

TT No.225: *Andy Gallon* - Sun 10th May 2009; Wembley: Glossop North End v Whitley Bay; **FA Vase Final 2009**; Res: 0-2; Att: 12,212; Admission: £20; Programme: £4 (52pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Perhaps Wem-ber-ley's magic was always more imagined than real, but I'd say the rebuilt national stadium lacks a sprinkling of stardust. Disregard the graceful Olympic Way and the stunning circular section lattice arch, and it's just another modern football ground. Compared to the nearby Emirates Stadium, 90,000-seat Wembley is short on distinguishing features. The roof, unlike the cheaper Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, isn't capable of enclosing the pitch, and there remains the thorny issue of a hare-brained location in a cramped, grubby and inaccessible north-west London suburb. All that, I'd suggest, is a bit disappointing for a Football Association budget-busting bill of £798m - at 2007 prices.

But let's not be a complete curmudgeon about the place, eh? There is, after all, plenty to admire. As chance would have it, we had an unexpectedly exciting view of the stadium en route. We'd parked at Stanmore with a view to catching the tube to Wembley Park. Astonishingly, the Jubilee line was closed for engineering work - as it had been for the FA Trophy showpiece between Stevenage Borough and York City the previous day. The woman in the ticket office at Stanmore station, giving the impression she was explaining the decision for the 214th time, said London Transport didn't think a combined crowd of 40,000 made it worth changing their plans. So, we were condemned to lurching through the traffic on the top deck of a bus replacement - and caught sight of Wembley, loud and proud on its hilltop, from about a mile away. With the arch, which has a mind-boggling span of more than 1,000 feet, soaring above the roof, it looked sensational. Picking a way through gridlocked streets (what must it be like for big games?) took another 20 minutes, leaving only a leisurely stroll up Olympic Way to complete a journey of almost 210 miles from home.

This, as it was in the days of the Twin Towers, is the best external perspective of Wembley. Ignore, if you can, the packed neighbouring Asda superstore and the grim industrial units on either side, and concentrate, as if wearing blinkers, on the magnificent vista down this landscaped concrete channel, at the bottom of which the arch, crossing one's line of vision, rears startlingly high above the stadium. Pre-match, before the heartbreak of defeat chastened half the crowd, it was a universally happy scene. Everyone was smiling, posing for photographs, and seemed willing to pay whatever was being asked for the usual tat - scarves, flags and T-shirts, mostly - hawked by the colourful collection of chancers who flock to such occasions.

Close up, Wembley is less impressive. Its cladding - silver and navy panels - and acres of glazing is both cool and cold. An ugly mixture of concrete stairs, walkways and concourses produces a horribly impersonal 'airport' atmosphere. A bronze statue of the great Bobby Moore - looking a bit tubby, to my eyes - adds some

dignity to the area around the bland main entrance. The Wembley Store is secreted below the broad, raised, open concourse which rings the stadium. Remarkably, not all the stuff on sale is tacky, though the presence of Arsenal and Chelsea souvenirs is a bit of a puzzle. A wall-mounted montage of black and white photographs depicting historic scenes from the various sports to have used Wembley down the decades makes popping in there worthwhile. Worryingly, my girlfriend appeared drawn to an image of Southampton skipper Peter Rodrigues, complete with dodgy 70s 'tache, raising the FA Cup after the Saints' shock 1976 victory over Manchester United. One of my favourite finals, that. I can hear clearly commentator David Coleman, a hoarse echo from the past, screaming into his microphone: "Stokes. One-nil!"

Back on the upper deck, the uninspiring panorama of Wembley's setting can be seen beyond extensive car parks. Bijou blocks of seats (backless - they don't want you lingering) were barely adequate even for the needs of this small crowd. Loos set into the stadium's outside walls are a thoughtful touch, though, in the ladies at least, the hand dryers were inoperable. We were searched thoroughly before and after passing through the turnstiles, lest we had a plastic bottle of water in our daysack. It turned out (surprise, surprise on such a warm afternoon) we were attempting to smuggle in two, and so had to pour them into the plastic pint glasses laid on by Wembley's legions of support staff. One of their colleagues relieved us of £4 for a programme which was at least £1 overpriced. The internal concourses are smart enough, with none of the exposed breeze block and pipework which spoils projects put together on smaller budgets. In our section, the walls were decorated with iconic colour photographs from the 1996 'Football's Coming Home' European Championships. One proves, beyond all reasonable doubt, that Gareth Southgate's always been an odd-looking bloke. My girlfriend was thrilled to name three members of an England line-up, and enjoyed the story behind Darren Anderton's 'Sick Note' nickname. Everyone was feeling relaxed, but few felt carefree enough to shell out £7.30 for a pie and a pint, £6.10 for Mexican-style (what else?) nachos or a minimum of £3.80 for a beer advertised as "cold".

