

TT No.47: Andrew Gallon - Wed 5th September 2007; **Stanton Ilkeston** v Newark Flowserve; Central Midlands Premier; Res: 2-4; Att: 22 (h/c); Admission: £2.50; Programme (20pp): £1; FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Stanton Ilkeston are finding the going tough on their return to the Central Midlands League after five years in the wilderness. This defeat, more emphatic than the score suggests, was their seventh loss in eight games. It's a big step up from the Notts Amateur Alliance but having to play every game away from home can't help. The Ironmen, whose traditional base is now home to a rugby union team, are sharing with Northern Counties (East) League Premier Division out-fit South Normanton Athletic, 20 miles and two junctions up the M1, to meet grading requirements. As well as the surroundings being unfamiliar, crowds are tiny. Not a winning recipe, it seems.

South Normanton is utterly unremarkable. What life the red-brick heart of this former pit village once had seems to have been given a coronary by the opening of a budget superstore. That means - usual story - all the specialist shops have disappeared, leaving behind a depressing collection of takeaways, tanning studios and hairdressers. There's nothing to see, save an unusual clock sculpture in the desolate market place and the parish church of St Michael and All Angels, with its squat but attractive tower. The church appears to have a disproportionately large graveyard. No wonder. The groups of teenage lads hanging about certainly looked short of something to do, unless you describe as useful activities blocking the pavement, smoking and spitting in various ways. Perhaps the British Olympic Association should consider introducing spitting as a showcase sport for the 2012 Games in London. It's cheap, far less effort than running 400 metres and our youngsters seem to enjoy doing it.

In a cloudy frame of mind totally at odds with a simply glorious Indian summer evening, I made my way down Lees Lane to the football ground. And things began looking up. All the homes on this claustrophobic thoroughfare have beautifully manicured gardens, leading to the conclusion at least some pride remains in South Normanton. The road narrows and leads to a curiously silent farm, with a sharp swing right taking you into the car park. The forbidding, dark and possibly satanic old miners' welfare building, which used to dominate the ground, was demolished three years ago, which means there is now more light and greater space for cars. A well-tended bowls club adjoins, though the gravelly car park is overgrown with weeds at its margins. This is an indicator for the ground, which is certainly a little frayed round the edges.

A sinuous concrete path steers the spectator past boarded-up, redundant portable buildings to the pay box (there's no turnstile) and the south-eastern corner of the ground. To the right are the dressing rooms, with steps leading down to the pitch, which slopes downhill appreciably towards the north. From here, the Peak District hills - in which I'd spent my day - fill the western horizon in an alluring manner. To

the left by the entrance is a patio area with picnic tables and the 'Shiners Diner' refreshment kiosk and, beyond, the social club which, when I arrived, was so dark inside a Davy Lamp would have come in handy.

The two areas of cover - corrugated propped cantilevers - are almost identical. Three rows of plastic, black, tip-up seats are sheltered behind the near goal, with the stand backing on to the bowling green. The patience of the bowlers was tested sorely during the kick-in because the Stanton players kept booting the ball over the stand and on to their cherished, close-cropped grass. Sadly, the footballers were no more accurate when the game began. The cover on the left, west, side is over hardstanding, with the neat dugouts immediately in front making obstruction-free viewing difficult. The remainder is open hardstanding, with shrubs providing a verdant fringe. A concrete strip runs right the way round and is separated from the metal panelled perimeter fence, painted blue and yellow, by grass. The pitch surround is fashioned of fancy moulded concrete. Perhaps South Normanton Athletic got a cheap job lot from a garden centre. Netting, in a sorry state of repair, rises above the south end. Beyond here, undulating fields roll away towards the neighbouring ex-pit village of Blackwell. Look hard and you can spot their ground. The M1's muffled, sullen roar can be discerned over to the north-east. Lees Lane's floodlights are masts, three per side, with six lamps on the middle-mast, and three on the others. If the ground appears slightly elliptical, be assured your eyes don't need testing. Until 1930, it was a velodrome.

With Newark Flowserve also languishing in the bottom half of the Premier Division table, Stanton might have pencilled in this fixture as a home banker but the Nottinghamshire club were always in command. The visitors should have been home and hosed by half-time but had only Rhys Lewis's 21st-minute goal, set up by Chris Self's quick thinking, to show for their domination up the hill. A comedy of errors for a bizarre equaliser led to Flowserve keeper Olly Dyson (52) turning a Luke Slaney effort into his own net when it appeared to be drifting wide. Danny Purves, producing a devastating first touch having just come on as a sub, restored Newark's advantage on the hour with a swerving, 25-yard free-kick which keeper Jack Harvey lost in the flight. Three goals in the last six minutes made for an exciting finish, rather out of character with the mundanity preceding it. Lewis (84) was all alone when he steered a low shot past Harvey for 3-1 and the diminutive Francis McGregor (89) chipped a tasty fourth after a scorching charge through from halfway. There was still time for Stanton to come back and get a consolation from Slaney (90), who fired home low after a bit of pinball in the Flowserve penalty area.

On the programme front, another poor issue to report from this league, I'm afraid. Some effort had been made with the cover, promising much, but the content, which included two entirely blank pages (shades of Len Shackleton's views on football directors!), was a major let down. Word is, Stanton's fellow newcomers Parkhouse, who play at Clay Cross, just south of Chesterfield, churn out a brilliant programme - one of the best the Central Midlands League has seen. I'll reserve judgment until I've visited them, just as perhaps it's best to wait a while before

passing sentence on Stanton's return to this level of the pyramid. Given time, they may come good.

06/20