

TT No.65: Andrew Gallon - Tues 25th September 2007; **Friar Lane & Epworth v Barwell**; Midland Alliance; Res: 1-0; Att: 81; Admission: £4; Programme: None; FGIF Match Rating: ****.

One feature of a ground is sometimes so overwhelming, it is destined to stick in one's memory long after all other recollections have faded. So, it is with Friar Lane & Epworth's interesting Whittier Road home. The dominating factor in this case is the main Leicester-London railway line, which overlooks the ground on a high embankment running along and towering above the east touchline. Every couple of minutes, trains roar by, drowning out the shouts of the players and temporarily suspending conversation between spectators. Engineering's version of thrash metal, I suppose.

The intrusive railway apart, and even the grassy embankment is studded with mature trees starting to acquire autumn tints, the ground feels pleasantly countrified - strange, really, because the unappealing city centre (Leicester will never be on any foreign visitor's tour itinerary) is only a mile away. The entrance on Whittier Road is off the busy Saffron Lane, which links the south side of Leicester with the outer ring road at the splendidly named Pork Pie roundabout. Suburbia is starting to get a grip on the general sameness here, and red-brick semis fringe the adjacent Aylestone recreation ground, which provides five football pitches and is fringed by a path through an avenue of trees. There were several informal kickabouts going on when I arrived but, worryingly in view of Leicester's large ethnic minority population, there was no indication of racial integration - the games were either all white or all black.

Opposite are the two unadorned fields of Aylestonians RUFC and beyond them sharp eyes will spot floodlights and a cantilever stand. These belong to the smartly refurbished eight-lane, tartan athletics track at Saffron Lane sports centre, part of whose complex contains a sorrowfully derelict velodrome, complete with rusting stands and a battered artificial pitch laid out for gridiron with 'tuning fork' goalposts. Is there anything sadder than an abandoned ground? Keep going in this direction and you soon reach Leicester City's Walkers Stadium, the site of Filbert Street and the wonderfully archaic, creaking stands of Leicester RUFC's Welford Road. Nearer the Pork Pie roundabout is the Grace Road ground of Leicestershire CCC. Strange how the city's main sporting venues are linked by this single traffic artery.

FL&E's ground is squeezed into a narrow but steadily widening segment of land between the railway and the houses on Whittier Road. A bridge over a culverted beck connects the unmade car park with the small club house, which proved as difficult to explore as the North West Passage was for post-15th Century seafarers by staying resolutely shut all night. To the left of the be-puddled parking area is a floodlit strip of grass used for training, warm-ups and, on my visit, a children's skills session. Pleasingly, a number of the kids were wearing Leicester City shirts.

The ground, about 100 yards up from the club house, is accessed in its north-west corner by a gate and a pay box. To the left, at the north end, is a whitewashed, breeze block building providing refreshments and hospitality. There is a fine display of pennants, many commemorating Friar Lane Old Boys' FA Vase exploits, which pre-date the 2004 merger with Epworth, who used to play in nearby Wigston.

Stone flags run round the pitch and lead to the oddity of a main stand, which straddles the halfway line on the west side. It is built from wood and faced with white metal sheeting. The glazed dressing rooms, to the rear, look like they belong to a village cricket pavilion. A gloomy, narrow corridor separates them from three rows of rickety, plastic, tip-up seats, which are sheltered by an overhang so deep, the impression the whole structure could capsize at any moment is hard to shake off. The club's name is painted on the fascia. A short flight of steps, encased by a metal cage, lead from the dressing rooms to the pitch.

Beyond the main stand is a Heath Robinson section of cover fashioned from scaffolding and more white metal sheeting. The south end is open and grassy, with netting hanging from poles to keep wayward footballs off the fruit and veg growing in neighbouring allotments. Low-slung dugouts, whose lack of height is accentuated by the looming bulk of the embankment immediately behind them, are positioned opposite the main stand. Another curiosity is the four different forms of fencing used round the perimeter - wood (south end), metal slats (east side), concrete panels (north end) and metal sheeting (west side). The overall impression, helped by a very smart post and rail pitch surround fence painted alternately in the club's colours of black and white, is of a tidy, studiously tended enclosure. But not, from the very moment the first train clanks by, will you find its setting remotely peaceful.

Overcoming the acute disappointment of discovering a cock-up between club and printer meant a programme hadn't been produced for this derby (a first failure to issue in the Midland Alliance for me), I enjoyed what proved to be an excellent contest which grew more absorbing as it wore on. How Barwell went home with nothing against the unbeaten leaders, only they know. Skipper Danny Gibbons threw himself full length to head home powerfully from a driven corner in the 18th minute as FL&E recovered from a slow start to dominate first-half proceedings down the slope towards the north end. The turning point came in the 52nd minute when an offside flag ruled out Lee Roper's low, 20-yard effort - to the relief of red-faced visiting keeper Liam Castle, who had somehow dived over the ball on its way into the bottom corner. A second goal, given what had gone before, would surely have been decisive and this stroke of luck seemed to energise Barwell, who then created chance after chance after chance. But sub Oliver Waters was guilty of some scandalously wasteful finishing and, on the occasions when the ball did find its way to the target, keeper Neil Blowfield gallantly maintained FL&E's slender advantage. At least the hosts finished with a flourish, and Kris Stevenson saw Nicholas Grant clear off the line after Castle had partially blocked the FL&E striker's goal-bound prod in a one-on-one.

