

TT No.46: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 23rd September 2008; **Ellistown** v Holwell Sports; East Midlands Counties League; Res: 1-3; Att: 65; Admission: £4 (incl. 20pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Ellistown are one of four north-west Leicestershire football clubs so close together you could cover them with a miner's helmet. The quartet - the other three are Coalville Town, Bardon Hill Sports and Ibstock United - have close connections with the coal industry which once dominated this gently undulating pastoral landscape. They are in competition for sponsors, supporters, helpers and players, and with Ellistown merely a large village, it is remarkable so small a community can sustain a senior club. Both village and team began life under different guises. Before entrepreneur Colonel Joseph Joel Ellis arrived from London during the mid-19th Century and sank a shaft to extract 'black gold', Ellistown was known as Swinfen Rushes. The modern club, a 1993 merger of two pit teams, was until recently called United Collieries.

Though little more than groupings of red-brick terraces radiating from a crossroads between Bardon and Ibstock, and now shorn of its coal mines, Ellistown remains a proud community. Witness the attractive floral displays and the bitter war waged on two fronts by its residents against the construction in their midst of what they describe as a "toxic incinerator" and a "giant distribution warehouse". It is also growing. New-build homes have sprung up in a village which is a curious mixture of industrial, post-industrial and rural features. At the bottom of South Street, essentially two rows of collier's cottages, there is a winding wheel memorial to those who worked and died in the former South Leicestershire Colliery. Most of the site is now an industrial estate but rolling wheat fields garland the flinty, grimy edges. Mother Nature is never far away because Ellistown falls within the boundaries of the National Forest. To quote the jargon, this is "one of the country's boldest environmental projects". It involves the planting of millions of trees in an area of 200 square miles covering Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire. The aim is to link the ancient forests of Charnwood and Needwood. The Sence Valley Country Park, close to Ellistown, is part of the National Forest and its opening witnessed the transformation of what used to be an opencast mine into a wooded haven for wildlife.

The football club are also a source of civic pride. A summer of graft upgraded Ellistown's engaging ground sufficiently to meet the requirements of the new step six East Midlands Counties League and promotion from the Leicestershire Senior League was secured. Terrace Road is on the south-eastern edge of the village. Just when you think you must have missed the ground and are seeking somewhere to make a U-turn, a hard-to-spot entrance is revealed lurking in the foliage, just before reaching a concrete drains factory. Pass through substantial red-brick gate posts, describe an S bend and you're into a small gravel car park with the pitch at right angles ahead. To the left is another winding wheel memorial on a grassy bank

and the shrub-lined green of Battram Bowls Club, representing a hamlet half a mile to the south-west. I went in to watch for a while as the sun dropped in a glorious golden inferno, and the old-timers invited me to have a go. It's more difficult than it looks! The trick seems to be bending and releasing in slow motion. The rectangular block - red brick and single storey with a pitched roof - in front of the car park houses the social club and the dressing rooms. A path round the side to the left leads to the turnstile, a pleasing echo of the main building in design and materials. You come out opposite the 18-yard line on the east side of a ground which, though basic and open, is lovingly maintained and of considerable appeal.

The entrance to the cosy social club, which has a bar and a kitchen serving the usual goodies, is down to the right, between the doors to the dressing rooms. The building is at a slightly lower level and a flight of steps climbs up to the pitch from a patio. To the left, on the halfway line, is the main stand, 20 yards long and four yards deep. In common with almost everything at Terrace Road, it is neat and orderly. It has a flat roof supported by four columns - painted in the club's blue and yellow colours - over a red-brick base. There are three rows of seats, two of the plastic slatted tip-up variety and one of a softer padded species. Large, low dugouts are located either side of this stand and, again, are in the house style which does so much to unify the ground's composite elements. Further down this side, beyond the club's boundary fence and partially hidden by a thick hedge, there is another red-brick building which acts as the bowls club's pavilion and bar. A second stand straddles the halfway line opposite. This is smaller and an interesting back-to-back affair shared with the club's second pitch - used mostly by the youth team - beyond the west touchline. An extremely low roof covers hardstanding, which is a couple of flags in width and runs right round the ground. The pitch is surrounded by a post and rail barrier. The posts are painted white and the railings alternate blue and yellow. Simple but effective. Both ends are very narrow, with netting suspended from poles to prevent balls catapulting into the adjacent cultivated fields. A metalled lane behind the south end forms part of the Miner's Way long-distance footpath.

