

**TT No.136: *Andy Gallon*** - Tue 27th January 2009; **Leigh Genesis** v FC United; UniBond Premier; Res: 0-2; Att: 1,302; Admission: £8; Programme: £2 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

An old cynic such as me is not easily impressed, but even I felt my jaw sag a little at first sight of the dazzling Leigh Sports Village. This is dreary, depressing, 'hotch-potch' Leigh - yes, Leigh - I was forced to remind myself. Some will tell you the complex, close to Pennington Flash on the south-western outskirts of the former textile and coal town, cost a mind-bending £81m. Others tack on, as if it's in any way important when dealing with figures of this magnitude, an extra £2m. No matter - at least if you're not a Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council taxpayer. The result, especially in such a resolutely unattractive place, is simply stunning. It really could live up to the marketing men's hyperbole, which claims what is on offer at the site "will transform Leigh into one of the finest hubs of activity in the North West". Yay, you.

Centrepiece of the multi-sports and leisure development (as the jargon-meisters have it) is a stadium shared by Leigh Centurions RLFC and Leigh Genesis AFC, formerly unhappy bedfellows at decaying and doomed Hilton Park, just down the Atherleigh Way bypass. Capacity, it seems, has yet to be determined, but it is likely to be about 10,000. I don't much care for new stadia, but this one has been very nicely done indeed, and will look even better when landscaping, come the spring, is in place. In design, materials and appearance, it mimics the other structures in the Village (dubbed 'The Gay Village' by envious Wiganers), making for a pleasing sense of uniformity. The 'house style', broadly speaking, is light brown brick lower parts, white or grey upper panels, and grey roofs and trimmings. It's a simple approach, which has worked remarkably well. The Main, West, Stand is the focal point. A curving canopy, propped by four columns, and a digital display noticeboard hover above the doors to reception. Stairs rising to the second floor are visible through yards of glass. To the left, as you look at the stand from one of the many (free) parking areas, is the Legends Bar. To the right is the players' entrance, club shop (no Genesis merchandise on sale, though), and ticket office. There is also office space here - much of it unoccupied. There are some delightful styling details which distinguish the stand from others of the genre. Note, especially, the two sets of three large porthole windows arranged in vertical drops. These break beautifully the monotony of endless right angles. Externally, the three other boxy stands are similar, though on a reduced, and less expansive, scale.

Take time to walk around the Village and check out the facilities. Immediately behind the South Stand, separated by a corridor just 10 yards wide, is an indoor sports centre, containing, among other things, a 25-metre swimming pool and an indoor hall. Beyond is a swanky building for Leigh Sixth Form College. If that doesn't encourage the youth of the locality to 'stay on' and get an education, nothing will. Over to the south-west, adjacent to Atherleigh Way, is Park Inn, said

to be a four-star hotel with 150 bedrooms. Stroll round the back of the South Stand and you reach an athletics stadium, home to Leigh Harriers. The large building almost back-to-back with the East Stand contains a clubhouse and an indoor sprinting area. There is a small number of seats on the business side of the structure, which looks out over a floodlit, eight-lane tartan track. The centre green is laid out for football, and judging by the muddy goalmouths, has seen a game or two lately. A disused railway embankment - trains don't go to post-Beeching Leigh - forms the site boundary at this point. Over to the north-east, beyond a mixture of old and new housing, can be glimpsed the squat tower of the parish church.

Walk on (with hope in your heart), and at the far side of the sprawling car parks behind the North Stand, in whose bowels workmen were still busy, is more evidence of Leigh's abiding passion - rugby league. There are several pitches with 'sticks', and the main one, a 3G affair, is fenced off and floodlit, and boasts swish changing rooms. It is home to Leigh East ARLFC, who play in the National Conference League, flagship of the British Amateur Rugby League Association. This tidy little set-up is surrounded by executive-style (as they are inevitably, and wearisomely, described) Barratt new-builds, which make up an estate dubbed Pennington Park. As is so often the case in the UK, the haves and the have-nots will live cheek by jowl.

