

TT No.202: Mike Latham - Sat 1st March 2008: Staffordshire FA Vase Semi-Final. Hanley Town 1-3 Brocton. Admission: £2 incl. 28pp programme; Attendance: 80 (h/c); FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

It's very rare to come across a fixture that doesn't appear to be listed in Bill Berry's excellent *Football Traveller* magazine but my determination to discover a fixture with an early start to tie in with Wigan RL club's 6pm kick-off against Bradford Bulls finally came up trumps.

This Staffordshire Vase semi-final had an alluring 2pm kick-off and, sure enough, I was drawing up at the JJB just as James Alexander-Gordon was flexing his vocal cords, to deliver the final scores to the nation.

I had deliberated about going to the other semi-final at Foley- good job I didn't as this tie was postponed and also the trip to Hanley Town was hugely enjoyable.

The ground actually isn't in Hanley, one of the five towns that make up the city of Stoke-on-Trent. It's about a mile-and-a-half outside the city boundaries just off the Werrington Road down Abbey Lane. A good map is recommended as the Potteries can be a nightmare to find your way around in my experience.

Hanley Town, founded in 1966, compete in the Staffordshire County Senior League, or level seven of the non-league pyramid, while their opponents Brocton, from the Premier Division of the Midland Combination are at level six.

The ground is in an elevated location in the middle of a residential area down a track leading off Abbey Lane. There are some fine views, sweeping across the city to one side and across rolling moorlands to the other. The ground is surrounded by an imposing steel fence, with notices assuring any would-be trespasser that it is covered in anti-vandal paint.

A friendly gateman dispensed an outstanding programme alongside the admission price and the teams were warming up as I drove into the large car-park in readiness for the game. 'Welcome to Hanley,' he said. 'It should be a good game today. The club house is open, you can get a drink or a coffee and something to eat. You're very welcome, enjoy your day.' How good is that? Simple courtesy, but it doesn't half make one feel that the previous half-hour spent battling through the traffic of Burslem and Hanley since leaving J16 of the M6 had been worthwhile.

Sure enough, the club house, a largely functional brick building situated in the bottom corner and also housing the dressing rooms was open for business, serving a wide array of refreshments. Inside it was quite spacious with notices that a local band, Magnetic Jellyfish, are due to appear here on 15 March. It sounds too good to miss.

Hanley Town have designs upon following near neighbours Norton United into the North West Counties League and have already started constructing hard standing

behind the impressive blue and white post and rail fence that surrounds the pitch. They also have hopes of shortly constructing floodlights and a seated stand to compliment the small cover on the far side of the ground.

Everything was neat, spic and span and a decent crowd built up by kick-off time. Kicking up the slight slope Hanley looked the better side in the opening stages but fell behind in the 18th minute when Bennett scored the opening goal for the visitors, before equalising on the half-hour through Chinn-Shaw. Then came the pivotal moment - the home 'keeper was fortunate to escape with a yellow card for bringing down a Brocton player as last man.

Though the 'keeper pushed away Scott's penalty, the same player scored from the ensuing corner and Bennett's second goal, with 15 minutes remaining, saw Brocton through to the final.

The game was played in a fine spirit, helped by a vocal and experienced official. Just as the game was about to start, he bellowed out: 'Enjoy your afternoon, gentlemen. Let's talk, my name's Nigel.' Just like the gateman, it was a refreshing approach and one that certainly complimented a thoroughly entertaining afternoon.

Just one gripe- the 15-question Half-Time Teaser in the programme doesn't append the answers- these will appear in the next programme against Alsager Town on 8 March. If, as a result of this you are tempted to visit this friendly and progressive club, will you please let me know the answers to questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 and 13? A visit to Hanley Town comes highly recommended.

06/20