

TT No.223: Andrew Gallon - Thu 3rd April 2008; **Aldershot Town** v Rushden & Diamonds; Setanta Shield Final; Res: 3-3 (AET); Att: 3,718; Admission: £10; Programme: £3 (56pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Aldershot Town tick all the boxes on my football ground wish list. The homely Recreation Ground has the lot - a lovely and unusual setting, interesting and quirky stands, a dash of history and a great atmosphere. I'd been before, a couple of decades ago when the original club were in the Football League, and have always rated it among my favourites. A revisit to see the non-league reincarnation of the Shots had been long planned - and even longer overdue. With Town romping away at the top of the Blue Square Premier, time was running out and the inaugural final of the ill-supported Setanta Shield presented one of the last opportunities to watch a meaningful non-league game at The Rec. And what a game! This protracted knockout competition has largely been ignored by fans but the Shots were determined to put on a great show for the sponsors' cameras. Admission was cut to a tenner and visiting supporters got in for free, ensuring Town's third-best gate of the season. Those who shunned an armchair view were rewarded with a dramatic contest, won by the hosts 4-3 on penalties after the teams had drawn 3-3 following extra-time.

But let's start with the ground. The 7,500-capacity Rec is located - famously - in a small park, with the whole complex owned by Rushmoor Borough Council. Security is a little tighter than in the old days, when it was possible to wander in at almost any time of the week. The entrance used by most fans backs on to High Street. This is something of a misnomer because the genuine main street, containing the nearby shopping centre, runs at right angles to High Street and ends by the turnstiles and ticket office. These, sadly, are new buildings made from a sandy-hued breeze block but their cute pitched roofs echo the Victorian turnstiles which once stood here and doubled as park gates on non-matchdays. A high green metal and mesh fence is another unwelcome addition. It contains an electronic noticeboard advertising tonight's game. Climb a grassy bank behind the turnstiles and this gem of a ground is laid out before you. The near (west) end is merely a tarmac path, about five yards wide, and backed by a wooden fence and mature trees on the crown of the slope. Looking at this end from inside the ground, its backdrop is one of the Aldershot town-scape. In the far-right corner is a pitch-side Perspex cover for use by the disabled and, on the other side of the barrier, a boxy hut serving refreshments.

The North Stand, dating from the 1930s, is over to the left. This runs the length of the touchline and has a low, pitched roof painted fetchingly in red and blue stripes. You will notice its front wall is higher at the east end - a clear indication of how the pitch slopes down towards the town. In common with the other three stands, it has been re-clad in blue metal sheeting but this does little to disguise its age. Looming behind is the only feature which spoils the Recreation Ground - a

hideous 1960s office block now used by BT. The stand is unusual in that terracing runs from each end and then behind a central section of tip-up and backless seats, to the rear of which are boxes for the press and directors. The players' tunnel is slightly off-centre, with modern conservatory-style UPVC dugouts either side of the halfway line. Hard up against the back of the stand, and jutting out above it, is a two-storey building containing the administration and hospitality areas, and the dressing rooms. This has a brick base and an upper section clad in blue metal sheeting. A tarmac track runs along the back and gives access to what few parking spaces the club can offer within the ground's tight confines. A motley collection of cream-painted buildings on the far side of the track contains, among other things, a well-stocked souvenir shop. In the near-left corner is a two-storey glazed cabin. One of many archaic and arcane elements of this fascinating ground, it serves as an office for younger Shots followers and has a programme hatch at its base. A flagpole also stands in this corner.

The South Stand, built in 1929, is opposite and runs between the two penalty areas, with open terracing either side. This looks, at first glance, relatively new but closer inspection reveals creaking joints and brittle bones. Its gently sloping roof has a steep 'peak' at the front and shelters a mixture of seats - tip-up and backless. There is a glazed box for sponsors at the rear on the east side. A paved path runs underneath the stand and gives a clear view of its soft underbelly. The wooden seating tier, blackened metal frame and red and blue-painted bracing struts are all visible. Squeezed into the small area of land between the path and the adjacent railway line (electric trains clatter by constantly and are a real feature of The Rec; the stand vibrates as they pass) is the cavernous Wally's Bar and a new, two-storey building offering corporate hospitality. Netting, suspended from red-painted poles at the back of the terrace on the west side, keeps stray footballs off Network Rail's tracks.