And so, to the stadium interior. It bears a strong resemblance to the Halliwell Jones Stadium, built for Warrington Wolves RLFC as a replacement for Wilderspool. All four stand roofs are propped cantilevers, rising to a height of 17 metres, but providing little protection from the elements for those spectators right at the front. Each features translucent panels to avoid inhibiting the growth of the grass on the pitch, which is raised a metre or so above ground level. The East and South Stands offer a single tier of seats, whilst the North Stand has been laid out, Halliwell Jones fashion, as an old-fashioned terrace. Bravo. A second tier in the West Stand is made up of executive boxes and associated small blocks of seats to the front. A glazed control room is located at the southern extremity of the stand. The seats, plastic tip-ups, are red, save for white examples next to the yellow-painted gangways. Again, nothing succeeds like simplicity. The players' tunnel is central in the West Stand, with four rows of benches for the press looking down upon the entry of the gladiators. Note the floodlights, which I thought particularly elegant. Four clusters of bulbs on the East and West Stand roofs are each anchored in position by a slender, curving stalk, which leans out gracefully beyond the fascias. The corners of the ground are not filled in, leaving scope to increase capacity, presumably if Leigh Centurions win promotion to the engage Super League. A digital scoreboard functions in the south-east corner, and the metal frame has been provided for another directly opposite. Below stairs, the concourses are of partially decorated breeze block. There are fast food and drink outlets, which were shunned by most because of the exorbitant prices. Not the fault of Genesis, it appears, however. Neither was the 'jobsworth' approach adopted by a battalion of stewards. Both caterers and stewards are laid on by the council.

Leigh Genesis, nomadic this season, had waited a long time for this debut game at their new home back in their own community. Their former chairman, and the club's money man, had, it seems, budgeted for the club being in situ at the start of the season, and got so disgruntled with the endless delays and setbacks, he jumped ship - along with most of the players. I've found there's even less loyalty in non-league football than in the professional game, as Genesis discovered to their cost when the cashflow dried up. They now have a team cobbled together from other clubs' rejects - hence their headlong slide down the UniBond League Premier Division table. A 5-0 drubbing at Matlock Town in their previous game sent them crashing to rock bottom.

A quick skate through the club's chequered history seems appropriate at this juncture. The old Horwich RMI outfit moved, in 1994, from their dilapidated Grundy Hill home, and its switchback pitch, in the hope of climbing the pyramid in the more palatial (no, really) surroundings of Hilton Park, six miles distant. As franchise football goes, the fallout, compared to the Wimbledon/Milton Keynes episode, was minimal. But many neutrals will have watched with relish the struggles of Leigh, a gritty spell in the Conference notwithstanding, since their departure from Horwich. The old RMI fans never came through to watch them in Leigh, a rugby league-minded town whose residents were uninterested in low-quality football. A second rebranding (I despair) was decided upon to coincide with the move to Leigh Sports Village. The name was changed (again), and the kit colours altered (once more). This game with FC United was deemed the completion of that regeneration. Tatty, forlorn and now-pitiful Hilton Park, incidentally, remains extant, a quarter of a mile away, awaiting its final fixture with the wrecker's ball. If you go for a peek, be sure to look right after crossing the canal on Atherleigh Way, and you will see the ground of Leigh Miners Rangers ARLFC, another leading National Conference League club.

The story of a disappointing game, watched by a who's who of travellers, is quickly told, though the Genesis programme did much to amuse. Manager Lee Merricks was in 'cliche select' mode when penning his notes. Sample: "What we have to do now is roll our sleeves up and grind out results the ugly way." On the pitch, Genesis did their best to harry accomplished FC United out of their stride, and succeeded to some extent, but were lightweight in the final third and unable to muster more than a single decent effort on goal. See how I can use the cliche select button, too? The visitors, roared on by their army (by UniBond standards) of fans, created chance after chance after chance. They were able to take just two. In the 17th minute, lively striker Jerome Wright dispossessed lumbering central defender Ben McHugh on the left side of the penalty area before smashing an angled drive into the roof of Danny Morton's net. The Genesis keeper was even more powerless to deal with FC United's clincher. This came in the 87th minute, from substitute Jamie Baguley, who hammered a sublime 30-yarder into the top corner with his left boot. The visiting fans seemed to enjoy it, but then I get the impression all they really want to do is gather once a fortnight to sing their Songs From The Seventies medley, which reverberated around Old Trafford until satellite television's money encouraged the 'proper' United to price the working man out of

the ground. The FC United fans were noisy from start to finish, but it just didn't feel as though they were supporting the players in red shirts toiling below them. Their minds were on Stepney, Albiston, Macari and Pearson, icons of yesteryear.

You'll like Leigh Sports Village, I'm sure, though the stadium will feel rather soulless for a fixture against 'regular' UniBond opposition in front of a couple of hundred fans. There is talk, however, of a new backer, doubtless lured by the Village's glitz, getting involved with the club, and realising the ambitions set out when they left Horwich. Things may be brightening up for Genesis, assuming they can secure a long-term future at this venue, where they will always play second fiddle to rugby league, as is the forecast for Leigh as a whole. If something like this Sports Village, whose logo features an approximation of the Olympic flame, can happen in Leigh, it can happen anywhere.

06/20