

**TT No.94: *Andy Gallon*** - Tue 18th November 2008; **Studley v Barwell**; FA Vase second round replay; Res: 2-2 (AET, 3-4 on pens); Att: 76; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*\*.

I set off on the 133-mile trek to this all-Midland Football Alliance FA Vase replay with some misgivings. The teams had shared a 3-3 draw at Barwell the previous Saturday in the original tie, Studley coming from behind on three occasions in an incident-packed encounter lacking only a streaker and a dog on the pitch. Surely, the second meeting couldn't be anywhere near as diverting? Thankfully, I was wrong about what proved an absolutely pulsating contest, with the second half, featuring a dramatic double sting in its tail, the best 45 minutes of football I've watched this season.

It proved a slow burner, mind. The players took time to adapt to a very heavy pitch, which disintegrated steadily, but I was grateful both sides were happy to try a passing game, despite the tricky conditions. Not everything they attempted came off, however, and that provoked exasperation from Studley skipper Craig Hall, who, early in the match, bellowed: "Lads! You can't play on this. \*\*\*\*ing get rid of it!" The Bees, who looked a surprisingly small side, led at the break thanks to a 35th-minute Steve Ruck goal. Leon Thomas took possession in midfield and, having shrugged off a shoulder charge from Reece Lester (rather like being savaged by a dead sheep), found Ruck with a ball Barwell captain Nick Green just failed to intercept. Ruck, free of his marker, cut in from the left wing before showing composure and patience in fashioning the space to shoot across Liam Castle and into the far bottom corner. Green was more successful in clearing a Thomas 25-yarder off the goal-line (18) after a poor clearance by Castle, while, for the visitors, Richard Letts's mazy run in the box (37) ended with a scuffed effort against the far post.

Four minutes into the second half, Barwell equalised - and it set the tone for a dominant 45 minutes from the Leicestershire men. Stuart Spencer met a Phil Mortimer corner with a powerful downward header, which squeezed past two defenders on the goal-line. Full marks to the linesman who flagged it had gone over. A procession of chances followed. The pick saw Bees keeper Dave Adey smother brilliantly an eight-yard Letts prod (60) following one of many probing Mortimer crosses, opposite number Castle denied Ruck (61) with his legs, and Letts (73) sent a well-placed header inches wide. The final 10 minutes (plus additions) was a white-knuckle ride of epic proportions. Castle reacted brilliantly to get his right knee to a goal-bound Jamie Bailey header (80), the Barwell keeper then rocketed off his line to block stocky substitute Craig Pountney's shot (84) in a one-on-one, before, two minutes into stoppage time, Barwell broke to score what appeared to be a late winner. Mortimer's sweet left foot fired in another great delivery to the near post and Kev Charley, under pressure from defender Tom Lacey, volleyed into the roof of the net. This sparked a Studley stampede, with

Pountney playing a central role. He blazed over wildly from close range after a Bailey nod down and saw a wicked volley deflected fractionally wide, before, with five and a half minutes of added time on the clock, rising highest amid a gaggle of players at the near post to head a Ruck corner into the net off the underside of the crossbar. There was barely time to restart before the final whistle sounded. Breath-taking stuff. Cue a charge for the loos.

How do you follow that? With difficulty, it transpired. Weary legs contributed to a low-key 30 minutes of extra time, though craggy Ian Mitchell almost caught out Castle with a cross (111) aimed towards the back post, and Hall headed a Ryan Amoo effort (113) off his goal-line. And so, to penalties. The chap next to me, drawing on all the wisdom of his years, informed his grandson: "This is where the goalie becomes a hero." Castle saved from Lacey and Pountney as Barwell went 3-1 up in the shootout. But Adey then pushed away Letts's spot-kick to crank up the tension. Mortimer, however, kept his head to shoot the visitors into a third-round home tie against MFA rivals Coalville Town on December 6, and spark wild celebrations. What a night!

