

TT No.17: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 25th August 2008; **Market Drayton Town v Tipton Town**; Midland Alliance; Res: 2-1; Att: 103; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Is it time we knocked Bank Holidays on the head and just gave everyone extra annual leave entitlement? Most people, terrified of more imagined than real gridlocked roads, fed up with several years of uncertain summer weather and knowing almost everywhere worth going to will be shut, seem to have taken to spending them at home. Take, for instance, Market Drayton. I could barely detect a pulse in the near-deserted town centre on the morning of this match. One or two oddballs were poking about in the sort of budget stores which never close, even on Bank Holidays, presumably because they pay minimum wage to skeleton staffs comprising teenage forced labour. I joined this celebration of torpor by popping into 'Wilkinson' to buy some pan scourers and kitchen cloths. Good work! There was scarcely any more life at Betton Hill Wharf on the Shropshire Union Canal, a picturesque setting just to the east of the town. Activities here included felting garden shed roofs, trimming hedges and borders, and sanding and painting narrow boats. Oh, and bickering couples finding out just how demanding upon relationships two-week holidays in the confined space of a barge can be. Maybe it's me. Perhaps I'm hyperactive. I just expect a little less conversation and a bit more action. You can tell I don't get many Bank Holidays off.

Market Drayton, if you turn a blind eye to the planning blunders which have allowed a mish-mash juxtaposition of ancient and modern, is an attractive little place. Its three most impressive architectural elements feature in the football club's crest. These are the iconic 1824 butter-cross, the 14th century hilltop parish church of St Mary's and numerous box-framed timber buildings, most of which seem to be pubs. These timber treasures managed to escape the Great Fire of 1651, probably the most seismic event ever to shake this sleepy backwater, which claims to be 'The Home of Gingerbread' and is known to locals simply as 'Drayton'.

The football club moved to Greenfields (never was there a more appropriate name) on the northern edge of town 17 years ago. Most of the building work has been done during the last five, giving Market Drayton FC a very pleasant enclosure. They hope to go one better than last season this time around by clinching promotion to the Southern League and will shortly complete what is required to secure the necessary ground grading. This involves extending the sole stand, putting in a proper turnstile and adding some parking spaces immediately outside the ground entrance. Access is down an extremely narrow lane alongside a bridge which, until 1967, brought the railway to this isolated community. First impressions aren't particularly favourable because the lane passes a builder's yard and a vehicle repair shop. But further down it reaches the Greenfields complex - quite impressive for a place this size. To the left, opposite the football entrance, is the undeveloped rugby union ground, where followers of the round ball game are

permitted to park. Just as well, too, otherwise it would be a long walk from the car.

Through a gate, and the football ground is half-left. Ahead is a second pitch, used for pre-match warm-ups, with reserve team dressing rooms in shabby portable buildings on the left. A low-ceilinged social club, fashioned from prefabricated panels and offering al fresco boozing from picnic tables on a patio, is to the right. An unmade path bends round the large expanse of grass past three floodlit tennis courts, with state-of-the-art artificial surfaces, to a gate in the ground's perimeter fence. Past a wooden pay hut, and you're within its confines. You'll notice immediately how the well grassed pitch falls away towards the bottom, northern, end and also the unusual floodlight pylons. One in each corner, these, though low, are substantial square towers with the lamps mounted above a fenced walkway at the top. All the facilities lie along the west touchline. The sole stand, a boxy propped cantilever, is positioned off centre. This is a solid structure made of blue painted metal sheets and contains six rows of simply wonderful wooden tip-up seats on wrought-iron frames. They don't make them like this anymore - possibly for good reason, as your backside will testify come full time. To the rear, portable buildings, again painted blue, house dressing rooms for both teams and the match officials, along with toilets. Unusually, the home players gain access to the pitch, via a railed off flagged path, on the near side of the stand and the away players on the far. The arrangement is reminiscent of the twin tunnels at bulldozed Belle Vue, Doncaster. Towards the tennis courts end, yet another portable building, this one more modern, painted light brown and boasting French windows, houses the hospitality area for the great and the good. There is a refreshment hatch to the side and a cover, of Perspex on a wooden frame, extends from the front. The pitch, around which runs tarmac hardstanding and a strip of spare turf, is surrounded by a post and rail barrier painted white. The interesting (only a groundhopper could think that!) wooden dugouts, located within the perimeter fence and set back from the spectator area, straddle the halfway line on the east side. A third pitch lurks over the battered wooden fence at the north end, beyond which the A53 Newcastle-under-Lyme to Shrewsbury road comes complete with background roar.