The far end is taken up by the East Bank, where the noisier element gathers. This is a big, traditional terrace with a wonderful barrel roof, reminiscent of those which could once be found at Leeds Road (Huddersfield Town) and Elland Road (Leeds United) - and still can at Lye Town! The barrel shelters only the rear portion of the terrace and a more modern roof has been added at the front. This has a gentle slope and no fewer than 10 supporting columns, painted alternately red and blue. The stand is disfigured by central crowd segregation barriers but it does boast splendid acoustics. A flat area for parking is shoehorned in behind and then the land rises steeply through a wood, in which four tennis courts are secreted, to a plateau called the Redan. This is a military term used to describe a temporary field fort and Aldershot's Redan, based on the Russian model, was constructed in 1856 for troop training. It is a marvellous vantage point and was used for ceremonial firing as recently as the 1980s. Restoration work gives a good idea of what it used to be like and, at this time of year, it's all fragrant buds and birdsong. The railway, having plunged into a gorse-lined cutting, dives beneath in a tunnel. The Redan, with the possible exception of the cobbled hike at Darlington's old Feethams ground, represents one of the quaintest and most picturesque entry points for away fans at any stadium. They must slog up Redan Road before bearing

left through a coppice and dropping through more trees on a winding path to reach their turnstiles next to the tennis courts. Fabulous.

The floodlights - old-fashioned corner pylons - are particularly pleasing. They are solid and squat, barely higher than some of the many trees which surround the ground. Each has 18 lamps, set in three rows of six. Their scale is in keeping with the rest of the Recreation Ground, which has a charm all its own. Town have made the most of what limited space they have. Not a nook or cranny is wasted. Liberal use of the club's colours, especially on the many blue-post-and-red-rail crush barriers, has a unifying effect on the four very different sides. There's an overwhelming sensation here of stepping back into one's childhood. This is how major football grounds used to be. Maybe that's the essence of its considerable appeal. Parking is The Rec's Achilles heel but then it was laid out in the days when everyone used to walk to the game. Even now, its location is enviable. The town centre and both railway and bus stations are just five minutes distant on foot. Let's hope this ground, one of the game's hardy survivors, has plenty more miles left on the clock.

The match itself built to a crescendo after a quiet opening. Rushden & Diamonds, safe in mid-table and very keen to win this competition, had rested some of their players the previous weekend while the Shots, one eye on promotion, fielded a slightly understrength line-up. Result - an even contest. No goals in a first half in which the hosts took time to get going. Ex-Shot Jon Challinor was closest for Rushden with a header on to the roof of the net and Diamonds keeper Dale Roberts did well to tip over with one hand a fizzing half-volley from Lewis Chalmers. Scott Donnelly hit the crossbar from 18 yards but a colleague had wandered offside. Roberts blocked superbly to deny an unmarked Donnelly soon after the restart before a flowing move down the left flank in the 71st minute ended with Junior Mendes bundling Town ahead from close range. Rushden were level within two minutes. A trademark long throw from Michael Rankine was allowed to drift through to the back post, where Andy Burgess had the simple task of tapping past Mikhael Jaimez-Ruiz.

Rankine failed to convert a one-on-one two minutes into extra-time, after a through pass from the workaholic Curtis Woodhouse, and was made to curse his wastefulness when, in the 95th minute, the Shots regained the lead. A loose ball fell to Kirk Hudson 25 yards out and, without hesitation, he turned to drill it low to Roberts's right. Four minutes later, Jaimez-Ruiz dived to his left to grasp a poor Burgess penalty after Andy Gooding had been felled in the area. And, again, Town made them pay by going 3-1 up in the 107th minute. Roberts made two brilliant saves to push away a Danny Hylton shot and Hudson's follow-up but Donnelly reacted quickest to head the rebound into an empty net. That, frankly, looked that. But Rushden weren't finished. They capitalised on a soft penalty, awarded in the 109th minute for a challenge on Abdou El Kholti by Donnelly, and this time Burgess was not found wanting. Piling forward as the game entered stoppage time, Lee Tomlin made space on the left flank to cross low to the near post and when Jaimez-Ruiz fumbled under pressure Rankine, on his knees, somehow grubbed the

ball over the line. Penalties! Rushden's Gooding put the first one wide but ice cool Aldershot kept finding the net and when Diamonds skipper Chris Hope, who looked a bundle of nerves as he advanced reluctantly to the mark from the halfway line, found Jaimez-Ruiz's gloves with the eighth spot-kick it was all over.

So, well done Aldershot. They were, on the night, perhaps fortunate to lift the Setanta Shield but made a big effort in staging what proved to be a memorable occasion. Programme editor Guy Butchers pushed the boat out to come up with an excellent souvenir edition, though a cover price of £3 was a bit cheeky. Assuming, as seems likely, the Shots go on to clinch a return to the Football League, it will be interesting to see how they get on next season. With their fine support and some decent players, Town look well equipped for the challenge Coca-Cola League Two presents. But what will those away fans make of the walk through the woods?

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