

TT No.183: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 21st March 2009; **Bardon Hill** v Borrowash Victoria; East Midlands Counties; Res: 2-4; Att: 42; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

If you do nothing else when visiting East Midlands Counties League club Bardon Hill, check out the colour aerial photograph of the locality beside the bar in the cricket pavilion. Breath-taking, hardly does it justice. If you imagine the July 2008 image as a clock face, the football ground appears at seven o'clock. The section between eight and six o'clock is taken up by an awesome quarry, a gigantic scar hundreds of feet deep, which has eaten away most of the northern flank of Bardon Hill, and dwarfs its neighbour. This summit, at 912 feet, is the highest point in Leicestershire and the National Forest, and the view from the top is said to encompass more than any other in the UK. The panorama takes in the peaks of North Wales and Derbyshire, the Malvern and Shropshire Hills, and Lincoln Cathedral. The quarry, which opened in 1622 before going large scale in 1857, has become a vast operation. Owned by the Anglo-American company Aggregate Industries since 1997, it employs 500 and produces more than three million tonnes of material each year.

It is impossible to understate the size of the role the quarry has played in the life of the village, just outside Coalville, and the football and cricket clubs, which were originally called Bardon Hill Granite. The football ground, known as The Close, dates from as recently as 1990, though much of the infrastructure has been put in place during the past 18 months. So voracious was the appetite of the quarrying operation, the village (two sets of terraced cottages at right angles to each other), and the football and cricket grounds were razed, and newer versions provided a few hundred yards further south by the quarry owners. It explains why the church stands in such splendid isolation, some distance from the modern housing estate which now comprises Bardon Hill.

Much of the quarry is invisible from The Close, which is hard up against the lower slopes of the hill. What can be seen, beyond the north end goal, is the offices, and crushing and screening plants - just a fraction of the site. Together, the football and cricket grounds form Bardon Hill Sports Club. This is a smashing little set-up, which must be the envy of many clubs in the newly-formed East Midlands Counties League. It lies adjacent to the A511 road linking Coalville with junction 22 of the M1 motorway. Bardon Close leads past red-brick semis, part of the new village, into a tidy car park, metalled and with bays marked out neatly. The football ground is ahead, and the cricket ground half-right, behind a red-brick block. This is the cricket pavilion, which doubles as the football club's social club and bar. A warm welcome is assured from stalwarts who clearly love their team. The walls inside, as well as featuring the aerial photograph of the quarry, are covered with team pictures from both sports. There is a wonderful Bardon Hill Granite FC line-up, all hooped shirts and handlebar moustaches, from the 1909-10 season. One of

the old-timers proudly pointed to himself -seated, arms crossed, in the middle of the front row - in the picture of the 1964-65 side. He was 27 then, and full of vitality. Now his smile is the liveliest thing about him. Isn't the process of growing older depressing?

From the car park, you will notice immediately The Close's distinctive feature - its floodlights. The system features three sturdy, square towers on each side of the ground. Using a disproportional sledgehammer to crack a nut, just two large lamps are mounted on each. The towers began life at Bristol City's Ashton Gate, and came to this football backwater via the now demolished Middlefield Lane ground of Hinckley United. As one Bardon Hill regular, the former player of the 1960s, observed drily: "They've seen thousands - but not here."

A gate in the wooden slatted perimeter fence, erected to meet the grading requirements of the East Midlands Counties League, leads to a pay hut, where programmes and lapel badges are on sale, and brings the spectator out in the south-west corner of what is an orderly enclosure. On an afternoon of early spring winter sun, The Close, spick and span, can seldom have looked better. The sole stand runs between the halfway line and the edge of the penalty area closest to the entrance on the west side. Two rows of blue plastic tip-up seats are mounted on neatly flagged steps. These flags, along with the others which form terracing either side of the stand, and run round the pitch as hardstanding, were provided by Aggregate Industries. The stand is a mini cantilever, in light green cladding to match the paint on the floodlight towers, with its superstructure planted outside the ground's boundary. The rear brick wall on this side is whitewashed, and backs on to the cricket ground, which is adjacent to the Coalville road. In the near right corner of The Close, the tall, whitewashed brick structure, its door picked out with green paint, is the cricket club's scoreboard. A chap was mowing the square in readiness for the coming Leicestershire County League season, and some amiable lads were using the nets to good effect. Bardon is a cheery place, wherever you look.

