later when Oadby keeper Ryan Tilley could not hold his near-post flick. Danny Hemmings almost levelled with a firm shot which beat Tilley but was headed off the line by Andrew Woodford and, as so often happens, the opposition then went straight down the other end and made it 3-1. Adams (63) raced away to beat the offside trap, pick up a through ball, round Rimmer and tap into an empty net. But still Oldbury weren't finished. Two minutes later Pugh expertly controlled a cross from the right before turning and smashing an 18-yard looper into the top corner. The Blues pressed furiously in the closing stages. Pugh missed out on a hat-trick when Tilley saved brilliantly in a one-on-one and as the game entered stoppage time Earl Grant squandered a great chance to earn a point. Liam Morris did well on the left to make space to cross low and found Grant, unmarked 12 yards out. He had plenty of time to pick his spot but cracked a drive firmly against the foot of the near post, the muddy ball leaving its mark on the woodwork to haunt the Oldbury striker.

Oadby's Topps Park ground (formerly Invicta Park but renamed after a club sponsor specialising in discount tiles) provided a pleasant backdrop to all this excitement. It was opened in 1948 and bought by the club from a farmer during the 1960s. Nestling in a shallow valley, its main feature is a wonderfully old-fashioned main stand on the Wigston Road side. It is fashioned entirely from corrugated metal sheeting, with a pitched roof providing cover for wooden benches arranged in four rows. At the west end is a small director's box and press area, both with plastic seats. These consist of shaped 'blobs', comfortable only for those whose backside matches exactly the dimensions of the designer's version of the average bum. The roof, outer walls and nine supporting columns along the front are painted red, with the facing rear wall in white. An Oadby Town Football Club sign in black and white is a neat addition to the roof. A wide area of grass leads up to the boundary fence.

From here, behind the right-hand goal is a relatively modern (built in 1990) red-brick block housing the dressing rooms and social club, whose windows are protected by netting suspended from poles. The building has a mixture of roof lines and a tower-topped gable. The club is fairly spartan inside, though the team line-ups can be found pinned to one of the walls alongside the bar. A refreshment kiosk on a small grassy bank is adjacent and alongside the main entrance. Oddly, the south end of the social club provides offices for a taxi firm. To the rear is an unmade car park which the presence of mature trees renders something of an obstacle course. Some of the trunks are put to good use as mounts for lamps and even a tannoy speaker. On the other side of Wigston Road is well-appointed Oval Park, the training ground for Leicester RUFC and the home of Oadby Wyggestonian RUFC.

The remainder of Topps Park is open, with a hardstanding path adjacent to the pitch perimeter fence of green posts and red railings. A flat area of gravel at the east end provides additional parking and another entrance. Behind is Washbrook Lane. The steeple of St Peter's parish church can be glimpsed towards the town centre, which is on a rise about a quarter of a mile distant and quiet even on the fabled last shopping Saturday before Christmas. The side opposite the main stand is very narrow. There are dugouts, of breeze block painted white with red roof supports. The home structure is twice the length of the away. To the rear is a chattering beck, a belt of tall trees (nice, I imagine, when in leaf), Washbrook Lane (which bends round the ground) and then rising farmland leading up to the town's major attraction. This is the Brocks Hill Country Park, whose visitor centre has been constructed with planet and energy saving in mind and preaches green virtues at every opportunity. To quote some of the rather pretentious flannel in the exhibition hall, the complex "contains a mosaic of habitats, each of which supports a range of plants and animals". To the layman, these look rather like fields and bits of woodland. Next door is Lucas's Marsh, looked after by the Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust. These rural aspects are a reminder of how appealing Oadby must have been when James Hawker moved here from Daventry as a 21-year-old in Victorian times. He was a poacher, felt the area to be ideal for the purpose and went on to write a book about his experiences. Hence the football club's Poachers nickname. The floodlights, switched on almost from the kick-off on this gloomy day, are mounted on masts. There are three per side, with three lamps on each. The mast placed right in front of the main stand merely adds to the number of obstructions in the spectator's eye line. One other feature of note is the high number of advertising hoardings. Someone behind the scenes is clearly working very hard.

There is certainly no shortage of grounds in the Leicester area (an ideal destination when the weather is 'iffy') and Topps Park is one of the better examples I've visited. The rural nature of the surroundings to the south add to its appeal. Judging by the statistics in the run of the mill programme, attendance levels at Oadby fluctuate wildly. Their best this season is 145 and today's crowd of 64 - mostly old timers - is the second worst for a league game. The youngish chap next to me turned out to be a season ticket holder at Leicester City but watched either

Oadby or neighbours Friar Lane & Epworth when the Foxes were away. There can't have been many more exciting games at the Walkers Stadium this campaign than this Midland Alliance thriller.

06/20