The otherwise-perfect ground strikes a couple of discordant notes. An ugly pylon line, wholly incongruous in such a rustic setting, marches down the middle of the second pitch while the aggregate strip between the hardstanding and the perimeter fence on the eastern side is strewn with weeds. The club intend to tidy the latter up when funds and manpower allow but, clearly, they can do nothing about the unsightly electricity wires. The floodlights, though excellent, are unusual. One large lamp is mounted on each of 12 low metal poles, with six positioned on each side. The pitch is in superb condition and, to my amazement, the groundsman tells me he cut the whole lot with a hand mower because his motorised equipment had broken down. "How long did that take?" I ask, scarcely able to comprehend what could have been a 13th labour for Hercules. "Ages," he said simply, before going back to sweeping cuttings off the hardstanding as the players warm up. Never again will I moan about mowing my back lawn!

The game, played at a surprisingly fast pace throughout, is won by Holwell because they take their chances with alacrity and don't give anything away at the back. The visitors from Melton Mowbray boast a Maginot Line defence manned by six footers and the Ellistown attack finds itself hopelessly outgunned. The early stages are as tight as a mortgage provider in a credit crisis. There are many attritional engagements in midfield but precious little in the way of goalmouth action. Just after the half-hour, the contest bursts into life. Holwell's Scott Mooney turns adroitly in the box and fires narrowly over and tricky home winger Robbie Johnson, in and out of the match so much he should consider entering the hokey-cokey world championship, fails to control the ball with only keeper Richard Gordon to beat. Sports skipper David Saddington, one of the giant infantrymen in the visitors' trench, tucks away what seems a textbook header from a corner only for referee Ray Brand to pull him up for a 'climbing' infringement no-one else seems to notice. But Holwell get on the scoresheet a minute before the break when Jamie Simpson steals in ahead of his slumbering marker to pick up a low pass and slip the ball past Jordan King from 12 yards.

Town's Ronnie White keeps up the game's momentum in the first minute of the second half by placing a flashing drive inches too high but Sports double their lead in the 55th minute when Niall Prenderville smashes a superb right-foot volley into the bottom corner from the edge of the box. Five minutes later, it's 3-0 as the hosts go AWOL in defence. Another low cross finds its way all the way through to Will Keightley at the back post and he sweeps the ball wide of an exposed King, who later saves well to deny the Holwell wide man. Town pull one back with 15 minutes left. Lee Colkin, who has a left foot sweeter than a McFlurry, fires in a 20-yard free-kick which White deflects past a hopelessly wrongfooted Gordon. Energised, Town push forward in numbers but that leaves them light at the back and King is called upon twice to thwart Mooney in one-on-ones.

Ellistown have come a long way in a short time but want to continue progressing. The work on the ground this summer saw the hardstanding laid, the dugouts built and the seats put in the main stand. They are now erecting lights for training and aim to build a bigger stand on the west side, tidy up the messy area around the turnstile and re-carpet the social club. But, as ever at this level, money is in short supply. Town still rue missing the FA Cup registration deadline and were sorry to go out of the FA Vase last weekend. A 3-2 defeat at North West Counties League New Mills, having led 2-0, meant what would have been a very handy £900 in prize money slipped through their fingers. But the clutch of enthusiasts who drive the club forward refuse to be disheartened. Real people. Real football. Are you watching Premier League?