

**TT No.168: Andrew Gallon** - Sat 12th January 2008; **Bishop's Stortford v Halifax Town**; FA Trophy Round 2; Res: 2-2; Att: 731; Admission: £10; Programme: £2; (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

I'm a serial killer of two birds with one stone, so this date had been in my diary since the morning the draw was made for the second round of the FA Trophy. It presented a rare opportunity (a matter of choice when you're hopping mad) to see my own team, and at a venue I'd not visited. The Shaymen provided the solution to their half of the equation by negotiating a route past Southern League high-flyers Leamington in a tricky midweek first-round tie delayed by the onset of winter and then the weather gods did their bit by sweeping aside the rain clouds in favour of clear blue sky and bright sunshine to ensure the Woodside Park pitch at Bishop's Stortford was playable. All systems go!

This was always going to be a trip ahead of which the game promised more than the ground. Stortford moved to Woodside Park just five years ago, so I wasn't expecting such a modern set-up to be terribly interesting. And so it proved. Think Witton Albion's Wincham Park - only less impressive. The match, however, was a different kettle of fish. Halifax's away form, this year as last, has been awful and with their Hertfordshire opponents scoring 11 times in their last three home fixtures, a close contest looked likely. And it was tight. The first half I spent in the company of a scout for Ebbsfleet United. He had intended taking in the Histon-Cambridge United Trophy tie but diverted his attentions to the Halifax game when waterlogging put paid to his original plan. Being anally retentive must be a prime requirement for scouting. Looking over his shoulder, I noticed he'd estimated the heights of all the Town players, drawn up a complex formation plan and scattered his notebook with a bewildering array of hieroglyphics. His conversation was peppered with sage observations such as "Nelthorpe could be a matchwinner" and "Legzdins has a good pair of hands", while quizzing me over exactly which Shayman had taken up a position on the near post at an early corner. I was watching the ball; he was watching everything but the ball. Fascinating. We went our separate ways at half-time, so I can't reveal whether he lived up to the scouting stereotype and left 10 minutes before the final whistle.

Woodside Park, which holds 4,000, is merely a decent goal-kick from junction eight of the M11. It's literally the last building on the east side of Bishop's Stortford, so there's no pressing reason to drive the extra couple of miles into town. But being the curious sort, I opted for a pre-match stroll among the shoppers. This is a place which is never going to attract the attention of the publishers of *The Rough Guide to England*. The centre, blighted by a congested ring road, is in the bottom of a shallow valley, where, unsurprisingly, the River Stort was once forded. There are signs of planning blunders everywhere but the narrow, mostly Georgian and now traffic choked, High Street includes the attractive Corn Exchange - home (God help us) to a snooty wine bar and a branch of Toni & Guy. Jackson Square is the mall

from Hell. The scene is dominated by the spire-topped tower of the parish church of St Michael, which is faced in what appears to be an early form of pebbledash. One or two timber-framed buildings add a dash of character, with the Boar's Head pub by the church particularly pleasing. But, tellingly, the tourist information centre is closed and the information leaflets in the library direct the visitor towards London. A footpath along the Stort provides a welcome escape, though even this is spoiled by the ugly angles of waterside apartments for the aspirational. It doesn't feel like a football town or, indeed, anything but a stopover for Stansted airport users. A bill for the Herts & Essex Observer ('Trusted in the Community Since 1861') gets as close to football as it can with a bill informing of 'Beckham's Help for Disabled Girl, 12'. I scarcely find sufficient diversions to pass by the 60 minutes on my parking ticket.

Woodside Park isn't a great deal more inspiring. This is the new ground territory we all know well. Access is through an industrial estate, with the stadium at the far end, just beyond a waste disposal unit and a park and ride facility. The proximity of the airport is reflected in the names of the units on the estate - Inflight Engineering Services and Aircraft Component Repair and Overhaul Centre. The latter can't be accused of not doing what it says on the tin. Topping the gobbledygook league is Thermo Fisher Scientific. Perhaps they are part of a campaign to nuke anglers. The aftermath of fly tipping provides a depressing welcome at the main gate. Parking isn't a problem for Blues fans. Though sandwiched between two busy roads, the ground boasts space on all four sides, but only two sections are tarmacked. Guess where the away fans have to go? The east side is dominated by the main building which, in design and livery, looks like something a child has knocked together from Lego. It's boxy, with fawn-coloured brickwork enlivened by bands of grey. The home club have taken a sledgehammer to crack the segregation nut, which means fans are directed to separate (both uninviting) bars as well as to different parts of the ground. It's a massive over-reaction because Town bring only about 100 supporters for a game in which defeat (the laughable Setanta Shield apart) will effectively finish the Shaymen's season. The gate, a distinctly unimpressive 731 for the first meeting between these two clubs, is still Blue Square South Stortford's best of a campaign which could end with promotion.

