

TT No.181: Andrew Gallon - Sat 26th January 2008; **MK Dons** v Rochdale; Coca-Cola League Two; Res: 0-1; Att: 7,882; Admission: £22; Programme: £2.50 (84pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

A former work colleague, born and raised in south-west London, was a died-in-the-wool Wimbledon fan. We felt his pain as the club he had followed from Southern League days was systematically dismantled and carted off - lock, stock and smoking barrel - to Milton Keynes, re-emerging, in his caustic words, as the Franchise XI. He gloated and sneered over the two relegations which followed and was none too pleased a couple of years ago when I headed to the National Hockey Stadium to watch the illegitimate offspring of his beloved Dons. We've since gone our separate ways but his understandable bitterness was firmly in my thoughts as I drove south on the M1 to sample the £50m stadium:mk and the game of the day in Division Four (oh, all right, League Two).

It's hard to shake the feeling Buckinghamshire's sole city is an ongoing social experiment. This was my fourth visit to Milton Keynes over a period of 20 years, and it still seems like another planet. It's a scrubbed, almost antiseptically clean, environment. Everything looks the same - the groups of houses positioned below road level, the sunken path and cycle ways, the juxtaposed residential, industrial and retail zones, the characterless roads and roundabouts which sluice the car-borne population from one place to another and the peculiar lack of visible people. They don't want your name here, just your number. Odd, odd, odd.

Strictly speaking, stadium:mk is in Bletchley ('Home of the Codebreakers'). But only by a couple of hundred yards, and it's MK-lite anyway. The ground, whose constructor claims to be 'Building Dreams for Milton Keynes', provides an oasis of humanity amid roaring roads and blank retail sheds. From the west side, all appears perfectly normal. There's plenty of tinted glass, glossy black tiles and silver panelling. Pretty cool, actually. Arriving via the main entrance road, it looks very much like any other new stadium. The futuristic block tacked on to the south end turns out to be The Arena, where the city's basketball team play out the arcane ritual of their repetitively bizarre you-score-then-we-score land-of-the-giants freak shows. I'll bet its capacity of 6,500 isn't tested for MK Lions fixtures. Towards the north end of the ground is what appears to be bog standard modern office or hotel accommodation. Stroll round the east side and be prepared for a big surprise. The stadium is unfinished! The glossy black tiling rises only to the height of the turnstiles. The rest is open to the elements. It's a little like watching an autopsy after the 'Y' incision has been made. All the innards are in plain view. There are exposed girders everywhere and the uncovered concrete of the seating tiers seems starkly bare. Like the chilling whiteness of a bone viewed through a deep gash. The roof, a sort of oval halo, hovers above the stadium on huge metal stilts. Eventually, when money allows, all this will be enclosed in the manner of the west side and the capacity raised from 22,000 to 30,000. Until then, the

anatomy of modern ground construction is open for you to inspect. Some of the immediate environs of the stadium are laid out with tarmac for parking. The remainder is un-landscaped waste ground. You won't, I'm sure, want to pay a punitive £5 to park. Don't use the adjacent car parks of the Asda and IKEA superstores because their jobsworth overlords are cracking down on matchday rogues. Your best bet is the industrial estate beyond the east side of the stadium. It's signed for Mount Farm off adjacent Saxon Street (V7). Free, safe parking is available either on Dawson Street or Clarke Road.

Inside, the stadium is even more clearly a work in progress. I chose to sit on the east side halfway line in one of the few sections where red and white tip-up padded plastic seats provide relief from the black examples which predominate. Only the lower, larger seating tier is in use. The upper tier is incomplete. The concrete steps and vomitories are in place, but seats have not been added. Between the tiers is a broad concourse ringing the stadium and providing the usual fast food outlets, betting kiosks and toilets. Facilities for the disabled on this concourse appear excellent. They get the best - rather than the customary worst - view in the house. Because the stadium is not fully enclosed, the concourse, though light and bright, is a breezy place to linger. But at least the surfaces have been rendered. No untreated breeze block here. The roof seems to float above the superstructure, with a gaping hole allowing free access to the elements. The west side has a wide players' tunnel on the halfway line. It is flanked by cutaway sections of red tip-up seats forming dugouts. Curiously, and possibly uniquely, the home dugout contains two exercise bikes as an interesting alternative to jogging up and down the touchline for substitutes aiming to keep warm. Above the finished seating tier is a concrete shelf. This is home, at present, only to the TV cameras. Either side are balconies for what will eventually become corporate areas. The only other break in the monotony of the layout is a huge concrete vomitory at ground level in the south-east corner. This provides vehicular access to the venue - handy, no doubt, if and when Dons owner Pete Winkelman's hoped-for music concerts materialise. The floodlights consist of numerous lamps mounted at the point where the roof's opaque and translucent panels meet. Strangely, for a new ground, there is neither scoreboard nor clock. Overall, stadium:mk bears some resemblance to Arsenal's Emirates Stadium which, given the same architect designed both, is to be expected.

This nerve-tingling contest more than lived up to its pre-match billing. MK Dons, the league leaders, have wobbled lately with successive 1-0 defeats by Barnet and (of all teams) Wrexham while Rochdale, in their centenary season, were unbeaten away from home since the opening day of the campaign. So, it looked like being close. Dons began well and Simon Ramsden cleared a Lloyd Dyer curler off the line. But then fellow Dale defender Nathan Stanton turned the match on its head in the 13th minute by getting himself sent off. Dean Lewington fell over dramatically in his tackle and the referee pointed to the spot before booking Stanton, whose protests continued to the extent he was shown a second yellow card. Keeper Sam Russell ensured justice was done by diving to his left to push aside Dons skipper Keith Andrews' strongly-hit penalty. From then on, the visitors left big target-man

Rene Howe alone up front and got everyone else back behind the ball. Milton Keynes struggled to find a way through the massed ranks and after Andrews had somehow blazed over at the near post Dale broke away down the right for Kallum Higginbotham, evading a feeble Drissa Diallo challenge, to set up a tap-in for his captain Gary Jones (32). It was just what the game needed.

Dons boss Paul Ince had clearly given his players a rollicking at the break because in the second half they did everything but score. They moved the ball around at speed and, with the extra man, found plenty of space down both wings. But Dale, roared on by a couple of hundred travelling fans, stood firm. Aaron Wilbrahim struck the inside of a post with a close-range header and Sean O'Hanlon then volleyed the rebound wildly over. Higginbotham twice cleared off the line to deny Danny Swales and O'Hanlon, and Russell made two fabulous saves inside a minute to leave Dons sub Kevin Gallen with his head in his hands. Amid the drama, a touch of comedy: one of the pitch sprinklers burst into unannounced action and, no sooner had that outpouring been dealt with, another made an unscheduled appearance. Stoppage time extended to seven minutes, leaving both sets of supporters frantic with emotion and excitement. But Dale held on to complete a notable double having beaten the Dons 3-2 (with a brace of last-minute goals) at Spotland back in September.

The tannoy man's choice of music before kick-off included 'Things Can Only Get Better'. It's appropriate - for both MK Dons and their ground. Ince, who in the mostly impressive programme admitted he was in "foreign waters" after the Barnet and Wrexham setbacks, must get his men back on course quickly because the club desperately need to win promotion. The Rochdale crowd was 2,000 down on that for the preceding Barnet home game so the fans of this team without a history are evidently - and unsurprisingly - fickle. This stadium, even in its present state, is wasted in League Two. When the job is finished, it will be a decent venue. Perhaps, though, it is time for the club to bury the past and forget their painful associations with Wimbledon. Why not drop the Dons nickname and change the strip from the original London club's all white kit? New location, new start.