

**TT No.88: Andrew Gallon** - Sat 13th October 2007; **Barrow Town** v Holwell Sports; Leicestershire Senior League Prem Division; Result: 3-1; Attendance: 84 (h/c); Admission (incl. 36pp programme): £3.50; FGIF Match Rating: 5\*.

Barrow Town numbers among several strong non-league clubs playing at attractive grounds in the Loughborough area, a renowned centre of sporting excellence. Their Riverside Park home, on the banks of a canalised section of the Soar, is a delightful enclosure in a charming location. In footballing terms, the club may be small but the village itself is big in the world of palaeontology. In 1851, a fossil of the now-extinct

plesiosaur reptile was unearthed in a nearby lime quarry and this discovery, known affectionately as the 'Barrow Kipper', is commemorated in the logos of both club and village. The local limestone is rich in plesiosaur and ichyosaur, fossils; it's just seems a shame they can't be viewed in the village. For some reason, the remains of an undersea world dating back 180 million years have been carted down the road to the New Walk Museum in Leicester, 10 miles to the south.

So, it means a stiff runout for one's imagination when strolling round the two-mile Fossil Trail, which is excellent pre-match entertainment. Beveridge Street, featuring a number of grand town houses and a fascinating mixture of cottages, and the parish church of Holy Trinity, fashioned from the distinctively purple Mountsorrel granite, are the highlights. There is also a pleasant section along the towpath of the famous Grand Union Canal, and a cracking spot for lunch at the Navigation Inn at the bottom of Mill Lane. The pub, which opened soon after the canal in 1794, is in a prime spot next to an overbridge on the cut.

The Soar, along with the four-track main railway line between Nottingham and Leicester, dominates Barrow and so it's appropriate that the ground, where the club have played since the late 1960s, has a setting by the water. If arriving down the A6 Quorn/Mountsorrel bypass from the Loughborough direction, turn sharp right at Quorn Hall Lodge just before the gracefully arching stone bridge over the Soar and then down Quorn Hall Drive. If it looks like the park of a country house, that's because it is. A rough track leads down an avenue of splendid horse chestnuts, resplendent in autumn regalia, and bears right over a cattle grid into the club car park. If you turned up in a barouche, wearing top hat and tails, you wouldn't look out of place in these regal surroundings. The ground is neat, tidy and lovingly tended. The unmade car park is squeezed into a triangular patch of land. To the right as you enter is a whitewashed garage and lean-to and, ahead, a tall wooden paybox painted maroon, sheltering under a magnificent oak. Beyond is a broad, low building of light-coloured brick. This houses the quite splendid social club - a model of its kind - and the dressing rooms. Round the other side is a patio, benches, a gazebo and, in a flat-roofed extension, a refreshment hatch.

Brechin City like to boast about their famous hedge at Glebe Park - but Barrow Town, running teams down to under-seven level, have several impressive privet specimens. They fringe the car park and pitch on both sides and the Loughborough end. The one on the far side is about 10 feet thick. Truly a patriarch among hedges! From the broad strip of grass between the clubhouse and the beautifully lush pitch, the ground is picture postcard perfect, particularly with the sun beginning to burn off low cloud. A fence (white posts, red rails) surrounds the pitch on all but the far side, where it is painted solely white. Goal nets with diagonal red and white stripes provide a pleasing echo. Flags are used for hardstanding. There is an area of grass behind both goals, with the one at the Leicester end laid out as a junior/training pitch. Dominating the ground to the left is a huge metal footbridge carrying a footpath over the adjacent A6, which is partially hidden by trees and a glowering metal mesh fence. The view of Riverside Park from the high point of the bridge is superb, and worth the short walk. Noisy traffic on the dual carriageway is the only minus point about the setting - it produces a constant background roar. Three bijou areas of cover are available on the far side. There is a breeze block stand, painted green with a corrugated sheeting roof - quaint and very much first generation. The club is working through a five-year development programme, part of which included the construction of two kit stands. The first offers four rows of red, plastic, tip-up seats and the second four wide steps of terracing, with a section in front for wheelchair users. There are also two modern dugouts, of Perspex on red metal frames. Behind the hedge are two more full-size pitches and a line of mature trees. From this side, the view is of the avenue trees in burnished gold, cattle grazing on the meadow-parkland and narrow boats moored on the peaceful canal bank. Wonderful.

Today's fixture was a rerun of the FA Vase tie between the sides on September 8. Barrow, 2-1 winners then in front of much bigger crowd, are challenging for the lead in the Leicestershire Senior League Premier Division and Holwell struggling to climb up from just below mid-table. Bizarrely, the visiting players opted for a Jonny Wilkinson-style kickabout with a rugby ball during their pitch walk. Victory in an end-to-end encounter went to the hosts - but only after one of the worst refereeing decisions I, and many of those others present, have ever seen. Barrow were a goal up when, in the 20th minute, their keeper Steve Wilson clearly handled outside the box and referee Ian Davies, ignoring an obvious advantage, blew before Graham Wells could stroke the ball into an empty net. After consulting an assistant who had only limited English (shades of 1966!), the whistler - to the astonishment of all - flourished only a yellow card. That incident turned the game and led to the referee having to run, as the cliché goes, a gauntlet of hate from the Holwell fans as he scurried to the sanctuary of the dressing rooms at half-time. All a bit unpleasant but, and I'll be honest here, pretty exciting.

Barrow dominated the early stages. Dave Hollis wasn't so much given room as board and lodging on the right wing and sent over cross after cross. A stunning passing movement over 60 yards was finished in the first minute by Hollis, who cracked a volley in at the far post. After the Wilson escape, the hosts angered the away supporters further by doubling their lead in the 29th minute when Ash

Warner, unmarked inside the six-yard box, guided a pinpoint Danny Geary cross past flatfooted keeper Richard Cragg, a former Barrow player. Holwell struck back seven minutes later thanks to a crashing 25-yard drive into the top corner from Ian Wells and team-mate Graham Wells failed to take two great chances to equalise immediately before the break, Jason Weafer clearing the second off the line in an almighty scramble. Just time to check out the joke England goals from Wembley in the social club before heading outside again to watch Holwell's Scott Mooney denied repeatedly by a string of top-class saves from Wilson before, against the run of play in the 58th minute, home skipper Matt Boyles slipped his markers to nod in another accurate ball from Geary. The visitors kept pressing, mainly through Mooney, and the striker's frustrating afternoon was complete four minutes from the end when Wilson pulled off a one-handed reaction stop to claw aside his close-range volley. Head in hands time for the luckless Mooney.

I gather not every club in this league, of which this was only my second experience, produces a programme. Barrow do - and it's a decent effort, let down only by a dismally bland cover. But the contents, which include

several quirky items, more than compensate. This, the charming facilities on offer at a well-run FA Charter Standard club and the unexpectedly interesting things to see in the village make a visit to this leafy part of the Soar Valley a rewarding one.

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