

TT No.56: Andrew Gallon - Sun 9th September 2007; **Biddulph Victoria** v Studley; FA Vase 1st Qual Rd; Res: 0-3; Att: 97; Admission: £5; Programme (44pp): £1; FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Some grounds are sheer delight - and Biddulph Victoria's attractive Tunstall Road home certainly falls into that category. In a tranquil, country setting and with idiosyncrasies enough to please even the most ardent quirk-seeker, this is a venue to savour. The ground is actually in the well-heeled village of Knypersley, about half a mile from Biddulph town centre in the Stoke direction, and forms part of a large and immaculately groomed sports complex. Three sided, the ground is shared with the village cricket team and a (happy for hoppers) clash of fixtures led to the scheduling on a Sunday of this FA Vase first qualifying round tie.

Space in the small car park, shared with all other users of the site, is at a premium. To the left as you swing in off the main road is a beautifully maintained bowling green, with the modern, functional social club ahead. This is the second to be built - the whitewashed, mock Tudor original is to the right. It looks very much like a cricket pavilion, complete with balcony and clock, and bears some resemblance to the Doll's House which stood in a corner of Bradford Park Avenue's long-demolished old ground in Horton. The building at Biddulph is presently used as a children's nursery.

A narrow track to the right takes you to the entrance gate and turnstile, through which you find yourself in the near left-hand corner of the ground, tucked away on the edge of the site. What a view from here. Tennis courts over to the left have an elevated perch, slightly higher than the handsome, twin-gabled cricket pavilion and equally pleasing clock-adorned scoreboard. The land rises so suddenly that the last 15 yards to the boundary are steeply sloping. Fours must be hard to come by! Behind the pavilion, fields dotted with grazing cattle entice the eye up and up to a tree-fringed horizon. Completely charming. I'm not great fan of cricket but this must be a lovely place to watch our national summer sport.

The main facilities of the football ground are squeezed into a triangular patch of land which narrows to the width of a path in the top-right corner. The first building, whitewashed with a shallow, pitched roof, houses the dressing rooms. The players access the pitch across a strip of tarmac, with a pair of portable, white metal gates providing the segregation beloved of graders. The second building, red brick and flat roofed, contains the hospitality area and refreshment hatch. Beyond is the sole area of cover - an unusual upright, boxlike stand with a high roof and bench seats. Its fascia is topped with netting suspended from poles to prevent unleashed balls causing chaos in Tunstall Road. This netting continues right round the far side and, uniquely in my experience, is attached to the white, metal pitch perimeter fence, giving spectators a 'caught herring's view' of the action. This side is dominated by a tall, modern, detached house and its oblong garden. Shoehorned into the space between house and pitch is a hardstanding

sliver which, where the twin dugouts intrude, narrows to a mere half-yard's width. Surely the slimmest side in football!

The hardstanding continues past a paddock, complete with grass-munching pony, and round the rear of the bottom goal. Behind this is a small, artificial pitch, fenced in with high wire mesh. A £70,000 investment by the club. At the far end, a footpath leads to the 'cricket ground pool', haunt of heron and members of the Victoria and Biddulph Angling Society. Lined by mature, overhanging trees, it's an idyllic and peaceful spot. The far side of the football ground collides with the cricketers' territory at an angle, with a temporary rope barrier allowing fans to stand here. Best view in the house, I'd say. The floodlights, positioned in each corner, are mounted on sturdy, tapering pylons and the cricket side ones are protected at their base to prevent any ghastly accidents while fielding.

Biddulph describes itself as 'The Gateway to the Moorlands' - a surprisingly accurate label in a world of marketing hyperbole because this is the delicious point at which the industrial Potteries fizzle out and give way to the verdant south-western tip of the Peak District. Not that Biddulph, whose residents are 'Stokies' to their marrow, doesn't know about getting its hands dirty. Coal mining was the major source of employment and income here for many years and, indeed, the football club was set up in 1933 by colliers from the Victoria pit, whose labyrinthine seams shut for good half a century later. Biddulph is a short, downhill walk from Knypersley (the club was, until recently, called Knypersley Victoria and changed its name to broaden its appeal) and, though more workaday than its desirable neighbour, is pleasant enough nestling at the foot of a wide, green valley. Above the streets to the north, the underrated Staffordshire moors rear impressively. A balancing wheel from the old pit serves as a memorial to the influence of the coal industry and forms the centrepiece of a wonderful floral display outside the town hall. A whiff of south Wales, definitely.

It's a truism of football that early-season league tables can be mendacious. Much of the Midland Alliance separated these two teams before kick-off, and with Biddulph at the business end, a comfortable home win seemed the likely outcome. Right? Wrong! Studley won at a canter, with Vic's struggling to make any sort of impression. The visitors had gone close on several occasions before Jason Ramsey (28) forced the ball through a forest of limbs from close range following an incisive cross-field pass from Scott Walsh and rather laboured work on the left side of the box by Rob Agar. Kieran Cross (61) needed two bites of the cherry before lashing an eye-catching second into the top corner and substitute Ryan Field displayed some fancy footwork to round keeper Danny Read for a tap-in third during stoppage time.

A number of Biddulph's players hail from Crewe and former Vics favourite Tom Pope appears twice on the programme cover - in the colours of both the hosts and Crewe Alexandra, whom he joined on leaving Tunstall Road. Decent programme, this, although, to my mind, rather chaotically sequenced. For example, the thoughts of manager Stuart Heeps do not appear until page 29! But, hey, let's not

quibble over trifles. Smashing little set-up - just a shame the game wasn't more competitive.

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