

TT No.166: Mike Latham - Sat 12 January 2008: Midland Combination Football League Premier Division. **Highgate United** 1-0 Barnt Green Spartak. Att: 47; Admission: £4; 32pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Having seen the leaders of the Midland Combination, Highgate United in action recently away from home and having been impressed, I was looking forward to a visit to their home ground at Tythe Barn Lane in the Shirley district of Solihull.

Heavy rains had led to many postponements in the area but a check call to the club's friendly chairman and secretary, Tony Clancy, confirmed that the game was on. Mr Clancy kindly returned my call- what a service!

The M6 was eerily quiet and in what seemed like no time I was coming off J3 of the M42 and making my way through the leafy south Birmingham countryside, following the excellent directions from the league web-site.

Highgate United is located on Tythe Barn Lane and, upon driving into the site a friendly gateman takes your admission money and dispenses a superbly produced full colour programme. The teams were warming up on an adjoining pitch behind the green-painted stand that runs along one side of the main pitch.

There is a small but warm and well-appointed club house and a well-stocked tea bar manned by extremely friendly staff. I was sure straight away that I had chosen a good venue to enjoy an afternoon's football and I wasn't to be disappointed.

The teams make their way from the club house down a gravel path to the main pitch, which has a white-painted post and rail fence surround and the long stand along one side. This has two rows of seats, most yellow but some red, down the first half and offers standing along the second half. Sadly, there is evidence of vandalism, even in such a pleasant location as this, with slogans daubed on the back of the stand and on the white-painted wall surrounding the pitch. The dug-outs are located along the far side. The club finally won a 25-year battle with local residents to have floodlights installed in 1997, allowing them to progress along the pyramid route.

Formed in 1948, Highgate moved to their present ground in 1964 and reached the semi-finals of the FA Amateur Cup in 1973 having reached the quarter-final stage six years earlier. It was in that year, 1967 that a tragedy unfolded as Highgate player Tony Allden was killed by lightning during the tie against Enfield. No less than 31,500 turned out for the replayed game at Villa Park, which Enfield won 6-0.

The Highgate manager, Peter Frain, had welcomed me warmly before the game, having recognised me from a chat we had at his side's game at Southam on New Year's Day. Since then he had lost the services of his goalkeeper, who sustained a broken hand playing Sunday football. With an unbeaten run stretching back to the first week of October, he was hopeful of extending the sequence but knew that

the opposition side, who had beaten Highgate 2-1 during August would provide tough opposition.

So, it proved on a heavy but playable pitch. The visitors, colourfully attired in green and orange halved jerseys gave every bit as good as they got and their goalkeeper was outstanding. It became clear that one goal would decide a fiercely competitive game.

As darkness fell on an increasingly chilly afternoon Highgate had their chance four minutes from time when a rash challenge from the otherwise outstanding Spartak no6 conceded a penalty. But the Spartak 'keeper dived to his right to turn away the penalty from Highgate's leading scorer, Tom Thacker.

With just 40 seconds or so of normal time remaining, though, Highgate made the breakthrough. The visiting 'keeper misjudged an angled cross and Steve Darlington, lunging at the loose ball, got a touch that found the net, just, despite a despairing attempted clearance from the no6 and the crossbar. The home joy was unconfined. With nearest challengers Southam rained off they moved seven points clear at the top, but defeat was hard on the visitors who contributed fully to an engrossing contest.

Highgate United have plans to improve their ground should they achieve their target of promotion to the Midland Alliance for next season. They are clearly an ambitious and friendly club in a nice location and a visit here comes highly recommended.

An attractive tree-lined ground that backs on to the grounds of the Old Yardleians rugby union club in neighbouring Tilehouse Lane, the Coppice (as Highgate's ground is named) is a good, stress-free place to spend watching a good standard of football.

06/20