

TT No.53: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 30th September 2008; **Brackley Town v Stourbridge**; FA Cup 2nd Rd Qual Replay; Res: 1-0; Att: 187; Admission: £8; Programme: £1.50 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Bypasses, demanded so loudly by so many, are not all they're cracked up to be. Yes, they banish a lot of unwanted traffic, noise and muck from town centre streets but, crucially, they have a deadening effect. To be passed by is hardly an attribute, unless you're desperate to live in sleepy old Snoozeville. Brackley, once a stop on the grand Great Central Railway but left trackless by Beechingisation, appears to have suffered this fate. Several times over the years I've whizzed along its periphery - riding the much-improved A43 like a landowner beating the bounds on horseback - on the way to bigger and arguably better things. Having found a reason to dismount and take a closer look, I discover few are doing the same. I dare say Brackley is livelier when it's market day but on this autumnal afternoon of sudden showers and playful winds the town is as still and silent as a crypt.

The High Street - elegant, wide, tree-lined and titivated with floral beds - speaks volumes. Hairdressers, takeaways and estate agents predominate. The bakery, complete with antique Hovis logo, has shut its doors for the last time. The magnificent Georgian town hall and a couple of posh schools raise the tone and add some architectural gravitas, and the honey-coloured stone used in many of the buildings gives the place a look of the Cotswolds. But there's not much else. Clearly, the world is happening elsewhere. It's hard to believe Silverstone is just up the road. Maybe the residents of Brackley's orderly estates enjoy being one step removed. Bored teenagers in the free car park struggling to find something original to do with skateboards and listless dogwalkers describing lonely circuits of 'Brackley's Local Nature Spot' St James' Lake suggest otherwise. Be careful what you wish for.

Semi-rural St James' Park is located on the south side of town between the dual carriageway bypass and the bottom end of the sloping High Street. Opened in 1974, this immaculate ground lacks historical quirkiness but is much more appealing than expected. The home of the Saints lies on Churchill Way at the end of a tidy, if rather characterless, housing estate. A small car park is covered with loose aggregate to the left and concrete on the right. The facade, clad in shimmering silver metal panels, is as eye-catching as a space rocket. The twin turnstile, to the left, brings spectators out near the north-west corner after a cheery welcome from the chap manning it. Most of the facilities are on this near - west - side. The main stand, which sits between the edge of the near penalty area and the halfway line, offers 300 red plastic tip-up seats arranged in rows of four and five. Its blue 'crinkly tin' cladding roof has a deeply overhanging fascia and this, coupled with seven bulky roof columns painted red, makes obstruction-free viewing a real challenge. At the back of the stand is a glazed box for the announcer, a separate area for directors and their guests, and benches for the

press. The latter are lit by portable fluorescent tubes, which makes the tactile woman delivering them to the local paper boys look like an extra from 'Star Wars'. Like the stand itself, the players' tunnel is off-centre. The dressing rooms, and boardroom, are in a separate building immediately behind.

Beyond the stand is Brackley's pride and joy - one of the most attractive football social clubs I've ever encountered. This is tastefully furnished with a red theme and has a nice line in low lighting. Only a small trophy cabinet and action pictures on the walls betrays to whom it belongs. It must be a real money-maker for the Saints because it is open to the community seven days a week. One of the club's latest initiatives is fish and chips for the over-50s on Friday afternoons. I'm just seven years from qualifying, which is a scary thought. I thought 50 was the new 30? What next? Doms? Fives and threes? A pint of mild? Back outside, a veranda shelters a paved area with picnic tables - a good place to wolf items bought from the refreshment hatch at the far end. To the side of the social club, set back and so slightly hidden, Brackley's well-stocked club shop is housed in a large wooden hut.

To the left, the north end is narrow and fringed by trees, with a cricket ground immediately behind on the other side of a ditch. Tennis courts and a bowling green, out of sight, complete a decent sporting complex. The concrete hardstanding strip running round the ground is broken to the rear of the goal by a 15-yard kit stand with three rows of terracing. A fence of corrugated metal sheeting, painted red, extends the width of the pitch. The far - east - side is open hardstanding. There is plenty of spare turf between the touchline and the pitch barrier, and between the pitch barrier and the perimeter shrubbery, giving the Saints plenty of space potential should they choose to develop this part of the ground. The dugouts, fashioned unusually from concrete panels and each containing six red plastic tip-up seats, are positioned either side of the halfway line. Behind the greenery is an industrial estate with several futuristically designed buildings.

