

TT No.237: Andrew Gallon - Tue 22nd April 2008; **Crawley Town** v Halifax Town; Blue Square Premier; Res: 0-4; Att: 817; Admission: £12; Programme: £2.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Another season, another crisis. Such is life as a Halifax Town supporter. The latest tidal wave of calamity threatening to engulf the club was caused in mid-March when a potential purchaser consortium took the Shaymen into administration to protect them from creditors and hoping to secure a 100% shareholding. The mandatory deduction of 10 points, and a subsequent run of four league defeats from a morale-sapped squad, transformed a moribund campaign of lower mid-table mediocrity into a desperate fight against relegation. After a spineless, clueless and apparently hopeless 6-1 capitulation to Kidderminster Harriers at The Shay on April 8, Town looked doomed but a determined run of one win and two draws from the following four games meant victories over Crawley Town and Stevenage Borough in the last two fixtures would clinch survival.

And so I found myself in West Sussex, a long way from home, watching my own team on a balmy midweek spring evening late in April. It's funny how the mud, blood and gore of freezing struggles in the depths of winter always come down to getting results in weather better suited to beach volleyball. As the Halifax evening newspaper's Town reporter put it - rather well - in his match preview: Play well and win, play badly and win - but win.

And win we did. It was, with a couple of exceptions, a very good performance. Total commitment. Admittedly, Crawley were spectacularly awful - so bad, in fact, their man of the match award went to James Krause, who was sent off in the 65th minute for a trendily over-the-ball lunge at Danny Forrest's upper shins. Other results on the night now leave Town requiring a point from the visit of Stevenage on Saturday to condemn Altrincham, along with Stafford Rangers, Droylsden and Farsley Celtic, to the wilderness of Blue Square North. We can't, surely, muck it up now.

Broadfield Stadium is a vivid splash of red and white in a pleasant landscape rapidly turning green with the approach of summer. The ground, opened in October 1997 as a successor to Town Mead, the Red Devils' home since 1952, is on the southern tip of Crawley, a country mile from junction 11 of the M23. There is a vaguely continental feel to the surroundings - perhaps this was the intention when New Town planners put together this particular, err, modern living solution. Broadfield, where building began in 1971, was the 11th 'neighbourhood' to be constructed in Crawley. The sylvan approach down the A23 dual carriageway is brightened by a superb piece of public art on the roundabout alongside the stadium. A huge white football, with red panels, sits atop a grassy knoll. Simple but effective - a description which applies to the football club's new ground, whose 4,996 capacity says much about the level of Crawley's ambition.

The cantilevered main stand runs between the penalty areas on the west side. It is perfectly symmetrical. The exterior has a brick base, breeze block mid-section and an upper cladding of white metal sheeting, with exposed ironmongery on the roof painted red. There is a glazed reception area amidships, with offices and a souvenir shop adjacent. Turnstiles and recessed refreshment hatches are positioned each side beneath low roofs of the same materials as the rest of the stand and which, curiously, wrap around both north and south ends. I can't recall seeing that design before. The stand has 1,150 red plastic tip-up seats spread over 10 rows and the words Broadfield Stadium picked out in red letters on its white fascia. The players' tunnel is central, with dugouts (unusually narrow and tall) either side of the halfway line beneath a high, blank front wall. The stand backs on to a metalled car park which, in an echo of the north and south stands, also wraps round at both ends. A tarmac path, winding delightfully through trees alongside a babbling brook, lies beyond and then there is a park and houses.

The south stand, which has nine steps of terracing and a single unbroken line of sturdy metal crush barriers painted red, houses to its rear the Redz (yuk) bar. This tries hard for a 'cellar' atmosphere and doesn't quite pull it off. As well as the car park behind this end, there is a tatty first generation artificial mini pitch, more trees and then modern office blocks. The north stand, designated for away fans, is, other than the bar, identical. Its area of car park contains a mobile phone mast and - thoughtfully - there is a cut-away section at the rear of the stand with 'toast racks' for storing bicycles. The Crawley Greenway, haunt of cyclists and joggers, runs right past the ground. Beyond the access road is the Broadfield training pitch (a state-of-the-art floodlit affair) and pavilion, which is a posh way of describing a breeze block box housing changing rooms. These facilities are available to the community and, on this lovely evening, are exceptionally well patronised by youngsters.

