

TT No.229: *Andy Gallon* - Wed 9th April 2008; **Carlton Town** v Eastwood Town; Notts Senior Cup Semi-Final; Res: 1-1 (AET, 4-5 pens); Att: 185; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50 (38pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

To outsiders, the senior non-league football scene in northern Nottingham is a tad confusing. Carlton Town, who began life as Sneinton, play at a ground located approximately between Gedling and Stoke Bardolph. Gedling

Town are based not quite in Stoke Bardolph and a little way from Burton Joyce. And Gedling Miners' Welfare have their home in Mapperley, a good two miles from Gedling. At least Arnold Town actually play in the town they represent! Those visiting Carlton since the relatively recent changes probably won't recognise the place. The Bill Stokeld Stadium is, effectively, a new ground in a slightly different spot. Council planners used compulsory purchase order powers to buy the club's old home, much of which has disappeared under the shiny tarmac of the A612 bypass. The council paid for the new ground, which is a hundred yards further west and has seen its pitch swung round 90 degrees. As part of the deal, the local authority shelled out for a state-of-the-art rubber crumb five-a-side facility. This, used by the community and apparently booked solid every day of the week, now separates the ground from the bypass and is a lucrative source of income for the Millers.

I recall the previous ground being in an exceptionally quiet spot off narrow Stoke Lane, a country byway meandering almost aimlessly across a fertile flood plain of the river Trent. The bypass, wide and noisy, has bisected the lane and ruined the sleepy atmosphere but the Bill Stokeld Stadium is far better than its predecessor, even if the immediate surroundings aren't terribly promising. A sewage treatment plant encloses the ground to the north and west, with a railway line and the spire of All Hallows parish church beyond in the Gedling direction. Further down Stoke Lane, on the other side of a level crossing, are the pleasant semis and blossomed gardens of Nottingham suburbia. The bypass is to the east and, past that, there is more Seven Trent Water paraphernalia. Despite the presence of the sewage works, the air on a crisp, clear spring evening had the tangy freshness of a television toothpaste advert. To the south of the ground, on the other side of Stoke Lane, is a vast expanse of allotments. It's worth saying at this point that access to the new ground can be gained only from the bypass. All other routes are now restricted to buses, with nanny state police cameras rolling constantly to nick the cheeky or ignorant.

A large aggregate car park leads to a wooden turnstile block, which deposits the spectator on a tarmac apron between the B&K complex and the social club. The former, to the left and opened by Nottingham Forest legend Kenny Burns last July, is a structure of red brick with a pitched roof and CTFC picked out in lighter bricks on its facing wall. It contains, at the far end, the dressing rooms, with a black-painted metal cage tunnel leading to the pitch. Adjacent to the tunnel is a small area of terracing, sheltered by an overhang from the main roof. This is the only

covered standing in the ground. The social club is a flat-roofed portable building, painted cream. It is set back from the pitch and has picnic tables on a concrete strip in front. Inside, it's bog standard, though there are some interesting photographs on the walls. The team line-ups are tacked up just inside the door, to the right. An identical - padlocked - portable building alongside was used for dressing rooms before the B&K complex was opened. The dugouts, of stiff plastic sheeting on metal frames, are positioned either side of the halfway line.

The covered seating is behind the bypass end goal. This comprises a kit stand, 30 yards in length and offering four rows of blue and yellow plastic tip-up seats. It is sponsored by the MSR Newsgroup. To the rear, a broad area of grass leads to the wooden perimeter fence. Beyond is the five-a-side pitch, surrounded by a high mesh fence and boasting its own parking area. The north side is extremely narrow. There is room only for a strip of concrete hardstanding and an equally thin band of grass before the barbed wire-topped mesh fence of the water company, who secret their operations behind thick, thorny shrubs. The far, west, end has a concrete path and then a wide expanse of grass. The floodlights are of the mast variety, with two lamps on each of the three posts on either side. The metal post and rail fence around the pitch has been filled in with wooden boards, most of which are painted blue.

I tend to regard county cups in the Mickey Mouse category but this derby promised a decent game - and delivered big time. In a bonus, Carlton had also issued a proper programme for the fixture. The hosts, with the fast, tricky Marquin Smith absolutely outstanding in midfield, played the second half and extra-time with 10 men after the dismissal of Phil Bignall, but took in-form opponents Eastwood Town, a division higher in the UniBond League but fielding a few squad players, right to the very last kick of a penalty shootout. Badgers striker Matt Rhead missed two sitters in the opening two minutes and team-mate Jay Smedley then cleared off the goal-line twice to deny bustling Millers hitman Bignall. Referee Dave Plowright somehow missed a clear handball in the penalty area by Eastwood's Mark Stevenson - not the whistler's sole myopic moment of the evening. Rhead rubbed salt in the wound on the stroke of half-time by capitalising on a Grant Brindley miskick to sweep languidly past Ali Bercherini from 18 yards. The half ended with punches thrown, and Bignall was dismissed in the dressing rooms after clashing with Gary Breach, who was booked.

Plucky Carlton, despite their numerical disadvantage, then took the game to Eastwood. The tireless Smith hit the crossbar from 30 yards and Aidan Brady brought a great save out of David McCarthy before, in the 63rd minute, Smedley, chasing back towards goal, deflected a Darrell Thomas header into his own net. Ricky Hansen, for the Badgers, struck the woodwork and Millers Dean Gent found the outside of a post from an acute angle. Extra-time was fairly low key, though Stevenson flashed a header narrowly over and home sub Steve Chaplin rolled a cross-shot inches wide. In the shootout, Chaplin's spot-kick against the crossbar was all that separated two weary teams. It was that close. Eastwood now play

Ollerton Town, 3-2 last-four winners over Central Midlands League rivals Gedling Miners' Welfare, in the final at Notts County's Meadow Lane stadium on May 7.

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