The area beyond the left side of the near goal as you enter the ground is taken up by portable buildings. These, very trim, are painted cream with green detailing, and house the hospitality area for club officials and the dressing rooms. The players access the pitch through a gap in the barrier surrounding the pitch, which slopes downhill towards the stand. The fence has its posts painted white and the rails in blue, with white boards, many emblazoned with Aggregate Industries adverts, providing a tidy infill. Sturdy dug-outs, of whitewashed breeze block and green roofs, are positioned on the halfway line opposite the stand. A grassy bank, in which the floodlight towers have been anchored, leads up to a most unusual feature. This is a metalled road, complete with 20mph speed limit signs, which runs the length of this side and provides access to a car park used by Aggregate Industries, whose offices and plant dominate the land beyond a second pitch at the rear of the north end goal. Netting suspended from poles at this end keeps wayward shots within bounds. Through trees on the east side, the land can be glimpsed rising quickly, but the sheer chasm of the quarry is out of sight. A shame,

for, as holes in the ground go, it must be truly spectacular. Bardon Hill hope to lay hardstanding round the back of the dug-outs, and put toilets inside the ground, but otherwise little needs to be done in the immediate future.

That adjective 'spectacular' could be used to describe this almost-bottom-versus-top contest, which might have yielded twice as many goals. Bardon Hill, much improved over the last month under new manager Kev Ward, led 2-0 after 58 minutes, and looked set to add to a record of two wins in their last three games. But Borrowash, in the thick of a title race also involving Kirby Muxloe and Dunkirk, scored three times in four astonishing minutes, before wrapping up victory with a fourth goal in the 85th minute. Some turnaround.

The Hill began well and had forced Vics' skipper Steven Banks to clear off his goal-line by the time Paul O'Callaghan gave them a third-minute lead, tapping in on the volley after keeper Wayne Smith had fumbled a Sam Saunt cross. Borrowash, as you'd expect from the leaders, played a studied passing game, while the hosts relied on a less measured approach. It made for a fascinating clash of styles. End-to-end action meant chances for both sides, and excitement for the fairly sparse crowd. Steve Moulton squandered Bardon's best hope when he blazed over from 12 yards with the goal at his mercy, while Vics' Robert Spencer somehow scooped the ball over from almost under the crossbar as he stretched to convert a flick-on at a corner.

Hill keeper Arron Harris made a one-handed save to push a John Guy header over the crossbar and a similarly acrobatic effort from opposite number Wayne Smith denied Matt Garner. But within a minute Garner put the home team 2-0 up. A corner from the left dropped to him 16 yards from goal, and he shimmied past his marker before driving low and true through the legs of Smith. Borrowash opted immediately to change their formation, and pushed big man Andy Mottershead up front in the hope of creating some mayhem. It was an inspired decision for he turned out to be the matchwinner.

Mottershead had the ball in the net in the 67th minute, but his muscular challenge on the keeper earned the displeasure of the referee. It was a mere appetiser. Four minutes later, Rory Maxwell, complete with red stripe down his hair, crossed for Mottershead to nod firmly into the top corner, despite a valiant attempt by Harris to prevent the ball going in. In the 73rd minute, Mottershead was pushed in the back by a defender in the penalty area. At least, that was the referee's interpretation. Contact looked minimal, and Mottershead, a big fella, crashed to the ground theatrically. Guy kept cool amid heated Bardon protests. He wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, and outwitted Harris from the spot. Wild celebrations among the visiting players and fans were sparked when they scored again two minutes later. Sean Gummer crossed from the right touchline, and Phil Summerfield nipped in at the near post to loop the ball over Harris and into the far top corner. Incredible. The influential Mottershead wrapped up an unlikely win when Harris sliced a bouncing backpass from Karl Shields, leaving the Vics enforcer to volley into an empty net. It was all too much for Hill substitute David Wozencroft, who had been booked for dissent shortly after Borrowash's third goal,

and was then shown a straight red for a crude tackle. It was unfortunate that an element of niggles - inspired by the dodgy penalty decision - crept in during the closing stages because this nerve-tingler, was a tremendous advert for the fledgling East Midlands Counties league.

It's to be hoped Bardon Hill, whose latin motto translates as 'Always Striving', can put together a team next season to match the quality of their impressive facilities. Perhaps Ward is the right man for the job. Having so many other senior clubs in the vicinity cannot help, however. Coalville Town, Ibstock United and Ellistown were all at home on this day, leaving the non-league football fan spoiled for choice, and managers struggling to lure the best players to their respective clubs. Borrowash, meanwhile, will be braced for an exciting run-in to the season, and are sure to have an eye on their April 18th visit to Kirby Muxloe and the May 2nd game at Dunkirk as potential championship deciders.

06/20