The east side, narrow and open to the elements, is a disappointment. Four steps of terracing and another long crush barrier back on to a breeze block wall behind which is a strip of grass, netting suspended from high posts, a hedge and then the A23. There are three scaffolding TV gantries on this side, with the most substantial above the halfway line next to a rudimentary electronic scoreboard. There is some room to expand - but not much. A tarmac path surrounds the pitch, with a metal mesh fence, painted red, separating players from spectators. The floodlights, which struck me as casting a radiance both dim and patchy, are of the most variety. Three short posts are mounted on the main stand roof, with the trio opposite being taller and free standing. Broadfield Stadium is colourful, leafy, functional and tidy. As new grounds go, I've seen plenty worse.

I've not, however, seen many worse Blue Square Premier teams than Crawley. Their embittered fans didn't like what they were watching, either. Those not morose and silent jeered every mistake mercilessly and spent the last 15 minutes encouraging Halifax. Most, of course, are London overspill and so have a chip on both shoulders about being booted out of the capital for life in the sticks. Of those standing around me, the majority supported Chelsea and would rather have been

at home watching the Champions League bore on the box. No wonder the ill-supported Red Devils, now under new ownership and hoping for a brighter future, spent so long in administration. The programme, a paint-by-numbers issue but devoting several pages to the visitors, hinted at bad blood between fans in the rival supporters' club and trust. Not a happy ship, then.

Halifax's players didn't care either way and simply got on with what proved to be the relatively straightforward task of securing three points. Crawley, frankly, were outplayed from first whistle to last and their sole effort on target was a weak, deflected header. How my heart bled for Steve Evans, their stropy, gobby Scottish manager. Remember Boston United, everyone? Town's top scorer Jon Shaw wasted a great chance in a one-on-one inside three minutes but players at this level can't often use both feet and the striker fired limply wide with his weaker left. No matter. A fast break down the right wing from Simon Heslop produced an early cross and Lewis Killeen (22) got the jump on his marker to snooker kiss a low effort wide of Ashley Bayes's right hand. Two minutes before half-time, Matt Doughty curled a corner away from goal and Shaw, arriving late and unmarked, bulleted a fierce 12-yard header into the back of the Crawley net.

You can never count your chickens with the Shaymen and the home team opened up the second half as if they meant business. But they had nothing to offer in the final third of the pitch and, when Krause was shown a straight red card for his reckless challenge on Forrest, Halifax took control again. Bayes, making a dreadful hash of dealing with a back-pass to add to a number of other sins, was dispossessed on the right side of his area by Forrest, who rolled the ball across an empty goal for Shaw (73) to tap in. With the teams playing out stoppage time, Doughty fired in a low cross from the left flank and Kieran Murphy, under pressure from substitute Darryn Stamp, could only divert the ball into his own net. Game, set and match Shaymen.

I'm not, as you might imagine, too bothered what the future holds for Crawley. What we need at Halifax is a fresh start. The consortium's new broom must sweep clean. It's time for a parting of the ways with manager Chris Wilder. He's been in the job six years (a lifetime in a Shay context) and the run to the play-off final two years ago looks, given his overall record, something of a fluke. It's time for new ideas. The squad also needs a major overhaul. There aren't many players worth keeping. Shaw, for his goals, must be retained - if he wants to stay. Big centre-back Adam Quinn, the club's longest serving player, versatile workaholic Anthony Griffith and hit-and-miss frontrunner Killeen all deserve another chance. But the rest can go in the mother and father of all clear-outs. But first let's make sure we get that point against Stevenage this weekend.