Perhaps that Bank Holiday feeling got to the players, too, because this game took a long time to get going and was littered with squandered chances, as if maintaining concentration was a problem. I felt sorry for the chap who packed up his video camera and tripod shortly before the goals - all of which came in the last 19 minutes - began flying in. With luck like this, it could turn out to be Drayton's year in the Midland Alliance. Tipton Town gave as good as they got for much of the match, and possibly better in the second half, but were sunk by a freakish winner in the third minute of stoppage time. Victory kept the hosts on top of the table and extended to six games their unbeaten start to the season in all competitions.

Another entertaining encounter with TBNTM (The Bloke Next to Me) to report, too. Fresh from my (or rather my neighbour's) harrowing prostate cancer diagnosis diatribe at Glapwell, I found myself sitting next to a couple of referees - one

expert, one amateur. Every decision was dissected in commentator and summariser fashion. For example: "Oh, he got that one wrong."; "That booking was harsh. He's set his stall out now - let's hope he's going to be consistent"; "The players aren't protesting about that decision because they don't know what the free-kick was given for." Ad nauseam. It underlined what has always been my strong suspicion - that it takes a certain kind of 'I' dotter and 'T' crosser to want to take up the whistle in the first place.

The first half was memorable mostly for the number of yellow cards - four - the zealot in the black dished out for dissent. Tipton, led by a skipper with sleeves rolled up to the armpits to reveal his collection of tattoos, hassled and harried but left the meaningful goalmouth action to Drayton. Keeper Wes Cox was at full stretch to tip over a dipping Jason Francis volley, Tom Rogers looked odds-on to score before a defender's back got in the way of his close-range shot and both Paul McMullen and Paul Bowyer failed to find the target with headers when well positioned. The visitors finally made an impact on the attacking Richter Scale in the 59th minute when Nathan Jones, in plenty of space after a poor clearance, shot straight at Andrew Pryce from 20 yards. Within 60 seconds, Cox was called upon to make the save of the match. The Tipton keeper twisted in mid-air to claw away a Stuart Ellis shot which had been diverted on to a new course by Rogers's boot.

Despairing of seeing a break in the deadlock, the video man stopped filming, inevitably heralding a goal rush. Nicky Pugh's corner was headed goal-wards by Dan Parker and when a defender made a block Luke Bradley (71) volleyed low and true into the net from 10 yards. The visiting contingent in the stand barely had time to celebrate before Drayton equalised. "It's when you're at your most vulnerable," opined TBNTM. A loose ball fell to Ellis (73) on the left angle of the box and he cracked a daisy-cutter across Cox and into the far bottom corner. Now both teams, suddenly alive and kicking, wanted to win it. Eric Bowen (82) guided a header inches too high after clever work from Tipton team-mate Jones before home substitute Wayne Edwards got ahead of his marker and on to the end of an apparently harmless cross-field pass, and thumped a volley wide of Cox's right hand from near the touchline. It was a stunning denouement. As soon as the visitors restarted the game, the referee blew for time. The shellshocked Tipton fans then had the unenviable task of relaying the awful news, via mobile phone, to friends and relatives back in the Black Country. Drayton's players displayed their relief with a light-hearted warm-down punctuated by jesting and laughter. Nothing better than playing poorly and winning, is there? As far as Bank Holiday excitement was concerned, certainly a case of better late than never.