

**TT No.17: Andrew Gallon** - Wed 15th August 2007; **Sleaford Town** v Yaxley; United Counties Premier Division; Res: 2-4; Att: 208; Admission: £5; Programme (32pp): £1; FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

Eslaforde Park is finally open for business - with an impeccable sense of timing. This fixture marked Sleaford Town's first competitive game at the £1.5m, 15-acre complex, and their home debut in the Premier Division of the United Counties League following promotion in May. Even though Yaxley comprehensively pooped the party, the general feeling was that the wait, ending a fairly miserable two-year exile at RAF Cranwell, had been worthwhile. A crowd of 208 compared very favourably with the First Division range of between 40 and 70 at their previous out-of-town base, while the facilities simply must be among the best in this league.

Eslaforde (the ancient name for Sleaford) Park is located on Boston Road, beyond the eastern fringes of this attractive market town. As well as the stadium, there are five other pitches (two full size) to cater for the club's 21 teams, plus a couple of pub sides for whom the council couldn't find room in the local park. You can start playing for Sleaford Town at under-seven level. That's what I call a community programme.

The setting is, well, very Lincolnshire. Fertile crop fields stretch away to the north, south and east, with windbreak tree belts providing the only height in a pancake-flat landscape. To the west is the railway embankment of a line so rarely used, I didn't see a single train all night. Turning through the main gate, everything is, as you might expect, shiny and new. Honey-hued aggregate in the (free) car parks, one to the right behind the near goal and a larger one to the left, echoes the shade of the bricks used in the main building. The trimmings are all painted in the club's green colours to give a neat, unified effect. Nothing succeeds like simplicity, eh?

The ground is surrounded by a tall, unvarnished wooden fence and the sole turnstile block brings you out in the south-west corner. To the left is the main building, which runs between the two penalty areas. Its sleek, clean lines house the dressing rooms, a tastefully decorated and furnished bar, toilets, refreshments kiosk and the usual cubby holes beloved of club officials. House Doctor Anne Maurice would, no doubt, approve of the neutral tones which abound. My only quibble here is that the unadorned exterior walls provide a rather bland backdrop to the action. A wide strip of turf separates this building from the gorgeous pitch and dugouts, with tarmac paths giving access from the dressing rooms and bar.

Tarmac hard standing and unpainted metal railings lead you round to the only area of cover, the main stand on the east side. Disappointingly, it's one of those metal kit-built structures which seem to be popping up everywhere. It straddles the halfway line and has green, plastic tip-up seats. Mast pattern floodlights are positioned in each corner.

The cost of all this was borne by the club (the council "have done nothing" for football in these parts, one official told me), with Football Foundation grants covering about half the bill. For a club Sleaford's size, it's an impressive set-up but - and I hate myself for saying this - it's a little uninspiring and lacking in character. Perhaps, if finances permit, they could build a more distinctive main stand some-time in the future. There is, however, endless scope for further development if a march up the pyramid puts its best foot forward.

Sleaford had played eight pre-season friendlies at Eslaforde Park to get used to their new home but were still caught cold in a feisty, physical contest by a Yaxley side who handed out a lesson in finishing. The Cuckoos, having scored three times without reply, had the points in the bag by half-time. Ian Edge's through ball sent Mark Paul (25) racing clear for a coolly-taken opener. Paul then teed up an unmarked Lee Blewett (29) to slam in the second from 10 yards, and both Paul and Blewett played a part in the third, Andy Chatters (40) forcing the ball over the line at the back post after keeper Andrew Scott had found a Blewett shot too hot to handle.

Sleaford, who didn't get many breaks (the rub of the Greens, I guess), improved considerably in the second half and dazzling footwork from mercurial substitute Miles Hunter enabled Jason Sedlan (62) to find the net from a tight angle after skipping round keeper John Feetham. But Yaxley, very much against the run of play, netted again when another pass from midfield again left Sleaford hopelessly square at the back, and Paul (79) fired hard and early past an exposed Scott. Back came the hosts (and they'll need this sort of spirit in what could be a tough winter playing at a higher level), and Jamie Shaw (83) rattled in a crisp drive which took a slight deflection off defender Chris Lenton on its way into the far bottom corner.

Couple of things to say about the high-sheen programme. A much more professional issue than Sleaford managed on my visit to RAF Cranwell 18 months ago but a few extra copies on the print run would have been welcome. The crowd contained a number of hoppers, several of whom missed out having travelled considerable distances.

With the club now back in town, there's no excuse for not going into Sleaford for a quick look around. Most of what's worth seeing is within a couple of minutes'-walk of the twelfth century market place. Don't miss the parish church of St Denys (one of the oldest broach spires in England), the windmill in Money's Yard, Carre's Alms-houses, the corn exchange and the Sessions House.

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