There were big changes at the far - south - end over the summer. Brackley bought a stand from St Neots' now bulldozed Rowley Park ground, transported it cross-country on a wagon and re-erected it in this rustic corner of Northamptonshire. A photo montage in the social club shows, stage by stage, how the operation was completed. The stand, 20 yards long, is a mini cantilever covering four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats on a kit base. Part of the grass bank at this end has been cut away to accommodate it. More spare turf on top of the bank is set up with goals and, presumably, used for training. Beyond is scrub and a line of trees. The barrier around another beautifully lush-looking pitch is a post and rail construction painted white. On the main stand side, it is infilled by black plastic mesh. The remainder is covered with boards which double as advertising hoardings. The floodlights, switched on during the 1988-89 season, are corner masts, with five lamps on each.

Familiarity generally breeds contempt - and these two teams, in sporting terms, know each other as well as an old married couple. Tonight's fixture is the third

between the rivals in just 10 days. The previous two were both at Stourbridge, with Brackley winning the Southern League Midland Division game 1-0 and the FA Cup tie ending 1-1. My worst fears are realised. It isn't much of a match. At least I am spared extra-time and penalties, which look likely from the opening minutes, by the home side's 82nd-minute winner. Even that comes from a botched penalty.

Big personal disappointment is that diminutive midfielder turned left-back Jamie Paterson, Halifax Town icon and Conference Player of the Year in the Shaymen's title-winning 1997-98 season, does not make Brackley's starting line-up. He's on holiday, apparently, and missed the first tie, too. I'd like to think his classy presence would have added something extra to a mundane Saints display. The first half is as flat as a cowpat. At least Ben Mackey, who comprehensively outshines fellow home striker and ex-professional Tony Thorpe, is up for it. Thank goodness for that because he injects much-needed urgency into the lacklustre proceedings whenever he gets the ball. It's mostly Brackley. Wayne Blossom's downward header brings a diving save out of Lewis Solly, Mackey sees two goal-bound efforts blocked in quick succession and Craig Farley's deep cross to the back post almost catches out the Stourbridge keeper. Glassblowers striker Ryan Broadhurst, wearing the number five shirt for some reason, finds himself in good positions near the end of the half but twice central defender Josh Green makes timely blocks.

As if the two sets of players are starting to become sick of the sight of each other, the pace quickens around the hour mark. Mackey's off-the-cuff chip nearly embarrasses Solly, who back-peddles furiously before tipping over with one hand. Stour's Nathan Bennett sends a half-volley flashing fractionally too high before Les Hines clears a thumping Mackey effort off the goal-line. Thorpe, hitherto as much a spectator as me, twists quickly at the back post to ready his body shape for a close-range volley but Solly reacts well to palm his effort aside. The visitors appear to go ahead in the 71st minute when Sam Rock gets a bullet downward header on a Hines cross but their celebrations are cut short by a linesman's offside flag. Richard Pierson heads tamely over having been picked out by Blossom and, just as thoughts turn gloomily to the extra 30 minutes, Brackley score the winner to set up a trip to Boreham Wood in the next round. Substitute Gavin Winsper, sitting on the turf near the six-yard box, is struck by a Mackey shot after a series of scrambles, and referee Chris Husband points to the spot having spotted a handball. Perhaps the Worcester official can't bear any more of this, either. Scott Hadland's penalty is too close to Solly but the keeper can't hold the ball and Brackley's skipper for the night follows up to whack it into the net. Joy unconfined for Saints' teenage barmy army, who sing their hearts out for the lads from first whistle to last. Their repertoire features several anti-Oxfordshire numbers. Stourbridge know the game's up and the closing minutes return to a routine dullness.

Brackley's reasonable match programme reveals how keen the club are to bring in more revenue. The Saints, probably aware of a chequered past which saw them rescued from voluntary liquidation in 1999 only at the 11th hour, are making a big effort. Many of the High Street shop windows display posters advertising games at St James' Park. But the gate for this match is well below their league average. It's

to be hoped locals catch the mood of what may turn out to be a long and lucrative run in the FA Cup and don't pass by this impressive little club as they themselves have been passed by.

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