

**TT No.209: *Andy Gallon*** - Tues 11th March 2008; **Dagenham & Redbridge v Macclesfield Town**; League Two; Res: 0-1; Att: 1,350; Admission: £15; Programme: £2.50 (60pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

The older I get, the more I see visits to London in terms of keyhole surgery - quick in, quick out, job done. Undeniably, some parts of the capital have aesthetic merit but the Dagenham district of the outer East End definitely isn't one of them. I remember reading, before a trip to Orient several years ago, that Leyton High Road was every Northerner's idea of the grim down south London stereotype. Dagenham's Rainham Road brought memories of that day flooding back. It's dirty, it's noisy, it's smelly, it's squalid, it's menacing. It's dominated by the unpleasant chemical works of pharmaceutical giants Sanofi-Aventis ('Because Health Matters') and split in two by the tube line. Just, in fact, the sort of place you'd expect to find a football ground.

Victoria Road is a narrow thoroughfare off Rainham Road and a short drive past ranks of cars - dumped, rather than parked - and seedy terraced houses decants the visitor to Dagenham & Redbridge into a rectangular car park at the back of the main stand on the south side of what is a very hemmed-in site. It's not a promising start. The surface, which extends in a slender strip the length of the stand, is a patchwork quilt of tarmac of varying ages and hues. But at least parking is free and a much better bet for early arrivals, than the surrounding streets which are scattered, in equal measure, with restricted parking signs and broken glass. A collection of tired, ugly buildings huddled up against the back of the stand represents the Football League newcomers' nerve centre. They're scruffy flat tops - never a design classic - and clad in wood which desperately needs a coat of varnish. Several fancy club logos in stained glass cannot disguise the general tattiness. In various rooms, lit mostly, it appeared, by 40-watt bulbs, can be found the administrative offices, the souvenir shop, three bars and a dance floor. Roll out the barrel. An old chap sparking up a gasper while guarding the main entrance greets me with "Aw-white?" Well, yes, as soon as I'm on my way out of this dump. A portable building alongside the flat tops is home to a training unit for Barking and Dagenham Disabled. Judging by the state of the exterior, painting and decorating is not on their curriculum.

The main stand opened as recently as 2001 and is a considerable improvement on its predecessor of late 1950s vintage. Entry is via a new turnstile block and a motley grouping of sheds in the south-east corner. The toilets and supporters' club shop have a very 'non-league' air about them. The stand, sponsored by a lager brewery, has a brick base and an upper section of grey corrugated cladding lightened by red edgings. There are just six rows of red plastic tip-up seats with a short section of glazed executive boxes amidships at the rear. The sloping roof has a rather curious upturned 'peak' along its fascia. There are a couple of clues pointing to the constrained nature of the site. There is no concourse at the back of

the stand, so stairways are bolted on to the front to provide access. Also, the rear wall of the dugouts, either side of halfway, is actually the stand's front wall. Benches and a shallow awning have simply been added. The players' tunnel is at the west end, beyond the dugouts. To the left of this stand as you sit in it is another all-seater stand, sponsored by Barking College. This has a propped roof and five rows of red plastic tip-up seats and, despite being only 25 yards long, requires four supporting posts. Its cladding is grey with red fringes to mimic its bigger neighbour. The scene brings to mind the twin stands at Hamilton Academical's old Douglas Park ground.

The Bury Road (east) end has two bays of uncovered terracing, with eight steps and one row of red metal crush barriers in each. The rear wall is fashioned from something akin to railway sleepers. Positioned centrally, high behind the goal and almost lost amid the huge, gaudy advertising hoardings, is a clock. A gloomy, metalled passage behind leads to toilets.

Opposite the main stand is the North Terrace, which offers 11 gently-raked steps of terracing and two rows of red metal crush barriers beneath a low, pitched roof. Bright adverts and liberal splashes of red paint help lift this structure but a glance at the screen ends indicates just how old it is - mostly from the late 50s. It used to be nicknamed 'The Sieve' because of a tendency to leak in wet weather. In appearance and atmosphere, it's similar to the now-demolished scratching shed at the Featherstone Rovers rugby league ground. A snack bar, poisonous fumes from which are a constant companion, is at the rear on the halfway line. Directly above, perched precariously on the roof, is a gantry for TV cameras. Behind the stand, a narrow tarmac path has been shoehorned into a space backing on to a factory which manages simultaneously to look both derelict and operational.

