

TT No.208: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 14th March 2009; **Ashby Ivanhoe** v Anstey Nomads; Leicestershire Senior Prem Division; Res: 2-1; Att: 87 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: None; FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Sir Walter Scott, whose first romantic novel, 'Ivanhoe', was set partly in and around Ashby de la Zouch, would have looked approvingly upon this heroic tale of Derring-Do. Anstey Nomads, with just one league defeat all season, and leaders of the Leicestershire Senior Premier Division, were slain by an Ashby side determined to claim the runners-up spot ahead of Blaby & Whetstone Athletic. The hosts, who hadn't lost for 14 matches, trailed 1-0 at the break, but stormed forward in an epic second half, equalised on the hour, and then capped a stirring fightback by grabbing the winner six minutes from time. It was a duel to equal Sir Walter's tournament meeting of Ivanhoe and the Black Knight.

Sadly, Ashby Ivanhoe, however ambitious they may be, cannot win promotion to the East Midlands Counties League this season. Their undeveloped Hood Park ground, rented from North West Leicestershire District Council, is simply not good enough. Its pleasant, tree-fringed setting in a public park of the same name means the club are unable to enclose the ground. This makes charging for admission impossible, and also ensures the permanent infrastructure is limited to a railed-off pitch, floodlights, a couple of dugouts, dressing rooms housed in an adjacent leisure centre, and a metal container, dispensing refreshments. The lights were switched on officially just last month, with David Wilson, whose Ashby-based charitable foundation donated £15,000 towards the cost, doing the ceremonial honours. Lacking cover, and with only a small area of hardstanding, Hood Park, though easy on the eye, is lagging behind its competitors. For better or worse, an ability to get the required ground grading is at least as important as putting together a winning team. Without both, you're stuck at a certain point in the pyramid, which appears to sum up Ashby's unfortunate position.

Everything worth seeing in Ashby, part of the sprawling National Forest, is within 10 minutes' walk of Hood Park. The remains of its 14th Century castle, which featured in 'Ivanhoe', are fairly impressive. English Heritage, who describe it as an "imposing Royalist stronghold", tend to specialise in preserving largely indeterminate piles of stones, but here there is something more tangible. There is a tower, offering views across the locality, and extensive grounds. The castle was originally a manor house owned by one Alan la Zouch, who gave his name to the town to distinguish it from the plethora of Ashbys in the Midlands. Next door is the parish church of St Helen, with its handsome sandstone tower, floral displays, and neighbouring Georgian town houses. Market Street, the lozenge-shaped main drag, is close by. This is decorated with several half-timbered buildings, and a number of intriguing passages, mews and courts. But don't count on a public loo being open after half-past five. This is small town England, remember.

For the football, you're likely to park next to Ivanhoe College, a dated example of 1960s architecture at the south end of Hood Park. It purports to be a specialist technology college, whatever that is. The windowless leisure centre, similarly drab, is to the left. At the far end, blue doors, an oasis in an arid expanse of red brick, lead to the dressing rooms, with the changing area for the match officials adjacent to squash courts. A flagged path across grass provides access, though a break in a post and rail perimeter fence, to the flat, if a little threadbare, pitch. The fence 'kinks' obligingly round each goal. In the south-east corner, a metal container, once stripped of its outer casing, can be transformed into a "catering suite and media centre". Somebody at the club has a wry sense of humour because, inside, two's company, but three is definitely a crowd.

Hardstanding, comprising more flags, has been laid from the near-end goal to the south-east corner and round to the halfway line on the east side, where the two tall, narrow dugouts are positioned. These are red brick with corrugated metal sheeting roofs. Plastic seats are brought out on matchdays for use by the substitutes and sundry occupants. The presence of graffiti on the dugout walls speaks only too clearly of the open, unprotected nature of the ground. From within an adjacent metal container, a humming generator, reeking of oil, powers the floodlights. A sunken stream, clogged with rubbish, separates the pitch from a boundary fence, behind which are the playing fields of the college, including a floodlit artificial surface. A broad area of grass extends behind the north end goal to a belt of trees and a building site. This appears to be part of the housing estate under construction to the north-west of Hood Park.

