

TT No. 151: *Richard Panter* - Tuesday 17th February 2009; **Southport** v Hinckley United; Conference North; Score: 0-0; Entry: £11; Attendance: 717; Programme: 48pp (B5), £2.50; Match rating: 2.5 stars.

Southport's Haig Avenue home is a ground I have had on my 'to do' list for many years, well yesterday I managed to tick it off. Rather ignorantly I believed that it was on the coast, somewhere in the Morecambe Bay area however, I had a drive on the grandly named esplanade and saw square mile after square mile of sand and mud flats, but nary a drop of the briny stuff was to be seen!

I parked up in Haig Avenue, then walked the two miles to the town centre, and had some thoroughly wonderful 'English Fish & Chips' (to quote the shop sign) then made my way back. I had been at the venue earlier having graciously been granted access by a club official in order to take some photographs of the empty ground.

Two sides of the venue consist of a series of open penned terraces with plenty of crush barriers tidily painted in the club's amber and black. One of these sides is segregated for away supporters, 10 had made their way north from Leicestershire in support of the Knitters. The bulk of the home support stood under the Jack Carr Stand. This is a well-elevated standing area to the rear of the other goal - it looks about twenty years old or so. The 1,660 capacity, main stand, looks to be of earlier vintage, late sixties at a guess. This impressive spacious structure houses changing rooms, offices and a social club deep in its innards.

The club shop is outside the ground on Haig Avenue itself, this is well stocked and the people in there are most friendly and welcoming, I would imagine they do a decent amount of business as many supporters were clad in Southport coats, hats and scarves. Haig Avenue is a decent old-fashioned venue, in a strictly non pejorative sense and I felt very much at home there.

I popped into the secretary's office about an hour before kick-off to see if I could obtain a team sheet. I was told to pop back a bit later and ask for Dave who would sort me out; as excuses went this was very polite if unoriginal! Anyway, I popped back to the office which was now closed and had an official outside, I mentioned that I was after Dave, said official stuck his hand into his inside pocket and produced a team sheet and introduced himself with a broad smile as Dave. Once inside the ground I enjoyed the banter between the pa announcer and the handful of United fans as he announced the teams. As I mentioned earlier the club officials of Southport were most friendly and welcoming.

In October last year I saw the corresponding fixture at Hinckley United, it ended one all, the high-flying visitors netting from the spot deep into time added on. A win this evening would put Southport up to second place, a win for the visitors would keep them on the heels of those in the play-off spots. A point each was not really that beneficial for either side, although the way Hinckley dug in, it clearly meant more to them that it did to the Sandgrounders.

At the end of the match I eavesdropped on a conversation between two chuntering home fans, one said 'they [Hinckley] came for a point and were dirty, like Redditch a few years back'. As a neutral I thought Hinckley battled well for the full ninety odd minutes. They certainly were determined in the challenge but they made plenty of forays into the opposition box in an effort to secure all three points. In central defender Craig McIlwain, they fielded my man of the match, he was a colossus in the centre of his back line, never missing a tackle either on foot or in the air and did not seem unduly hampered by a booking in the thirtieth minute. Not the best of matches it must be said and, sadly, this was my second scoreless match in succession!

I had a brief chat with programme editor Robert Urwin in the club shop. I had a quick glance at the programme and told him it looked a good effort. The editor apologised to me for the high advertising content, yes 26 out of 48 pages is rather high, but of the remainder no space is wasted. Four pages document three different historical topics, statistics, visitor's details, club news, match action, Editor and Chairman's are afforded plenty of lineage. The centre spread features 'A Day Trip to Kings Lynn' no less than eleven colour pictures document the distant journey to Norfolk through snow and rain, and the anxiety of the possibility of a postponement is elegantly captured in prose. Make no mistake this B5 full colour glossy magazine is expensive at £2.50, but on the other hand it is well worth it.

Haig Avenue will certainly see this writer again in the future.

06/20