Some, though not all, of this was forgiven once our tickets had passed a final Checkpoint Charlie examination and we could take our seats. It's a breath-taking stadium. For the Vase final, only the bottom of the three tiers was in use - the north side and half of each end. Just our luck that this was the sole area of the stadium penetrated by an increasingly intense sun. We cooked slowly, as if on a spit, basted bums glued to seats, from sticky first minute to last. By comparison, the concourse, to which everyone dashed at half-time as disciples to a messiah, was chilled as a pot hole. Bliss. The interior design and layout is, very similar to Arsenal's Emirates Stadium, with navy bands, bearing the name Wembley Stadium in white letters, separating the serried ranks of red plastic tip-up seats. Wembley, a sporting tart's boudoir, is now very red indeed, though at least everyone is close to the pitch. And what a pitch! Following criticism from Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger, queen mothers amid the game's royalty, the FA opted to relay it for a fifth time. There weren't any signs of the previous day's FA Trophy game, the first contest on the new surface, and no indication the turf suffered trauma during

our match. Sitting in the lower tier, the stadium seemed vast, stretching up to neck-straining heights, though from our side the eye-catching arch was invisible, sadly.

The Vase final did not disappoint, with Whitley Bay scoring two classical goals in nine first-half minutes to add to their Villa Park success of 2002 after an end-to-end battle. Lee Kerr, who scored one of the Northern League club's goals, was the official man of the match, but the outstanding memory will be of Adam Johnston's remarkable near-miss from his own half. With the game goalless, the little midfielder spotted Glossop keeper Matt Cooper off his line and lofted a well-struck shot from inside the centre circle. Hooper, backpedalling as furiously as an MP with a dodgy expenses claim splashed across the Daily Telegraph's front page, managed to reach up and with both hands divert the ball against the crossbar before watching it bounce to safety. Wow. Johnston's manager, Ian Chandler, later joked he was glad the effort did not go in because the player would have been "unbearable" if it had.

Glossop's Nick Allen also struck the crossbar with a cracking 20-yarder before Whitley, who had slightly the larger contingent in the crowd, went ahead in the 36th minute. Paul Chow ran in from the right wing and found Kerr, who spun to his left and went on a curving outside burst past defenders Jamie Kay and Jay Gorton before slamming an angled drive past the advancing Cooper and into the far corner. The game-breaking passage of play came on the stroke of half-time. A Glossop shot was blocked when an equaliser looked certain, and Whitley broke away, with Johnston's lay-off allowing Chow to fire calmly past Cooper from the edge of the box when through for his 40th goal of the season.

For a time, it looked as though Glossop would fold. Cooper used his legs to block a low Johnston shot, Chow tested the underside of the crossbar with a glancing header, Chris Moore forced the Glossop keeper to dive to turn a dangerous effort round the near post, and Chow somehow nodded over from a couple of yards. Then came a valiant North End fightback which deserved more luck than it got. Languid winger Dave Hodges found the top of the net with a flick over Terry Burke and later shot weakly at the Whitley keeper. Rick and Tom Bailey saw efforts blocked before, in stoppage time, Gorton sent a 20-yarder whistling inches wide of a post. It was that sort of day for the Hillmen.

The ritual of the winners, led by skipper David Coulson, being presented with and showing off the cup (not a vase at all), and another walk down a sun-bathed Olympic Way, made for an enjoyable end to the day's entertainment before the battle with the capital's congested roads resumed. What a shame no-one at the FA was prepared to grasp the nettle and opt to build a new national stadium on, say, a brownfield site near centrally-located Birmingham. It even scans better in the famous 'Going to Wem-ber-ley' song!