

TT No.236: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 23rd May 2009; **St Mirren** v Hamilton Accies; Scottish Premier League; Res: 0-1; Att: 6,747 (360 away); Admission: £10; Programme: £2.50 (56pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

I'm clearly never destined to see Paisley at its best. My only other visit to the old cloth-producing town, in November 1989, for a game at St Mirren's old Love Street ground, took place amid a storm which did not let up for a split second. I went by train, and clearly remember dodging from one shop doorway to the next on a sprint from the station in a futile attempt to prevent a real soaking. A dire goalless draw with Hibernian followed. This trip, to see the club's 8,029-seat new stadium in Greenhill Road, was spoiled by similarly lousy weather. Dreech, the Scots call it. You don't expect it in May, even north of the border, but it proved entirely appropriate - a grey day for a grey ground.

You may be surprised to hear Love Street, barely a mile from the new stadium, hasn't yet been demolished. A retail giant (let's not give them a free advert, eh?) bought the site for a reported £15m to build a supermarket, but has since earmarked another plot of land in the town it appears to like rather better. Buddies fans believe their old home will end up as housing, though exactly when the bulldozers are moving in is difficult to say. Shrouded in murk and drizzle, Love Street, a padlocked picture of dereliction and decay, presents a sad sight. Is there anything more depressing than a sporting corpse?

Down potholed Murray Street, and the new stadium, located at Ferguslie Park in the north of Paisley and in an area, which is a peculiar mixture of residential and industrial properties, does little to raise spirits. It was built, on a tight budget of just £8m, by Ayrshire-based Barr Construction, the company responsible for the recent aesthetic disappointments (I'll be kind) perpetrated in the names of Airdrie United, Clyde and Dumbarton. St Mirren had no alternative but to relocate after more than a century at Love Street. The cash generated from its sale enabled them to clear crippling long-term debts which threatened to force the club into liquidation. But the Buddies are finding it tough adapting to their drab new surroundings - after this defeat, they still haven't won a league match at Greenhill Road since opening the doors on January 31st for a 1-1 draw against Kilmarnock.

The main (east) stand is adjacent to Greenhill Road, which approaches the ground from the M8 motorway by passing under the electrified Glasgow to Gourock railway line. Nearby Paisley St James station is ideally located for those travelling by public transport. At least the main stand can be distinguished from the other three, which are design's identical triplets. A central building/annexe houses the reception, with a section of the red bricks on the lower part of the structure bearing the names of faithful supporters. The club's name, in white letters, and a couple of logos lend some individuality to an off-the-shelf stand whose upper section is clad in charcoal sheeting. A small shop sells the usual range of souvenirs, and there is also a ticket office. It's as exciting as this stadium gets.

Parking is a real puzzle here. On all but the main stand side, there are acres of tarmac spaces, neatly marked out. And yet most lie empty while fans struggle to avoid antagonising residents when parking in and among the area's narrow streets. A couple of Buddies fans told us they had to pay £23 for a half-season ticket to use the club car park, which, they claimed, is not available to those without such a document. There is no pay-on-the-day policy - even for visiting supporters. I'm amazed Renfrewshire Council haven't got on to St Mirren, demanding a rethink, because there is clearly some tension between fans and residents. As we all know, parking vexes people almost as much as dog poo. And, frankly, I'd rather lose a testicle than pay to park.

The main stand differs slightly from the others inside, too. A symmetrical central section contains the players' tunnel and, either side, al fresco seats for the managers and substitutes. To the rear, an oblong directors' box is denoted by maroon seats. The rest in the ground alternate between black and white. All four single-tier stands are cantilevers, with roofs which barely cover the front rows. The cladding on the north, south and west stands is light grey, with opaque screen ends. Points of interest are hard to find. There is a TV gantry at the back of the west stand, a row of three flagpoles in the south-east corner, with four church spires and a tower beyond, and through the gap between the east and north stands, Paisley St James station and distant (cloud-wreathed) hills can be spotted. Three state-of-the-art 3G pitches, complete with lights, are located behind the north stand, and available for community use. I can't say much more. This stadium really is that dull. The floodlights comprise corner masts, and a rare excursion into mental arithmetic informed me there were 31 bulbs topping each. Hasn't halogen technology made it to Scotland? Still, every single bulb was needed. It was so dark that the lights were switched on for a 12.30pm kick-off. There are plenty of indications of cost-cutting below stairs. We were in the west stand, whose concourse was cramped and ill-lit. Untreated breeze block and exposed pipework scarcely encouraged us to linger before taking our seats. So, we didn't.

Thankfully, we were treated to a lively contest, refereed with conspicuous and admirable authority by Calum Murray - calmness personified. St Mirren would be relegated only if they lost by three clear goals, and Falkirk won at Inverness Caley Thistle. News of a Bairns goal in the Highlands, coupled with Hamilton taking the lead in Paisley, left the Buddies faithful feeling nervous. That tension was maintained to the final whistle of a typically helter-skelter encounter because the Accies always looked capable of scoring on the break, while the home team wouldn't have found the net if they'd played until Whit Monday. The frustration of the St Mirren fans (the chap next to us was almost incoherent with fury) became as plain as the sporran on your kilt. Having seen their team lose at Kilmarnock recently, it was obvious every match this season must have followed this pattern. Neat approach play, but no cutting edge. At the end, the Accies players, thrilled by a rare away victory, celebrated with their small band of supporters, throwing shirts into the crowd. It is the first time a Hamilton side have not been relegated 12 months after climbing into the Scottish Premier League from the First Division. In contrast, the embarrassed Buddies, who stayed up merely on goal difference,

mustered half-hearted applause in the direction of fans mostly happy to ignore them, put a season to forget to the backs of their minds, and start hoping for a different set of players to follow in 2009-10.

The ball pinged from end to end in the customary fashion of the Scottish game. After the third straight clearance from keeper to keeper, though, the crowd were losing what vestiges of patience they had left. Earlier, Garry Brady just cleared the Accies bar with a cross, while team-mates David Barron and Andy Dorman were off target from distance. Hamilton, the last team to lose an SPL game in Paisley, at Love Street in December, came more and more into the match, and stirred things up by taking a 28th-minute lead. Brian Easton swung a corner into the guts of the penalty area, and Simon Mensing made the net bulge with an unstoppable header. Shades of St Mirren's sloppy defending in the Killie match I'd watched. Brady had two chances to level before the break, but could not capitalise on either.

Hamilton, wearing a Brazil-style kit (oh, the irony), continued to look the more stylish side in the second half, and only a point-blank save from Mark Howard prevented Joel Thomas doubling the Lanarkshire men's advantage. But the Buddies were the stronger over the last 20 minutes. Under-employed keeper Sean Murdoch reacted brilliantly to tip over a back-post Billy Mehmet volley after Dorman's cross had found him unmarked, and substitute Stephen O'Donnell was fractionally over with a 14-yard drive. In truth, though, St Mirren, a team hamstrung by fear, were never going to score, and the match petered out as it became increasingly obvious Terry Butcher's Inverness were destined for the drop.

One aspect of the day for which St Mirren did deserve praise was the admission price. The club had halved the usual rate, and were rewarded with a crowd not too far short of capacity. Had the team played better, there would have been a cracking atmosphere because the fans were desperate for something to cheer. Love Street (and I went there when the remnants of the speedway track were still in place) was no oil painting, but at least it had character. Greenhill Road emphatically does not. A couple of older fans told us they were "still getting used to" their new home. I wonder if they ever will?

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