There are turnstile blocks either side of the main building, and they maintain the house style. The near side is dominated by the main stand. This, in common with all four stands, is a cantilever. It provides seven rows of blue and white plastic tip-up seats arranged in 'stripes'. The players' tunnel is central, though the stand is slightly offset in relation to the halfway line. The brickwork is the same inside as out, and the roof, of corrugated metal sheeting, a faded shade of blue. The roof extends beyond the seats at one end and, equally unusually, the stand faces the setting sun. That's generally the fate of the cheap seats. To the left is a refreshment hatch and, in the north-east corner next to a bicycle-style cover for the disabled, the club shop. This is a wooden shed, run by a lad with a physique akin to a biro pen refill who looks like he'd blow over in a stiff breeze. Programmes on the walls include the one from Stortford's 1981 FA Trophy triumph over Sutton

United at Wembley. The north end has three steps of terracing alongside a cover sheltering eight steps of terracing. The pattern is repeated at the south end. Opposite the main stand is a kit stand, with four rows of plastic tip-up seats, again arranged in blue and white 'stripes'. This is set back from a strip of flat tarmac. Metal railings surround the pitch which, given a week of rain and a home game just four days previously, is in excellent condition. The floodlights are corner masts, with five lamps on each. Evergreens fringe the south end and are visible beyond the road on the main stand side but otherwise the only feature of note is the planes taking off from Stansted's nearby runways. It's best described as functional. But then so is a public toilet. If football grounds ever become available as flat packs, they will look like this one.

Thankfully, this mundane backdrop fades from view once the action begins. It's a cracking cup tie. Poor finishing at both ends means it's goalless at half-time. Lewis Killeen, Craig Nelthorpe (one of three debutants in the Town line-up) and Jon Shaw all go close for the visitors. Shaw's miss, blazing over wildly from close range, is the worst. But not quite as bad as Greg Pearson's for the Blues. Ahmed Deen's through-ball sends him scampering away and the striker, being courted by several Football League clubs, shoots into the side-netting after rounding Adam Legzdins. The Town keeper also does well to tip over a fizzing effort from Blues man of the match Loui Fazakerley, a lively customer on the right wing.

All the goals come in the last 32 minutes. Deen (58) puts Stortford ahead with a free-kick from the right touchline which somehow evades everyone in the six-yard box and nestles in the far bottom corner. A real softie. Halifax hit back seven minutes later. Top scorer Shaw, who looks fractionally offside, volleys home at the back post when a Simon Heslop effort is deflected to him off a defender. Stortford, semi-finalists in this competition three years ago, respond with a classical goal. Craig Edwards finds Fazakerley overlapping on the right flank and his deep cross to the back post picks out an unmarked Roy Essandoh (69) and this sometime FA Cup hero glides a perfect downward header past an exposed Legzdins. Town keep pressing and are rewarded with a second equaliser 11 minutes from time. A drive from substitute Andy Campbell (fit, for once) is blocked by keeper Joe Welch and the rebound falls to Killeen, who forces the ball in off the underside of the crossbar. It is clearly over the line and bounces up to hit the netting but the alert Shaw makes sure with another volley and is credited with the goal - his 15th of the campaign. In the 85th minute, Shaw fluffs a great chance to win it for the Yorkshiremen, dallying over his shot to take an unnecessary touch and Welch pulls off a tremendous save. A draw is a fair result, though. On the weekend of what would have been my late father's 72nd birthday, Town give their all. He'd have been pleased.

I like to give credit where it's due, and Stortford's 'Park Life' programme is well worth adding to your collection. Many issues in the Blue Square-sponsored divisions seem to want to ape those of Football League clubs - all gloss and little substance. But Blues editor Gareth Stephens finds a happy medium. His content for this game features a number of historical pieces, many relating to Stortford's previous FA

Trophy heroics. It's good value for the cover price. All in all, a splendid day out with a great game as its centrepiece. Just a shame about the ground.

06/20