

**TT No.75: Andrew Gallon** - Tues 2nd October 2007; **Hitchin Town v Haverhill Rovers**; FA Cup 2nd Q Rd replay; Res: 5-0; Att: 160; Admission: £8; Programme: £1.50 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

Top Field is a characterful enclosure with unusual features in a pleasant part of an attractive town. My cup (FA in this case) runneth over. Hitchin Town, notwithstanding a brief post-First World War hiatus when the club went out of business, have played here not far short of 140 years. It's an historic venue, rightly famed for the sort of wooden terracing which was causing health and safety concerns at the turn of the last century, let alone this. It has to be seen to be believed.

But we should start at the beginning. My expectations for Hitchin were not high in light of its status as a dormitory town for London commuters but it proved to be a charming place. There is a superb mix of timber framed and Georgian buildings, with those on Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street and Bucklersbury particularly fine. This is what I call a 'proper' town, with useful, independent and interesting shops which outnumber the inevitable national chains. Just off the cobbled market place is the fascinating St Mary's Church, the largest parish church in Hertfordshire and a structure boasting an odd tower/steeple combo. Parts of it date back to the 12th Century.

It's a 15-minute walk from the bustling high street to Top Field, on the northern edge of Hitchin. The approach is past an open-air swimming pool and the grassy acres of Butts Close. Cross Fishponds Road and you have the option of bearing left to the turnstiles or right into the car park. The latter choice brings you to the social club, the only uninspiring aspect of a wonderful ground. The least said about the shabby social club, the better. Certainly not somewhere you'd meet anyone for a first date. Beyond here is a grassy area which acts as an overspill car park. The east side of the ground is adjacent. Two points to note: firstly, the floodlight pylons (of that traditional, flimsy, tapering, 'non-league' design) are positioned outside the ground perimeter and, secondly, the metal sheeting which forms the backs of the stands has a very modern appearance. Wait until you get inside.

Retracing one's steps, access through the inset turnstiles brings spectators out behind the Fishponds Road end. Up a path and, to the right, is a breeze block shed painted a lurid green and yellow and, beyond that, a portable building in grey used as the club shop. To the left is a first glimpse of that ancient terracing. Five steps of beams are bolted directly to an exposed frame - all of wood. There is no floor as such and, on a damp, autumnal evening, the surface is rather slippery. What they must be like when it's pouring down, I can't imagine. And not a crush barrier in sight. A flat-roofed, boxlike cover of wood and metal covers the section immediately behind the goal. The archaic terracing, again five steps deep, fills the entire east side. Two areas of cover are similar in appearance to those behind the goal. Twin dugouts, of wood and painted bright green, sit on the halfway line, with

a generous amount of spare turf producing some of the biggest technical areas in the game. Graham Taylor would love it here! The terracing has survived, presumably with the blessing of the graders and the local council, because of a long-standing clause in the club's lease which does not permit - technically, at least - the erection of permanent structures.

Normality returns at the Ickleford - or north - end, which bears some resemblance to the old away section at Oxford United's now-raised Manor Ground. Conventional terracing extends the width of the pitch, with green metal crush barriers behind the goal and yellow ones to the left and right. Behind are mature trees, which continue round the Bedford Road side and Fishponds Road end to form a beautiful, sylvan backdrop. Near the corner on the west side are two dilapidated wooden huts. Both are painted green and the one with the moss-encrusted roof is the hospitality room for directors and sponsors. Next to that is the 60-yard main stand, a charming 'hotch-potch' and, in appearance, not unlike that at Welling United's Park View Road. A low cover fashioned from metal sheeting is painted green and has a bright sign bearing the club's name in the middle. The roof overhangs at the front like the peak of a cap. The tunnel, partially caged off, is in the centre. There are numerous styles and colours of seat, with wooden benches (painted, you've guessed it, green) the least comfortable. A motley assortment of buildings to the rear accommodates the dressing rooms and toilets. Behind these is a narrow, dimly lit path weaving through the trees and the four floodlight pylons on this side. Outside the ground, across Bedford Road, is the Firs Hotel. This used to be a pub called The Cricketers and was where the players changed in the early years. The pitch, which is excellent and rises from each end to a crown on halfway, is surrounded on all but the east side by white-painted railings. The other barrier is solid wood, painted, for a change, white with a green top. All in all, a cracking little ground, hemmed in by sought-after semis on three sides, and now high up on my list of all-time favourites.

In football, as in life, you rarely get everything you want and the game turns out to be rather disappointing. Hitchin, of the Southern League Premier Division, had struggled to draw 1-1 at Ridgeons Eastern Counties League Haverhill the previous Saturday, coming from behind to earn this replay. Rovers will, incidentally, leave their unusual Hamlet Croft ground next year, so time is running out to go there. On the night, however, the home team steamrollered their visitors after a tight, if rather flat, opening 45 minutes.

There was an early blow for the neutral when, in the second minute, Rovers keeper Arron Benstead failed to hold a low Lance Gentle-King drive and Tyrone Sealey forced the loose ball in from almost on the goal-line. Both sides had chances leading up to the break, though neither keeper was forced into meaningful action until stoppage time, when Benstead dealt with a Carl Williams effort which really should have been struck with more potency. A different story after the break, with the Canaries really taking flight. Wayne Mills used his pace to get round the back of the Rovers defence and his grasscutter cross was turned in by Mark Ducket (60), deploying his first touch after coming on as a substitute. The

menacing Mills set up the third in the 70th minute, Williams lashing his square ball into the near top corner of the net. Ducket (75) showed great confidence in making it 4-0, taking an incisive Shane Hill pass in his stride to rocket a great strike past Benstead. Just like Geoff Hurst's third in '66. Haverhill's misery was complete in the last minute when Marc Abbott tripped Hill on the left side of the box and Hill, ignoring the fans' pleas for Ducket to be given a shot at a hat-trick, picked himself up to ram home the penalty in emphatic fashion. Just time left for the handshakes.

Top Field is one of those grounds one wouldn't mind attending every week. But attracting decent crowds, given the number of senior teams in the neighbourhood, is a real struggle for Hitchin. On this occasion, for example, as well as competition from the televised bore that is the Champions League, Bedford Town, Stotfold and Potton United were all at home. Canaries officials will, doubtless, be hoping local rivals Stevenage Borough don't end what is shaping into a promising season by winning promotion to the Football League because, one suspects, that would give people round here just another excuse not to get up to Top Field. And that would be a crying shame as, in every sense, it is appropriately named.

06/20