

**TT No.192: Andrew Gallon** - Tue 12th February 2008; **Nuneaton Borough v Worcester City**; Blue Square North; Res: 1-1; Att: 753; Admission: £7; Programme: £1 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

Nuneaton Borough have pulled off quite a trick. In crossing the town last summer to swap Manor Park for Liberty Way, they've moved to a ground worse in every sense. Admittedly, their traditional home, one of the non-league game's classical venues, had its faults but many of them had been dealt with as part of a modernisation programme in the 1990s. Manor Park, on the west side of Nuneaton, also had the attraction of being embedded in what I regard as proper football ground territory - down among the grit and the grime. It was in a squalid, dilapidated district, shoehorned into a small plot of land bounded by the Coventry Canal and the Cock & Bear pub, one of the roughest boozers in which I've ever had a pre-match pint. But Borough, pound signs flashing before their eyes, opted to sell. Site and soul, it transpires. Manor Park is now owned by Bloor Homes, who have flattened the stands and are busy building homes of between one and five bedrooms. Nuns Retreat, the development is called. The canal and pub, however, survive to mark the location.

Liberty Way is on the east side of town and has been home to Nuneaton RUFC since 1995. Because nobody watches rugby union at National Two level, facilities were virtually non-existent, leaving Borough with a lot of work to do to bring the ground up to Blue Square North specifications. Despite the revamp, it isn't remotely appealing. When amid the red-brick terraces surrounding Manor Park, Borough were - physically and spiritually - part of the community. Now they seem a step removed; cast adrift. This really is a horrible spot. The ground is on low-lying land between, on one side, the murky River Anker and an embankment of the railway line to Hinckley and, on the other, by the offensive blandness of Attleborough Fields industrial estate. Eastborough Way bypass, behind a scruffy hedge, runs along the crematorium end of the ground, with marshy, hummocky fields - some used as football and rugby pitches - stretching into the distance at the other. Yuk.

The rugby club have become Borough's tenants and the twain (surprise, surprise) seem determined never to meet. Their respective accommodation is entirely separate. Access, having negotiated the industrial estate, is down a track of compacted mud. The ground is over to the left. The large building on the near side belongs to the kick-and-clap chaps. It is an ugly, windowless monstrosity of red brick and houses dressing rooms and bar. The latter, I imagine, is particularly important because the standard of rugby union teams such as Nuneaton play can be enjoyed only by those rendered semi-comatose by alcohol. Sniff the barmaid's apron long enough and even the Eton Wall Game becomes a spectacle.

Borough's presence is announced by the perimeter fence - metal sheeting in cream (it should, by rights, be white) with blue detailing. Everything else is fashioned from breeze block, much of which has been left bare. The near side features three

sections of uncovered terracing, each with five steps and fronted by unpainted metal crush barriers. Behind a flat area of tarmac are glazed doors leading to the rugby club bar. The covered areas at either end are identical - boxy sheds of the same material and finish as the perimeter fence. That at the bypass end - the Ian Neale Stand, named after the construction group responsible for this mess - has 16 steps of metal terracing and two lines of unpainted metal crush barriers. That at the near end has eight steps and one line of barriers with, to the right, a stadium control tower. It looks like a railway signal box for the 21st Century. In the far corner of the bottom end is a collection of portable buildings which constitute the social club (better inside than out) and permanent breeze block structures for the dressing rooms, administrative areas and souvenir shop. The sole spectator accommodation on the railway side is a temporary stand of scaffolding and canvas providing red plastic tip-up seats. The clue is in the colour. This is all that was here before Borough came along. Next to this 'stand' are Perspex dugouts, hard up against the boundary fence. The floodlights are masts, with four per side and three lamps on each. Parking, on the aforementioned sludge, is available on the near side and behind the far goal. At best, this ground is functional. At worst, it's an aesthetic disaster. Atmospheric Manor Park inspired tremendous affection and loyalty in the Borough fans but I can't see anyone warming to this characterless dump. A ground to be endured rather than enjoyed.

Having gone to the trouble of spending the afternoon in Nuneaton, and safe in the belief you won't like Liberty Way, I might as well run through the sights which are worth seeing. Boasting a local celebrity helps enormously and Nuneaton works hard to promote its connections with novelist George Eliot, who was born Mary Ann Evans on the nearby Arbury Hall estate in 1819. She spent the first 21 years of her life in Griff and went to school in Nuneaton, which features as Milby in 'Janet's Repentance'. The museum and art gallery in pleasant Riversley Park devote a couple of rooms to the writer, there is a George Eliot Memorial Garden a little further down the banks of the Anker and, in the town centre, a statue of the great one in what used to be Newdegate Square. It's now, you've guessed it, George Eliot Square. Depressingly, a modern pub close by is called Elliotts. They couldn't spell her name correctly and omitted the apostrophe. Sometimes, I despair. Apart from the Eliot stuff, there's not much, though I would recommend seeking out the art deco Co-operative building on Queens Road and the 1930s town hall - both splendid examples of their species.

Borough have lopped £3 off the admission price for this restaging of a fixture abandoned after 82 minutes last month owing to floodlight failure. Inexplicably, the club have reissued exactly the same programme, complete with January 12 dateline and mistakenly duplicated pages, though there is a team sheet insert and the cover price has been halved. That's, frankly, amateurish. Rubbish. To add insult to injury, the weather's as raw as a Norman Hunter tackle from behind. Thankfully, the game proves to be excellent entertainment. A draw doesn't help either club in their bid to qualify for the play-offs but, given the saves made by each goalkeeper, one point could quite easily have been nowt.

The first half is all Nuneaton, who look mobile, eager and cohesive. Bradley Pritchard scores the only goal in the 13th minute when he turns to fire into the roof of the net from 12 yards after Cameron Belford punches weakly at a corner. It's about the only wrong step made by the City keeper, who denies Andy Brown on three occasions. When he can't get a glove on the ball, it flies inches wide, off Alex Rodman's forehead. Worcester's single response is a 25-yard free-kick from the lively Jamie Price. Darren Acton, in the Borough goal, misjudges the flight and does well to palm the ball over the crossbar.

Worcester, astonishingly, dominate the second half and it's Acton's turn to show us how good he is. He parries brilliantly a George Clegg piledriver and does even better to clutch a close-range Adam Webster effort. Opposite number Belford produces a double save of Jimmy Montgomery proportions to foil first Brown and then Rodman before Borough defender Simon Travis clears a Jonathan Munday header off his goalline. An equaliser is on the cards and arrives with eight minutes left. Price's volleyed cross from the left is deflected up and Webster nods it over and beyond Acton. The ball, seemingly in slow motion, drops into the far corner. It pleases the drummer among the travelling supporters no end. Unfortunate, that. Worcester survive a late - and justifiable - penalty claim after an ill-advised lunge at Travis before Clegg, with a 30-yard boomer, almost wins it for them at the death. Borough, beaten just once since December 15, are booed off by their fans. Hard to please, eh?

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