

**TT No.217: Andrew Gallon** - Sat 22nd March 2008; **Mansfield Town** v Grimsby Tn; Coca-Cola Football League 2; Res: 1-2; Att: 2,616; Admission: £17; Programme: £2.50 (56pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

Time is running out for Field Mill as a Football League venue. I hadn't visited the ground, first opened in 1861 just a year after the world's oldest, since its £6.5m, post-1999 rebuild and with both teams having plenty to play for this looked a promising fixture. Another home defeat for Mansfield (Town haven't won on their own turf since Boxing Day) pushed them closer to relegation, which would terminate a League membership stretching back to 1931. It's easy to see why the Stags are struggling. They're weak at the back, uninventive in midfield and lightweight up front, manager Billy Dearden recently got the boot and this miserable season has been played out against a backdrop of supporter protest over majority shareholder Keith Haslam's continuing ownership of the club. Haslam's involvement looks - after 15 long years - near to ending. Talks are close to fruition with a consortium, led by chairman James Derry, to take over the club and put it back in the hands of local people. Caretaker boss Paul Holland (whose always stocky physique has padded out considerably since he stopped playing) is Mansfield through and through, and he spelt out in the match programme how landing the job full time would mean everything to him. All this aside, the Stags need to start getting it right on the pitch - and quickly. Holland reckoned the team had 10 cup finals from now until the end of the season". This latest setback leaves nine. The clock is running down and the fans - a mixture of the angry, the frustrated and the resigned - know it only too well. So does the club. Buying a ticket for this fixture got you a price reduction voucher for the next home match, against fellow rivals in distress Wrexham, on, of all things, April Fool's Day. In manager-speak, it's a massive game. And possibly bigger even than that.

What, then, of the new Field Mill? In terms of aesthetics, more has been lost than gained. Gone is the 1930s-vintage West Stand, bought from the defunct Hurst Park racecourse in south London and erected in 1966; gone is the cranked North Stand with its interesting fascia and clock; gone is the open Quarry Lane terracing and its tell-tale curvature giving away the fact there was once a dog track round the pitch. In their place have risen three identical all-seater cantilever stands. They form an austere presence. All are clad in silver-grey metal sheeting, with exposed steelwork painted blue. There is a horizontal blue band painted just beneath the roof line on the rear and sides of each. Inside, the concourses have been completed on a tight budget. There is untreated breeze block everywhere. Distinctly cold and unwelcoming. Worse, ugly metal slat fences between the stands (the corners have not been filled in) don't so much shout 'keep out' as 'sod off'. The two-tier West Stand has predominantly blue plastic tip-up seats, with yellow (by rights, it should be amber) additions picking out a series of vertical stripes. The single-tier Quarry Lane Stand has yellow seats with Stags spelled in blue and the North Stand, also single tier and allocated to away fans, has blue seats with MTFC

in yellow. The West Stand boasts translucent screen ends while the end stands are open to the elements. Though relatively new, all three look a little timeworn. The 'artistry' of graffiti enthusiasts does not help in this respect. A few colourful logos - and Mansfield have a great badge - would work wonders.

The dressing rooms have been moved from the West Stand to the Quarry Lane end, so the players emerge from a tunnel on its west side. A stadium control room is also in this south-west corner, above and to the right of the seats. Behind this stand are the club offices, ticket sales point and, in a portable building, the souvenir shop. Beyond Quarry Lane, in a narrow, sylvan valley out of keeping with the general scruffiness, is a mill pond and its associated race which once powered the wheel of the Field Mill. This opened in 1797, processed cotton and was demolished in 1925. In the town museum can be found several paintings of the substantial structure (and many other historical Mansfield scenes) from the brush of renowned local watercolourist Albert Sorby Buxton. The rest of the ground's surroundings have changed considerably in the last decade - and not for the better. An artificial pitch so battered as to be unusable and a tussocky grass pitch, both floodlit, have swallowed up much of the car park behind the West Stand. A health club fills in the gap between the pitches and a bog-standard retail park which dominates the area behind the North Stand. There are loads of parking here but it's off limits if you're going to the game, sonny. This used to be the Portland railway sidings and was where the Stags intended to build a new ground before opting to redevelop the existing site.