The away fans - tonight, all 57 of them; the worst travelling turnout of the season here - are condemned to the Pondfield Road end. This is a narrow, uncovered terrace of five steps and a single row of red metal crush barriers. The railway sleepers put in another appearance in a back wall so low netting suspended from poles is needed to keep the ball within bounds. The floodlights are masts, with seven lamps on each of the four rather low corner pylons. Victoria Road is now somewhat grandly titled the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Stadium. But is it a Football League venue? In name only, I'd suggest, though its facilities have come a long way in a short time. Tonight's crowd, a pitiful 1,350, is the second lowest of the season for the ill-supported Daggers, who struggle to present a credible alternative to local kingpins West Ham United. But in such a claustrophobic environment, the attendance looks and sounds like much more. When the place is full, it must rock.

This basement battle, even if it had been staged in perfect weather, was not destined to make anyone's list of greatest games. But amid the sort of gale which makes good players look average and ordinary players appear clumsier than schoolboys, it scraped the bottom of the entertainment barrel. A fellow in front of me was texting a friend during the second half. Being nosy, and bored with the 'action', I leaned over his shoulder to note he'd finished with "...over Dagenham

watching the football - if you can call it that". There wasn't much to admire. It was, and excuse me while I reach for the cliché select key, all about getting a foot in, clearing your lines and running until you dropped. Muscular, sweaty, no-nonsense and holding the sort of ghoulish fascination reserved generally for a multi-vehicle motorway pile-up.

There were, thankfully, a few laughs. Both teams, for whatever reason, decided the ball would be better off up in the rigging rather than down on deck. It refused to be tamed and floated infuriatingly in the manner of a helium balloon, leaving the players red-faced and vexed. Daggers' keeper Tony Roberts liked to play to the crowd (pleasing, in a Football League context). He had a bizarre routine of hurling his drinks bottle into the back of the net in mock fury and also acted the jester as he launched his tubby frame at a ball catapulted to all points of the compass by the gusting wind.

The first half really was awful. Macclesfield, playing the percentage game so loved by new manager Keith Alexander but hated by anyone with an ounce of football purism in their veins, had first crack with the elements in their favour but weren't good enough to create more than a handful of shooting opportunities. Long throws and even longer balls were the visitors' tools of mass destruction. Ryan Cresswell had an early header ruled out for a foul, Jamie Tolley aimed straight at Roberts from the edge of the box and Gareth Evans - a lonely but energetic figure up front - was inches wide with a thunderous 20-yarder. The Silkmen went into this fixture with just two wins in 19 games and just how badly morale has suffered was apparent two minutes before the break. Jonny Brain and 'gobby' debutant Richard Walker got in each other's way in a six-yard box melee and the keeper ended up lashing out at his own defender, earning a lecture from the ref for his pains.

It got better in the second half. James Jennings tripped Jon Nurse (dubbed 'Nursey' by the home fans; I couldn't help thinking of the 'Blackadder' character) in the box with an ill-timed tackle but Brain dived to his right to block superbly Dave Rainford's well-struck penalty in the 55th minute. My goalless draw fears began to mount. But substitute Francis Green, on the pitch only six minutes, came up with a winner as brilliant as the preceding 72 minutes had been dull. He latched on to a long ball down the inside right channel and cut inside to pass Jon Boardman before lashing a rising drive wide of Roberts's right hand and into the top corner. A beauty.

Once ahead, Macclesfield, sensing League survival, weren't going to let slip their precious advantage. Bodies were put on the line but keeper Brain was the hero in a tense climax. Ryan Hall hit the side-netting from an acute angle after the Macc keeper had dropped a cross given a mind of its own by the gale but Brain made amends with a breath-taking tip-over from a Nurse piledriver and an excellent block in a one-on-one after Chris Moore had engineered some shooting space 10 yards out. Three vital points for the Silkmen but a worry for Dagenham & Redbridge, who have now followed up an astonishing run of five straight wins with two defeats and are not yet out of the relegation woods.

One interesting fact to emerge from the impressive programme revealed that, for the first time in the Football League's 120-year history, a single division (Rochdale-fuelled League Two) is on course to record a higher number of away wins than homes. So, this result marked another step on the stairway to heaven for statos everywhere. And a maiden victory for Alexander since taking the Macclesfield helm. Who says the long ball game doesn't pay?

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