The west touchline provides the best vantage point. Over to the south-east, the twin towers of castle and church can be glimpsed through the trees. An area of grass narrows with the angle of a tarmac footpath, which heads down towards the leisure centre and its car park, patronised by tubby mums looking to doggy paddle off a few pounds. Behind more trees, and another beck, on this side are a floodlit artificially-surfaced court used for tennis and football, a skateboard park, and a children's playground. The floodlights are mounted on masts, with three on each side of the ground.

Having rung before setting off and been assured Ashby were issuing a programme, I was less than pleased to discover one hadn't been produced for this game - arguably, the club's biggest of the season at Hood Park. The printer, I was told, had been closed that day, though a programme had been produced for the Easter Saturday fixture with Cottesmore Amateurs (a 7-0 cruise). Even club officials couldn't understand why arrangements hadn't been made to print an Anstey version when the Cottesmore edition was put together. For Ashby, it meant a considerable loss of revenue because they charge £2.50 for a programme, which includes admission. Without anything to offer, they weren't in a position to ask for money from anyone. I like small clubs, and, generally, I'm sympathetic to their frequent pleas of poverty, but sometimes they seem incapable of helping themselves. Copies of the programme for the game against Highfields Rangers on March 21

were available (for free, I might add), and it proved to be a decent 28-pager with an eye-catching colour cover.

Despite that disappointment, it was an exciting game - as befits two of the best teams in a league shorn of its bigger clubs by the formation last summer of the East Midlands Counties League. As a comparator, in 2007-08, Ashby Ivanhoe were promoted in second place from Division One, while Anstey Nomads finished in the bottom half of the top flight. Nomads have been shelling out relatively big money for good players, and the visitors, such was their domination, really should have had the three points they needed to clinch the title in the bag by half-time. They took just 11 minutes to open the scoring. Lee Connolly flicked on a long ball, and Michael Reeve outpaced Mitch Poulton before planting a low shot from 12 yards across the advancing John Noon and into the far bottom corner. Reeve lifted a close-range effort over the bar with only the Ashby keeper to beat before home striker Rich Hanslow, the Premier Division's leading marksman, was denied by a brilliant save. Scott James's downward header produced a breath-taking reaction stop from Noon, and Connolly flashed a drive inches wide. The half concluded with Reeve blazing over from close in when a corner wasn't cleared. Nomads were to regret their wastefulness.

My money (at least, what I'd saved by not paying to get in) was on a Nomads victory. But Ashby had other ideas, and really took the game to the champions elect after the break. They drew level in the 62nd minute. Reeve lost the ball in midfield, and Mark Muir passed to Phil Gibson on the left side of the pitch, 20 yards from goal. Gibson stepped inside his marker and fired a thunderbolt low into the net. Three minutes later, Gibson almost repeated the feat, but hit the side-netting as Ashby sensed victory - and revenge for a 9-3 drubbing at Cropston Road early in the season. Jamie Brown sent a close-range free header too high before Noon flapped an overhead kick against the crossbar and punched the rebound away. With 16 minutes left, Hanslow thought he'd got the clincher. Muir fed Sam Bartram wide on the left, and his sweeping cross was glanced in off the inside of the near post by Hanslow, whose jubilant celebrations were cut short by a linesman flagging for offside. But Ashby did not have much longer to wait. Bartram sent a free-kick on the right touchline over to the back post, and an unmarked Muir (84) climbed to head home via a slight deflection. Joy unconfined among the Ashby players and their supporters in a very good crowd. Stu Dealey's Nomads, two points ahead of Ashby with two games in hand, must now wait until Saturday's home game with Ratby Sports to sew up the championship.

It's a pity, owing to their basic facilities, that a season of hard work from Ashby, who formed in 1948 and run three open-age teams, won't be rewarded with promotion. But that's the nature of non-league football these days. At least everyone knows the rules before they start. Somehow, Ivanhoe must find a way to work with their council landlords and put in the facilities they need. In a public park, it's hard to see how that could happen. Maybe a move to a new site is the only way forward.

