

TT No.188: Andy Gallon - Tue 24th March 2009; Rainworth MW v Pickering Town; NCEL Cup Round Three; Res: 0-3; Att: 68; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Genial Rainworth press officer Gordon Foster had warned I "wouldn't recognise" the Welfare Ground after the revamp needed to get the club into the Northern Counties East League last season. I hadn't visited the Wrens since their Central Midlands League Premier Division days, and was stunned by the extent of the transformation. The ground, once a very basic set-up with sparse facilities, is now an aesthetic delight, boasting everything a club at this level of the pyramid - and possibly higher - would need. The number of signs dotted about the place informing you that this is, indeed, Kirklington Road, where Rainworth Miners' Welfare play their football, suggests club officials are bursting with pride over their impressive 'new' home. Busy programme editor and matchday announcer Gordon, his ready smile a touch wider two months after retiring from his job on the sports desk of the local newspaper, certainly seemed to relish a grander stage as he flourished team sheets.

Rainworth, a few miles east of Mansfield, is a village of two halves - nice (daffodil displays and four-wheel drives) and not-so-nice (boozers and bookies). No prizes for guessing in which part the football ground is located. Though the immediate surroundings, largely comprising a utilitarian red-brick housing estate, are undeniably drab, the 2,000-capacity Welfare Ground's dash of brightness warms the heart. With many of its surfaces painted white, it fairly dazzles in a dreary, post-industrial landscape. Close to the ground is an old winding wheel set in stone, serving as a poignant memorial to those who died in the village's Rufford Colliery, which opened in 1911 and closed 73 years later.

The main entrance, opposite the miners' welfare, is marked by an ornate set of wrought iron gates, dedicated to former club chairman, secretary and groundsman Alan Wright. Gold lettering spells out the words 'A Lifetime's Dedication 1933-2002'. Wright was also the chairman of the Notts Alliance, from which the Wrens emerged (some would say not before time) shortly after his death at the age of 69. Judging by the razor wire topping the ground's high perimeter fence, and several graffiti daubing's, there is an undesirable element here to keep at bay. A tarmac path leads down to the turnstile on the right. To the left is a shabby pavilion, which used to be the club's main accommodation, and was once shared with cricketers, who played on what is now the second football pitch. This, fenced off and floodlit, is ahead. Having passed through the new perimeter fence and wrestled with an uncommonly unyielding turnstile ("just give it a push, lad"), the spectator emerges in the south-west corner of a tidy little ground.

The new clubhouse, funded by Football Foundation cash and finished in sparkling white paint, dominates the south end and should be your first port of call. Glazed doors on the west side of the building lead into a warm, cheery social club, where

refreshments are available. Memorabilia on the walls include a Wrens shirt and the match programme from the club's appearance in the 1982 FA Vase final at Wembley, where they lost to Forest Green Rovers. The dressing rooms take up the east side of the low structure, with the players emerging from glazed doors positioned centrally, and accessing the pitch via a gate in the solid metal fence which surrounds the playing area. If this barrier looks familiar, it may be because you last saw it at the former Manor Park ground of Nuneaton Borough. An overhang at the front of the clubhouse provides cover for fans using a broad area of hardstanding. A grassy bank at the rear climbs up to Kirklington Road.

To the left as you come into the ground are three portable buildings strung out down the west touchline. These are white with blue trimmings and contain hospitality areas for home and away officials, a huge (compared to Brian Clough's Hartlepool United broom cupboard) manager's office, and a media room. The main stand, about 30 yards long, clad in khaki metal sheeting and straddling the halfway line, is a kit-built affair with four rows of blue and white plastic tip-up seats. A sign bearing the club's name is mounted on the roof.

The simple cover on the east side, another kit construction, shelters two rows of black plastic tip-up seats. Twin dugouts, at either end, are set back into the stand. Immediately behind them is a single step of terracing, which makes for a cosy arrangement. A large area of grass, ripe for further expansion, lies to the rear. Another sign carrying the club's name is fixed to the roof. There's certainly no doubting where you are. The north end comprises open hardstanding, though there is a tiny shelter, used on this bitter evening by one of the oldest ball boys I've ever seen. A large expanse of netting suspended from posts keeps balls out of an adjacent patch of scrub, which backs on to the noisy A617 Rainworth bypass, the main road to Mansfield. Beyond the dual carriageway, the land - reclaimed colliery waste heaps - rises to tree-topped heights. The floodlights masts, three on each side of the ground, appear incredibly tall.

What a shame this League Cup tie, played out in an icy gale and intermittent showers, did not do justice to the magnificence of the setting. Neither club fielded anything like a full-strength team, though Premier Division Pickering clearly had plenty more in reserve than First Division Rainworth. A humdrum encounter was enlivened by the pace and direct running of Pikes right winger Darren Clough, who signed recently from Teesside League Scarborough Town. This talented youngster made two goals, and went close to scoring one of his own. His substitution in the 55th minute provoked groans of disappointment from a crowd smaller than this season's average.

Pickering were on top from the kick-off, and won at a canter to set up a quarter-final trip to Premier Division rivals Winterton Rangers. Rainworth, beaten just four times in the league this season, and with high hopes of finishing runners-up to newly-crowned champions Scarborough Athletic, were poor. They struggled to put more than a couple of passes together, could not maintain concentration at the back, and hardly troubled skipper Kevin Martin in the visitors' goal.

Opposite number Neil West, making his debut, reacted well to deny Liam Salt and Jonathan Brown, but he was left exposed in the 26th minute. A Craig Charlesworth back-pass never looked like reaching its destination, and an alert Salt nipped in to round the keeper and tap into an empty net. Clough created the second, in the 34th minute, with a fabulous 30-yard dash from inside his own half. He beat several challengers before finally laying the ball off to Chris Batchelor, who drove hard and low across a diving West into the bottom corner from 20 yards. A brilliant effort. Clough then cut in from the right flank for a one-on-one with West, only to shoot powerfully into the side-netting.

Rainworth desperately needed to find a way back early in the second half. They did so in the 46th minute, but Jermain Hollis somehow poked a close-range shot the wrong side of a post after full debutant Jake Williams's drive had been fumbled by Martin. Pickering killed the game six minutes later. Chaz Wrigley found Clough in space on the right, and a slip by defender Ian Streather allowed the Pikes flyer to cross to the back post, where an unmarked Salt converted smoothly. Salt was denied a hat-trick in the 54th minute when flagged offside as he bundled the ball over the line after an angled Clough drive had proved too hot for West to handle. The game then deteriorated badly, prompting the local woman next to me to end every despairing comment with the words "for goodness sake". She and a younger female friend certainly knew their stuff. Perhaps exotically named Wrens manager Rudy Funk (and the Commotions?) ought to seek their advice.

Despite the relatively mundane entertainment, it's always uplifting to visit a club heading in the right direction. Rainworth, so recently in the Notts Alliance, are clearly moving forward at a rate of knots, and the excellence of their facilities makes them a cut above a number of rivals in a hotbed of non-league football. The Welfare Ground is a spacious site, leaving plenty of scope for further development. Having built on Alan Wright's legacy, everything seems to be in place. Promotion to the Premier Division this season for the Wrens would give Gordon Foster even more to smile about - and keep his computer keyboard humming.

06/20