

**TT No.28: Andy Gallon** - Tue 2nd September 2008; **Boldmere St Michaels v Barwell**; Midland Alliance; Res: 1-2; Att: 68; Admission: £5 (incl. 28pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

Now and again you stumble across a ground so utterly charming it simply takes your breath away. Watching football regularly at the Trevor Brown Memorial Ground, where not a blade of grass nor any brick feels out of kilter, must be an enduring pleasure. And yet this is the sort of well-heeled suburban landscape - all manicured villas, floral borders and gleaming Jags - in which you'd expect to find a rather snooty rugby union club.

Let's be grateful, then, the vicar at St Michael's Church decided, 125 years ago this season, that football was the pastime through which he could best teach the lads in his care how to become good and useful citizens. Boldmere's home, appropriately, is on Church Road, which rises gently to St Michael's, whose steeple looks down on proceedings and has kept a paternal eye on the club since its formation in 1883.

Unremarkable metal gates, painted black, lead into a tarmac car park. To the right, and at right angles to the pitch, is a brick single storey block with a pitched roof. This very broad, squat building contains the tidy but plain social club - entrance round to the right - and the dressing rooms. It was the brainchild of late former chairman Trevor Brown, who did so much to make the ground what it is today. A brick wall, featuring pleasing diamond pattern details, runs down to a classical turnstile block complete with tiled pitched roof. The brickwork in this part of the ground is a wonderfully warm terracotta. The turnstiles, for whatever reason, were not in use for this match. You paid at a table sheltering under a gazebo just inside another set of gates to left.

Inside the ground, two things about the pitch are immediately obvious. One is the slope, downhill from east to west and really pronounced. It brings to mind the terrain at Halifax rugby league club's former Thrum Hall ground. Secondly, the surface is without blemish. This horticultural perfection is particularly noteworthy, and a credit to the groundsman, when you consider a youth team game had been played on the pitch the previous evening.

To the left, a widening triangle of tarmac provides additional parking and doubles as hardstanding along much of the western touchline. Beyond the Mikes' boundary on this side, there are the gardens and houses of Warden Avenue. A delightful bowls club, with a pavilion of the now familiar terracotta brick, fills in the north-west corner of the site. There is just enough space between the black and white painted post and rail pitch barrier and the bowls club's hedged perimeter to squeeze in a flagged path. Identical twin dugouts, again in terracotta brick and with corrugated metal sheeting roofs, are positioned either side of the halfway line. Each contains a row of red plastic tip-up seats.

The north end boasts a concrete path atop a grass bank, which is much deeper at the foot of the slope, emphasising the difference in height between the two touchlines. A concrete panel fence encloses the ground here but a curious 20-yard strip of land, covered with fine aggregate, lies between this barrier and St Michael's Road, where still more lovingly tended gardens and bungalows can be seen. What this part of the ground is used for isn't clear.

A simple though neat stand, about 50 yards long and five yards deep, is positioned off centre on the eastern touchline. Its metal frame, cladding and fascia are painted dark green, so it blends beautifully with the mature trees which dominate this side between the back of the stand and Browns Drive. There are up to four rows of mixed black, white and red plastic tip-up seats. A central section, separated off by white painted breeze blocks walls, is set aside for directors and their guests. There is also a bijou three-seat press bench. Six slender columns support the roof. There is hardstanding either side of the structure.

Clever use has been made of the social club roof, with an extension covering a tiled area to form a sort of cloister behind the top half of the Church Road End goal. A refreshment hatch can be found within its gloomy confines. The players' tunnel is shoehorned into a space by the toilets. The team line-ups can be found chalked on a blackboard propped against the tunnel wall. Uncovered tarmac completes the grand tour and takes you back to the turnstile block.

The club's name - and badge - is painted on the boards infilling the post and rail pitch barrier on the western touchline and on the stand fascia. The floodlights have two lamps on each of eight masts, with four per side. Greenery fringes the ground's perimeter at every angle, adding to its considerable aesthetic appeal.

In the excellent programme, new manager Rob Mallaband told how anxious he was to get back to winning ways after the recent 3-2 Bank Holiday home defeat by Causeway United - first setback of the league season - and promised Mikes fans a brand of attractive football. He was to be disappointed on both counts, I'm afraid. This contest was a real clash of styles. Boldmere relied on the no-frills ugliness of the long ball while Barwell positively dazzled with a bewitching demonstration of pass and move beauty products. Sow's ear versus silk purse. So, don't be fooled by the result. Boldmere scored a late consolation goal they barely deserved and were lucky not to concede five or six.

The wonder was it took the visitors so long to break the deadlock. Jouel Potter, described in the programme as "Barwell's very own Ade Akinbiyi", had gone closest with a 26th-minute header Matt Jackson smuggled off the goal-line - one of several good chances. But Potter got ahead of his marker in the 63rd minute to stab a Nicholas Green cross to the near post past Adam Lane. A superb double-save by Liam Castle denied Mikes strikers John Williams and Nathan Gough before Reece Lester, a culture vulture on the left wing, put the issue beyond doubt in the 70th minute by stroking a crisp, low shot from the left angle of the penalty area into the far bottom corner. Mikes centre-back Adam Wood then earned spontaneous applause for a stunningly acrobatic - and wholly unexpected - goal-line clearance

to keep out a Nigel Julien lob after a poor kick from Lane had fallen at the feet of the substitute 20 yards out. With three minutes left, Boldmere pulled one back when the red-booted Ricky Baker swept in a Kieron Robinson cross from 12 yards. Not that anyone was fooled.

Happily, Boldmere's connections with the Church remain strong 125 years on. Tamworth-based club chaplain, the Rev Hugh Baker, had two columns (one exquisitely entitled 'A Visit from The Vicar') in the programme and clearly had the Mikes' interests at heart. The club also want to broaden their appeal and reach out into the community by bringing youth teams from U14 level and upwards under their umbrella. This missionary zeal bodes well for a club whose ground is the perfect memorial to their former chairman. Football as religion? Will it ever catch on?

06/20