

TT No.212: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 15th March 2008; **Skelmersdale United** v Bradford PA; UniBond Division One North; Res: 0-1; Att: 383; Admission: £7; Programme: £1.50 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Everyone should visit blighted Skelmersdale - if only to make themselves feel so much better about the place in which they live. It's uniquely depressing. In some ways, it would be true to describe the town as a social experiment gone wrong. Until the early 1960s, Skem, as it's nicknamed by those for whom it inspires affection, was a small community with a coal mining past set amid the rich agricultural flatlands of West Lancashire. There were rows of red-brick terraces, cobbled streets and pit heads. Then came the decision to designate it a New Town. And all hell broke loose.

Construction began in 1964 and housing estates and roads were laid out for a planned population of 80,000. Today, just 39,000 unfortunate souls live here. Most are Scousers, lured away from slums in Liverpool by the promise of shiny new homes. But the dream turned quickly into a nightmare. By the mid-1980s, the development corporation responsible for Skelmersdale was wound up, its job half-finished. The legacy has been described as a "rather disjointed and possibly dysfunctional town with questionable infrastructure". In short, the dump to trump all dumps.

A wander round the 'town centre' is an eye-opening experience. I use those inverted commas advisedly because this consists merely of the Concourse Shopping Centre and an Asda superstore. The shopping centre, known as the 'Conny', is gruesome indeed. Architecture and design concepts from the 60s have not dated well, and this is no exception. Its low ceilings are oppressive, its tatty discount shops miserable and the downtrodden citizens imprisoned within its walls sport the uniform and flaunt the trappings of the beleaguered white poor. Tracky bottoms, bling and vile canines. Signs at the exits urge you to Call Again Soon. It's like getting an invitation to dinner from Dennis Nielsen. The 'Conny' bolts its doors at 5.30 each evening. After that, the town centre simply shuts down until morning. The shabby precinct around the college and the Nye Bevan swimming pool is particularly grim. The pitifully token attempts at landscaping have been allowed to overgrow and become untidy, and there is graffiti, broken glass and the stench of despair everywhere. One of the two local newspapers, tells how plans to regenerate the centre, mainly with a new high street linking the grubby mall to the grisly superstore, could come unstuck because of Everton FC's proposed 55,000-seat stadium at nearby Kirkby. This development includes a Tesco Extra megastore - potentially fatal to Skem's hopes. The lead story in the other paper says it all. Boy, 3, Shot in Face screams a headline from the dark side of all that is to be feared. A flick through the population and social survey for 1971 in the library reveals "71% of families think the town is a good place to live and 86% think

it will be a good place for the future". I wonder what the most recent version reports?

Away from the centre, Skelmersdale has a lighter, brighter, more rural and spacious atmosphere. The roads are wide and, in a community without traffic lights, the roundabouts vast green spaces. The largest, Half Mile Island, has to be negotiated from the M58 before reaching the Ashley Travel Stadium, home since 2004 to Skelmersdale United after the club sold its previous ground at White Moss Park. A developer, Elite Homes Group, transformed the old place, the club's base since the 1950s, into what a sign claims to be a "range of luxurious three and four bedroomed houses". To be frank, White Moss Park hadn't a great deal of character but it was much more appealing than its replacement, which has even less to please the eye.

Bizarrely, a wedding reception is in full flow on the day of this top-of-the-table game with fellow UniBond League Division One North title challengers Bradford (Park Avenue). Fans have to work hard to avoid getting on the wedding pictures as they enter the turnstile. Ominously, with the photographer's camera clicking away, the strains of 'What Becomes of the Broken Hearted' drifts from the stadium tannoy towards the stick insect bride and her lumpy female retinue; all cackles and blotches, fags and tattoos. But they keep smiling. Perhaps they're too happy either to notice or care. Or too hammered. The father of the bride is wearing a new shirt straight from the box. It hasn't been ironed, so there are tramline folds down the front. These are not the Beautiful People.

The ground is part of the Stanley Industrial Estate; a cheerless, unpleasant setting. Opposite, on the far side of Statham Road, is a depot for rubbish collection lorries; further on, huge storage sheds for Comet and Asda rear skyward. Because this is a new town, and it's deemed a winning notion to juxtapose industrial and residential areas, there is a housing estate a couple of hundred yards away. It means fans can still walk to the game. That's good but these are cheap, Legoland homes, with windows of the meanest dimensions and roofs of a kind trendy in the 60s but leaky in the Noughties.

