

**TT No.157: Mike Latham** - Sat 29 December 2007: Midland Football Alliance. **Coventry Sphinx** 1-0 Coalville Tn. Attendance: 73; Admission: £5; 36pp programme: £1.50; FGIF Match Rating: 2\*.

Some days you set off for a game and your plans change drastically. So, it was on the last Saturday before the New Year for me, as an M6 motorway resembling a car park necessitated a four-hour crawl towards Hilton Park services and led to abandoned plans to visit Olney Town in the United Counties League.

At 2pm in a motorway service station, fed up and somewhat panic-stricken I started 'phoning around to check an alternative venue, mindful of the heavy rain of the week that led to several postponements. First call was to Coventry Sphinx, a newcomer to level five this season and playing at the highest level in their 61-year history. A friendly voice at the other end confirmed the game was on and 45 minutes later, after exiting J2 of the M6 and following a circuitous route more by luck, than good judgement, I was driving down Sphinx Drive into the spacious car park of the Coventry Sphinx Sports Ground.

Coventry Sphinx started out as Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft FC in 1946 and progressed through the local ranks until joining the Midland Combination, being elevated to the Midland Football Alliance (level 5) at the end of the 2006/07 season. They owe their name to the Sphinx emblem, first used by the Siddeley-Deasy motor company in 1912 when their cars used the slogan 'as silent as the Sphinx' and sported a Sphinx-like bonnet ornament.

These days the club is a private one, also hosting cricket, tennis, bowls and other sports and occupies quite an elevated piece of land in a largely residential area near the district of Stoke to the south-east of Coventry.

First impressions count an awful lot and the exceedingly friendly gateman put me at ease, reassuring me that this rather modest, wind strewn location was in fact a good choice for an afternoon's entertainment.

The main feature of the sports ground, also shared with cricket, is the Willie Knibbs Memorial Stand, named after the much-loved club manager tragically killed in a car accident in November 2001. The stand offers some seated accommodation and a small covered standing area. The far end is dominated by a huge Marconi building and a communications tower. The rest of the ground is flat standing behind a post and rail fence and the far side, shared with cricket, is out of bounds, effectively making this a three-sided ground.

It soon became apparent that the club is run by several stalwarts and supported by a hard core of fans who are devoted to the Sphinx cause. The programme, 'Sphinx Review' is an outstanding effort- 36 pages crammed with articles, photographs and statistics and beautifully produced. And it comes with an apology, though there is

no need. Apparently, the standard issue is an even grander effort and normal service will be resumed after the holidays.

The adjoining Sphinx club house offers a warm respite on a bitterly cold afternoon and a range of drinks and filled rolls are dispensed with a smile. At half-time hot drinks are served in return for a donation to the 'honesty box.'

The man at the gate is happy to provide the team line-ups and a vigorous game ensues on a cold afternoon. At first signs it is apparent we have a Captain Mainwaring-type referee and an equally officious linesman on the main stand side. Coalville, not the best disciplined side I've seen all season, fail to heed the warning signs. They lose two players to red cards in the first half- one for an alleged off-the-ball elbow, the second for a rash tackle from behind and the way the referee is going, not to mention the non-stop whining of the visiting players left on the pitch there is some doubt they'll retain the necessary compliment to complete the game.

As it happens just one more red card is proffered- that to a member of the Coalville bench late in the game. Funnily enough the visitors play better with nine men and almost snatch a draw in the latter stages, the only goal coming as early as the 11th minute.

It isn't the greatest game, to be honest, but then the Midland Alliance isn't my favourite league by a long chalk. In my experience the standard of play and the discipline of the players can leave a lot to be desired. Salford City, a level 5 club from the North West Counties League, visit here in a few weeks for an FA Vase tie and that result will be watched with interest. I'd expect Salford to progress.

But I'm not going to criticise a club with as warm a welcome to the neutral as this. Everyone I met, club officials and supporters alike were simply great football people and there is clearly a huge amount of hard work and dedication going into ensuring that the club continues to prosper, not only at this level but also with the large amount of junior sides under its umbrella.

So, the ground isn't the greatest and, on this occasion at least, the game was hardly a classic. But the real heartbeat of grass roots football is to be experienced at clubs like this one and that made a visit here such a rewarding one. It is recommended, especially, I am told, on a warm summer's day or an early Spring afternoon.