

**TT No.39: Andy Gallon** - Wed 10th September 2008; **Grimsby Borough** v Appleby Frodingham; NCEL Division One; Res: 0-3; Att: 42; Admission: £4 (including 24pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

Grimsby Borough remain afloat - thanks to the backing of a generous sponsor. The deal enabled the Wilderness Boys to survive losing their College Ground home on Hereford Avenue in the summer of 2007 and its continuation ensured they could step up to the Northern Counties (East) League this season having qualified for promotion from the Central Midlands League. Problem is the club, who emerged late in 2003 from the mangled wreckage of Louth United's collapse, have been ground-sharing with Brigg Town since effectively being booted out of Grimsby. The sponsorship by a local firm underwrites the £5,000-a-season rent charged for using The Hawthorns. But this venue, though of UniBond League standard and so among the best in the NCEL, is more than 20 miles from home. Hardly ideal and, when it comes to marketing a relatively young club, scarcely a long-term proposition. Ideally, Borough would like to move into the derelict old Woodlands Avenue ground of defunct Immingham Town, former NCEL members who went bust a decade or so ago. The floodlights there are still intact but the pitch has become a jungle and the site is used for illegal tipping. Without grant aid to sort out the mess, a return to Grimsby is unlikely in the near future.

The players have not been able to provide much cheer this season, either. Tonight's North Lincolnshire derby with Scunthorpe-based Appleby Frodingham, Borough's first home game as a NCEL club, marked their fifth defeat in six matches at the higher level. It was also the visitors' first win since moving up with Borough from the CML.

The Hawthorns, an interesting enclosure with several intriguing features, bears the hallmarks of piecemeal development. As with so many grounds, it is more attractive inside than the exterior would suggest. Its location in this not unappealing market town is a curiosity. To the south and west the ground is hemmed in by council houses and their back gardens while, in contrast, to the north and east a park and football pitches provide a surprising amount of breathing space.

The winding access lane passes those football pitches and, bending sharply left and then left again, reaches the metalled car park behind the social club and alongside some depressingly moss-covered tennis courts. No sign of the next Andy Murray - or even Jamie Delgado - being unearthed here. The social club, red brick spartan and with an ugly flat-roofed extension to one side, juts back into the car park. The sole turnstile block is in the south-west corner, next to a venerable wooden hut.

Three elements dominate this south side. To the right of the turnstiles is a modern whitewashed building, squat and with a pitched roof. It contains the dressing rooms and toilets - complete with snazzy chessboard tiling on the floor - and the

roof overhangs hardstanding to give some extra cover. Metal gates midway down allow the players to gain the pitch. The original main stand - 'tarted-up' considerably over the years - sits astride the halfway line like an old dear surveying her grandchildren at play. Because of a lack of space on this delightfully cramped side, it is narrow and offers just two rows of red plastic tip-up seats on steeply raked steps. Its roof has a deep angled 'peak' at the front, giving excellent shelter and a really cosy feel. Modern (though rather jarring) Perspex dugouts are located either side of the halfway line. Adjacent is a simple propped cover over a couple of shallow steps of terracing. This stand looks a lot older than it undoubtedly is.

Brigg Town's pride and joy fills most of the north side. This is a relatively new stand positioned between the two penalty areas. It is sturdy and boxy, and allows column-free viewing for spectators on three rows of red plastic tip-up seats. Small areas of terracing, each with five steps, have been provided thoughtfully on either side - and still under cover - for those with a phobia about sitting down to watch their football. Its cladding is dark green corrugated metal sheeting and the name of the stand sponsor is emblazoned across the deep fascia. A strip of grass behind gives the players some room for pre-match warm-ups to avoid wear and tear on the pitch. A park, and then a council estate, lies beyond.

There is uncovered hardstanding at each end. To the west, a couple of battered portable buildings contain the hospitality rooms for directors and their guests. Though painted a faded green, they seem homely enough inside. Netting suspended from telegraph poles - two of which lean like Saturday night drunks - protect the back gardens of the council houses on Hawthorn Avenue. These are hard up against a ramshackle wooden boundary fence. A hut selling refreshments (though no hot food tonight) is positioned in the north-west corner. The perimeter fence at the slimline eastern end is newer and more secure. Additional netting, on telegraph poles less inebriated than at the opposite end, attempts to keep stray shots within bounds. A metallised snicket behind separates the ground from the broad acres of tree-lined football pitches.

The floodlights are masts, with four per side and either two or three lamps on each. Three of those at the eastern end double as mobile phone towers. Most have prominent foot-pegs which prompt sensations of vertigo at the mere thought of scaling them. The flat, grassy pitch - yet another in perfect condition despite the awful summer - is surrounded by a breeze block wall topped with metal girders and boasting a pleasing cream paint job.

The public address announcer, whose extensive make-up requirements must absorb much of her disposable income, describes the matchday experience here as "Grimsby Borough at The Hawthorns courtesy of Brigg Town". Kick-off is preceded by a minute's silence to salute Harry Yarborough, a Grimsby-based stalwart of football in the region for more than 70 years who has died at the age of 82 following a short illness. What follows is a lesson in finishing. App-Frod take their chances; Borough do not. The game, though never more than humdrum, is far tighter than the score indicates.

Just one goal separates the teams after an opening 45 minutes high on pace but low on composure. James Hare taps home from close range in the 15th minute when a Ryan Hibbard curler comes back off the inside of an upright. Borough's clearest opening is fashioned a minute before the lemons. Ricky Green rolls an effort inches wide having been played in by Lewis Buckthorpe and then stealing in behind visiting skipper Danny Jackson.

A drab second half garners two more goals for the Scunthorpians. With 18 minutes left, Lee Everitt sends Hibbard scampering away and with the coolness of a shivering pensioner unable to pay his winter fuel bills dribbles round keeper Scott Drury and rolls the ball into an empty net. That's game. Set and match follows in the 82nd minute after the passing movement of the evening. Hare sweeps a ball from central midfield out to Hibbard on the right and the influential striker cuts in before drawing Drury and crossing unselfishly to give substitute Jonathan Nicholls a tap-in more straightforward than your average bouncer.

Most groundhoppers dislike these kind of sharing arrangements - and Borough are clearly trying to make the best of a bad job. Despite, as the programme states, Brigg Town being "hugely supportive", the club's future health, wealth and happiness can - surely - be served only by a speedy return to Grimsby. Otherwise the outlook, I fear, will be grim indeed.

06/20