A metallised car park fronts a collection of flat-topped portable buildings painted in the club's blue and white colours. These house Skem's offices and a social club dank and gloomy as a pot hole. One almost expects to find Gollum ordering a pint. At the far end, the wedding guests are drinking themselves into oblivion. Inside, the ground is disappointingly dull. The social club has a raised patio area sheltered by a plastic awning. At the end nearest the turnstile, which is in the north-west corner, are toilets and a cubby hole from which a chap sells programmes and souvenirs; at the far, a refreshment hatch and, beyond that, a battered portable building where the PA announcer stands - Caesar-like - on a balcony to pontificate. And give a bigger-than-average crowd the team changes. Two kit stands, offering four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats, straddle the halfway line on the

south side. They are separated by a canvas concertina tunnel which gives access to another portable building at the rear. This contains the dressing rooms and is of

the same design and colour scheme as the social club. Perspex dugouts are positioned either side of the tunnel. Tiny, faded flags hang from the stand fascia's in a desperate attempt to provide a sense of occasion. Flagged hardstanding runs round the rest of the ground, which has grass banks everywhere but the near end. This, if memory serves, echoes how it used to be at White Moss Park. Tall, slender trees, as yet without leaves, fringe the west, north and east boundaries beyond the wooden fence which encloses the ground. Behind the stands are more industrial units. The rather threadbare pitch, which has caused problems in the past, is surrounded by a concrete panel fence. The lights are masts, with three per flank and two large lamps on each. It all feels so temporary, so drab. This really is no better than the Concourse Shopping Centre.

Big games frequently live down to expectations but this was an absorbing contest, replete with skilled and committed action. Skem, top both before and after play, cannot complain about the result. The club's best years, between 1966-71, brought two Wembley appearances in the FA Amateur Cup and coincided with the optimistic early years of the New Town revamp. After several moribund seasons in the North West Counties League, they are now reviving but surely did not hit top form against an Avenue side who, with better finishing, would have won in some comfort. The visitors, under newly-appointed manager Dave Cameron, looked a well-balanced team. Veteran Paul Stoneman was a rock in central defence, skipper Steve Connors a wonderfully old-fashioned enforcer in midfield and Tristram Whitman all pace and tricks in the front line. Compared to this glistering gold, leaden Skem were base metal.

Tom Baker's crisp shooting from range was a feature of the match and he brought a superb tip-over from Ryan McMahon as Avenue began as they meant to go on. Shaun Foster cleared off the goal-line when Mark Bett's clever backheel put Whitman through on the home keeper. Skem had their moments, too. Jon Worsnop palmed aside a 25-yard Aaron Turner drive and sleepy Anthony Murt, who looked 'on something' throughout, failed to finish off a tremendous George Donnelly run and cross by taking an unnecessary touch at the back post, allowing defenders to block his eventual shot.

The upbeat tempo was maintained after the break. A Chris Gahgan miskick led to a fast Skem break and when Murt put Donnelly through Worsnop did well to stand tall and make an important save. Bett sliced wide wastefully when Connors set him up cleverly and Whitman shot the wrong side of a post from the right side of the box having been sent scampering away by a Chris Williams pass. Donnelly's speed gave Stoneman a few anxious moments and a slip from the centre-back left the Skem striker with room to shoot from the edge of the box but he blazed over wildly. The goal Avenue had threatened from the first whistle came with 12 minutes to go. Connors lofted a ball down the inside right channel and Whitman collected it before cutting inside and finding the top corner with a left-footed shot which evaded McMahon's outstretched right hand. Baker, with a trademark 20-yarder which took a slight deflection, almost doubled the Yorkshiremen's lead in the 85th minute but the Skem keeper went full length to scramble it round a post.

Four minutes of added time was notable only for the booking of increasingly exasperated home captain Michael White.

So, Avenue, described in the programme as the "Chelsea of the league" on account of a benefactor funding an alleged £5,500-a-week wage bill and being behind a proposed £20,000-capacity stadium at Phoenix Park in the Thornbury district of the city, closed to within five points of pole position with three games in hand. Whether Skem can hold them off remains to be seen. Whether the town acquires its new high street will depend on the planners. Let's hope they don't get it as badly wrong as they did 40 years ago.

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