

TT No.45: Andy Gallon - Wed 17th September 2008; **Harrowby United v Ollerton Town**; CML Supreme Division; Res: 2-4; Att: 72 (h/c); Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

It's good to see Harrowby United playing at a decent level in the pyramid again because their well-developed Dickens Road ground in Grantham will now be brought to wider attention. The Arrows, thanks to boasting floodlights, were fast-tracked into the Central Midlands League Supreme Division over the summer after a spell of obscurity in first local football and then the largely stagnant backwater of the Lincolnshire League. The club, formed in 1948 and successful members of the United Counties League before suffering the ignominy of resignation two years ago, strengthened their backroom team during the close season in a bid to get organised for the fresh challenge ahead.

This is another ground whose charm lies partly in its inaccessibility. Like a spider at the centre of a web, it lurks within the depths of a densely-packed council estate off Harrowby Lane on rising terrain to the east of the River Witham and Grantham town centre. The tortuous recommended approach involves negotiating a bizarre one-way system round a church. This produces the disconcerting feeling of getting close to a destination without quite having any confidence one will ever arrive. How frustrating the unattainable can be! Happily, the navigational struggle proves worthwhile because Dickens Road - or The Arrows, as United prefer to call it - offers facilities far superior to what is generally found in the Central Midlands League.

A gate in a metal slatted fence leads round the side of the main building to a picnic table serving as a turnstile and then on into the north-west corner. From here, the ground spreads out before you. The adjacent block, single storey, brick and with a pitched roof, fills in the area between the entrance gate and the near penalty box's 18-yard line. There is a kitchen and refreshment hatch at the far end and a door amidships leads to the dressing rooms (left), loos (straight on) and the rather uninviting social club (right). A canopy, of opaque Perspex over a wooden frame supported by seven surprisingly ornate iron columns, has been added to the facade and shelters a stretch of concrete and more picnic tables. The remainder of this west side is taken up by a broad belt of tussocky grass. Concrete hardstanding, the width of a path, runs round the ground, despite the considerable efforts of tangled vegetation to return it to nature. The pitch is enclosed by a post and rail barrier painted in the club's red and white colours. Breeze block dugouts, commodious and painted white, are positioned either side of the halfway line. The upstairs windows of the council properties to the rear have the best view of the action.

The far (south) end is narrow, with the hardstanding up against a boundary fence fashioned from grey metal sheeting. The modern brick building behind is an NHS surgery, beyond which is Harrowby Lane and then more council houses - on streets

named after poets - before the land rises to tilled fields and a tree-fringed horizon. The near (north) end is similar but its perimeter is lined with thick firs, all but concealing a mesh fence. These evergreens continue round to the east side and help give the ground a compact, cosy atmosphere. Behind the firs at this end is a small area of tarmac and grass used for parking by early arrivals, and the playing fields and classrooms of Grantham Church High School.

Saving the best until last, the sole stand, about 40 yards in length, straddles the halfway line on the east side. It appears to be a mixture of old and new. Seven rows of wooden benches, painted red and white, are provided in a segregated central section beneath a smart roof constructed over a substantial frame of girders. Standing - on flat areas of concrete and still under cover - is available to each side. The stand's cladding is grey metal sheeting - a gift to vandals whose witless-daubing's have made a right mess of the exterior rear wall. No sign of Banksy's artistry here! Unkempt grassy banks flank this pleasing structure. The floodlights which proved so useful to United's pyramidal ambitions are mounted on masts. There are three per side, with three lamps on the outer four and two on the middle pair. The innermost mast on the east side sprouts through a hole in the stand roof. Two football pitches lie to the rear and rather posher houses lead the eye to another rise topped by trees and a couple of communications towers. Harrowby have done their best to landscape what they have and, despite an unpromising setting, the ground makes an appealing enclosure.

After United's sorry demise as a United Counties League club, I feared the chance to come here and watch a half-decent game of football had passed me by. Thank goodness for the club's indefatigable spirit - and the Central Midlands League's rules, which ensure a programme has been produced for this fixture. Not, admittedly, a sparkingly good one but all issues, regardless of size, shape and content, are welcome. Grantham likes to play up its connection to Sir Isaac Newton, who grew up on a farm in nearby Woolsthorpe-by-Colsterworth and wrestled with concepts way beyond the intelligence of the average 17th Century agricultural labourer. He may be less than thrilled to discover a shopping mall in town now bears his name. The appliance of science was, however, sadly lacking in this scrappy, fractious clash of two teams without a win all season.

Ollerton, well led by hat-trick hero Lee Wilson, always had the edge over a Harrowby side who struggled to keep their discipline - so often the mark of a team propping up the table. Wilson, who played well this time last year when I saw him dismantle Phoenix Sports & Social, intercepted a terrible back-pass to give the visitors a 12th-minute lead but a clever turn and off-the-shoulder volley from Danny Maddison brought the Arrows level within eight minutes. Wilson restored Town's advantage in the 37th minute when he planted a low drive into the bottom corner from 18 yards.

As tempers frayed and the referee looked like losing control, Ollerton went 3-1 up with 67 minutes on the clock. A superb cross-field pass (stunning, in the context of this crash-and-bash affair) from Julian Topliss gave Ricky Chambers the space he needed on the right side of the box to deliver the coup de grace. Home keeper

Chris Bennett then made a complete Horlicks (so bad, it was double malt with extra milk) of dealing with a downfield punt and Wilson, in the 76th minute, was able to stride past him for a simple tap-in. Harrowby closed the gap with seven minutes left when substitute Rob Mills deftly lobbed Neil McClafferty but despite sustained late pressure they couldn't find another goal. A long, hard winter appears to lie ahead for United but they are no stranger to adversity and seem determined to make the most of this second-coming. Let's hope they survive and prosper.

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