Because Field Mill is on a shelf above the town, the view from the upper tier of the West Stand is most impressive. The Mansfield townscape, with parish church steeple and brewery prominent, stretches to the far horizon. In the foreground is the Bishop Street Stand, built in 1939 and the sole remaining part of the old ground. This 50-yard structure, with sloping roof and plastic tip-up seats, is out of bounds and hidden partially by a fence of white boards running the length of the touchline. The stand is due to be replaced by another all-seater cantilever when funds allow. Don't hold your breath. Beyond are a couple of rows of terraced houses and another health club. They must be a fit bunch in Mansfield. Perspex dugouts are positioned either side of the halfway line on this side. The floodlights, switched on in 1991, replaced the original system which dated from 1961. There is a mast, topped by 12 lamps, in each corner. If they look familiar, it's because the design is the same used at Doncaster Rovers (Belle Vue), Scunthorpe United and Notts County.

One other thing before we get to the game. Think Mansfield and you tend to think coal mining, even though the pits in the area were an early 20th Century phenomenon, sunk to great depths to access distant seams. Post-Thatcher, most of them have been closed but the Stags are determined to keep alive memories of the industry in which so many of their fans toiled. The front cover of the match programme features midfielder Keith Briggs pictured in front of the awesome twin headstocks at nearby Clipstone Colliery, whose deepest shaft extended to a mindboggling 920 metres. The site, shut in 2003, is being razed, along with the

winding gear, at 65 metres the second tallest in the world at the time of its construction. The headstocks had been the subject of a conservation order but residents voted for the towers to be felled in favour of a business park. If you're planning a trip to Central Midlands League club Clipstone Welfare before the end of the season, you can't fail to spot the pale blue giants. Unless they've already gone.

Mansfield v Grimsby had to be an away banker. I've mentioned the Stags' dismal home form and this was compounded by Grimsby's record of just one league defeat on the road (at Darlington last week) in four months. A gusting, swirling wind made constructive football difficult on a raw afternoon but both sides tried to put on a show. The first half was light on goalmouth incident and enlivened by a 31st-minute goal for the visiting Mariners, back in the play-off hunt after Rotherham United's 10-point administration deduction and off to Wembley shortly for the final of the preposterous Johnstone's Paint Trophy. The hosts failed to clear (a problem they had all afternoon) and Peter Till slid an angled 12-yarder through a ruck of players and into the far bottom corner. Team-mate Danny North made it clear in the celebrations that followed he felt he'd got a touch to divert the ball past Jason White but Till, got the credit.

The Stags began the second half like a team whose ears had been both marinated and griddled during the interval. Four minutes in and Nathan Arnold turned sharply on the right side of the box and drilled a low effort past Phil Barnes from 16 yards, the ball hitting exactly the same piece of netting as Till's earlier shot. In a frantic spell, Barnes saved superbly to deny first Arnold and then Matt Hamshaw while Johnny Mullins saw two close-range nudges cleared off the goal-line by Danny Boshell in blink-and-you'll-miss-it quick succession. That's the sort of luck you get when you're bottom of the League. With Mansfield on top, Grimsby broke away to steal the points with 16 minutes left. Till was allowed by debutant Neil Wainwright to run down the right wing and cut inside to pass square to Boshell, who smashed a first-time drive with his right foot into White's top right-hand corner from 20 yards. No way back for Mansfield, despite a flurry of late corners. Gloom all round.

For my money, Mansfield look doomed but the public address chap was clearly undecided. His pre-match music selection featured (appropriately, for a Bank Holiday weekend) Elmer Bernstein's classical theme tune from 1963 thriller 'The Great Escape'. However, he followed that up with the Beatles' 'Yellow Submarine', which conjured uncomfortable images of going down. We'll see. It's going to be a tense, last few weeks, of the campaign at Field Mill.

06/20