

TT No.42: Andrew Gallon - Sat 1st September 2007; **Northampton Spencer v North Greenford United**; FA Cup Preliminary Rd; Res: 2-1; Att: 87; Admission: £5; Programme (22pp): 50p; FGIF Match Rating: 5*.

Few things in this hobby are more pleasing than discovering a ground is much nicer than you've been led to believe. Everything I'd read about Kingsthorpe Mill, which sounds as though it were something Constable might have painted, had been negative. Indeed, the approaches do not bode well. Through a soulless industrial estate (what must they be like as daily places of work?) and then a tight squeeze down a narrow, potholed track between allotments. A sharp right turn decants the visitor in the bottom of a wide, shallow-sided valley, with the ground nestling at its foot amid positively rustic surrounds. Now, I won't pretend this is a rural idyll. A busy trunk railway line runs a couple of hundred yards to the left beyond the River Nene, the constant hum of vehicles can be heard from an adjacent main road and the upper slopes are scattered with bland sheds and unimaginatively designed offices. It used to be "like Beirut" up there, according to one official. But, contrary to my expectations, flora and fauna abound, trees and shrubs bloom everywhere, a quiet footpath keeps pace with the sleepy river bank and the elegant spire of the church of St John the Baptist in nearby Kingsthorpe village peers over the topmost boughs. Can the centre of Northampton, all high rises, be just a mile a distant?

This odd mixture of town and country provides an intriguing setting for Northampton Spencer, who have played at this site since 1972, developing the facilities year on year. And what a tremendous job the club has done. At the end of the access track, you can bear left to park in the long grass of what clearly used to be a railed-off second pitch, complete with rudimentary floodlights mounted on telegraph posts. A footpath and a stile take you to the river bank and a grand spot for a pre-match picnic. The main car park, small and covered with fine aggregate, is dead ahead, through the rather ugly metal railings which surround the ground and show a clear intent to keep undesirables out. The large building to the left houses the dressing rooms, with the flatter-roofed social club and the turnstile beyond. Liberal use of cream and green paint brightens breeze block and wood construction materials. It's not rocket science, is it?

Pause to pop into the social club before going through the turnstile. It is attractively decked out - far more appealing inside than out - and has an interesting array of team photos going back to the mid-1930s, when the club was formed and used the name Spencer School Old Boys. Inside, the ground is lovingly maintained. A wide area of hardstanding to the left is covered by a roof propped out as an extension from the social club. You'll find the line-ups blue-tacked to the wall here. Beyond is a refreshment hatch, serving some of the best grub in the United Counties League, and the exit from the dressing rooms. There is no tunnel; just a short ramp on to the pitch which, considering so many games last season were lost when the perfidious Nene burst its banks, is in A1 condition. The breeze

block on this side of the buildings is untreated, and would look so much better with a lick of the cream and green paint used outside. To the right of the turnstile is a kit-built stand (yes - another one) with green and yellow, plastic tip-up seats and, further down, a wide, grassy area which broadens out to form a mini training pitch.

The rest of the ground is uncovered, with a metalled path running right the way round. Strips of carefully tended grass run up to the perimeter fence, the hard lines of which are broken by the presence of, at both ends, a line of tall, mature trees and, to the side, thick shrubbery. The trees help to give this relatively undeveloped ground an enclosed, built-up feel. The dugouts, again decorated cream and green, are on the far side halfway line and were erected this summer once the flood waters had finally ebbed. Behind this side, an uncultivated, ungrazed meadow leads to the river, concealed by foliage, and the four-track railway line, whose light is anything but hidden under a bushel. The floodlights are corner masts, with six lamps on each. The ground's overall effect is one of unity and, in this part of town, an oasis of order.

This FA Cup preliminary qualifying round tie between two sides going well in their respective (United Counties and Combined Counties) leagues promises much - and does not fail to deliver. There are goals, controversy and a thrilling finish. Spencer win through but North Greenford, who play all but 30 minutes with 10 men, feel aggrieved at not getting a replay. "Robbery without violence", was the verdict of one of their fans. The ref "had a mare", complains another.

Spencer, having to cope without injured star striker Darren Frost, who broke an ankle in a car crash last week, have marginally the better of the opening exchanges and go close when Karl Bates's speculative effort hits the top of the crossbar. The turning point comes on the half-hour. United's Nick Booth clearly blocks a Bates volley on the goal-line with his hands but the referee (for whatever reason) needs two separate consultations with one of his assistants before flourishing the red card. Keeper Danny Harry, who had dropped the ball in the build-up to the incident, redeems himself by smothering Scott Marshall's poorly-placed spot-kick.

Matt Collins takes advantage of a kind ricochet to put Spencer ahead seven minutes before the break, finding the bottom corner with an angled left-footer from 16 yards. A sweet finish. In the 52nd minute, visiting

skipper Luc Kenny - all red-faced drive and passion - draws his men level. He races on to a sublime Danny Murphy through ball to outwit keeper Shaun Markie in a one-on-one - and then charges back for the restart, screaming at his colleagues and pumping his fists.

Spencer appear to doze as the sun begins to shrug off its cloak of cloud and North Greenford start to look the likely winners. But the referee again intervenes on the home team's behalf, awarding a distinctly dodgy penalty in the 78th minute for what he deems to be a foul on Chris Davies. There is, once more, a pregnant pause before the decision is made. Having thought Davies was about to be booked for

diving, the north Londoners are simultaneously aghast and furious when Phil Cassidy is given the opportunity to send Harry the wrong way from the spot. In a frantic finish, North Greenford see a header cleared off the line and are denied what looks like a strong penalty shout as they throw everything forward during the six minutes of time added on. Sometimes, you just know it's not going to be your day.

My tale of the unexpected with the surroundings is matched by Spencer's programme - it's in a most unusual slim, upright format with pages in the middle which fold out like a concertina. I haven't seen one of that shape since Hunslet rugby league club's 'Pizza Hut menu' affair of the late 1980s. But, at 50p, it's good value - and a sell-out, too, because this tie attracts a better-than-average attendance. The friendly chap on the gate explains the programme is shaped thus so it can fit easily into a breast pocket. Perhaps I need to rethink my wardrobe.

The United Counties League has been one of my 'pets' since a change of address brought me within its compass but I'd been putting off going to Kingsthorpe Mill after hearing tales of barbed wire and urban blight.

Spencer have made the most of what they have and I urge you not to be dissuaded - and, if the weather is nice, it might be worth taking along your oils to plug that gap in the Constable collection!

06/20