The hosts' ground, The Beehive, is on the north-eastern edge of Studley, alongside the A435 Birmingham-Evesham road. This has been a noisy, bustling thoroughfare since the Romans laid it out as Ryknild Street. Don't waste your time continuing the extra half-mile into the village, once a centre for the manufacture of needles, and now little more than a lay-by on a traffic-choked tarmac artery. There is nothing to see - partly owing to bizarre skimping on street lighting - other than an unusually high density of pubs. Seventeen within a square mile, it is claimed. I guess somewhere has to be overshadowed by Redditch, five miles distant. Even Studley Castle, which features on the club's logo, turns out to be Victorian Gothic make-believe. Tucked away in a 28-acre estate close to the banks of the River Arrow, it was built as an agricultural college for young ladies. It is now a hotel and, if rather scathing reviews on TripAdvisor are to be believed, far more impressive outside than in.

Studley, like so many of our senior clubs, began life as a works team. They were formed in 1971 by employees of BKL Fittings as BKL FC. Switching from Sunday to Saturday football in 1986, they became Studley BKL and progressed to the Midland Football Alliance via the Midland Combination. During the 2001-02 season, BKL Fittings went into liquidation and a consortium led by Bees chairman Dave Robinson bought the ground and its facilities, renaming the club plain old Studley FC.

The layout dates from 1997, when the pitch was moved to its present position. A 45-yard long structure, housing the social club, hospitality area and dressing rooms, dominates the ground on the north-eastern side. This building, the former BKL Sports & Social Club, is unprepossessing, single storey and red-brick. Unlike - apparently - Studley Castle, it is better inside than its gaunt lines without would suggest. The central large hospitality room and bar has been refurbished tastefully and brightly, with French windows looking out on to a paved area. The adjacent social club, for plebs such as me and lit by horribly low-wattage bulbs, could do

with a similar facelift. There is a hatch serving refreshments next to the door which leads from the dressing rooms, with the players accessing the handsomely dimensioned pitch via a railed-off walkway over flags. The main building is at an angle to the playing surface, and the resulting triangular wedge of raised concrete is scattered with picnic tables. The turnstile is at the end of an alley between the sole stand and the main building. The 1997 vintage stand, 30 yards long and six yards deep, fills in the area between the halfway line and the penalty area. It has a sloping corrugated metal sheeting roof over a metal frame painted white, with its rear brick wall doubling as the ground perimeter. It shelters five rows of seats - a mixture of plastic tip-ups and more traditional slatted wooden benches. All are painted navy. Six columns supporting the roof make obstruction-free viewing a bit of a problem.

A hardstanding strip runs round the remainder of what is an open, exposed venue in a flat location. There are a few landmarks to note. An estate of modern houses, beyond an unkempt grassy bank and a thin line of saplings, lies behind the south-eastern goal. The dugouts, fashioned from metal sheeting and painted in the club's sky and navy colours, are positioned either side of the halfway line on the south-western touchline. Each contains eight red plastic seats. I moved from this spot at half-time because I couldn't bear any more of the Barwell boss's inane, and voluble, manager-speak. What does "be compact" mean, exactly? It was his default shout. Over and over and over again. Sit down; shut up. To the rear of this touchline is a railed-off training area and a second pitch. Beyond that, behind a boundary fence and trees, is the ground of Studley Cricket Club. Another broad area of grass, floodlit for training, lies immediately behind the north-western goal, with vehicles on the A435 roaring away beyond the perimeter fence. A children's play area fills in the corner between the grass and the main building. The floodlights are mounted on what seem to be rather low masts, prompting one or two caustic comments from the Barwell contingent about the 'dazzle factor'. There are three per side, with three large lamps on each. Metal railings, painted white, surround the pitch.

So, a really exciting game at a relatively unexciting ground. But Studley have their blessings to count. The Beehive contains all the required elements, has orderly and, for the most part, appealing facilities, enjoys masses of (free and largely metalled) parking outside the main building and is accessed easily off the M42 and A435, via Abbeyfields Drive. It's far more than a lot of clubs can boast, and is impressive for a village club who have come a long way from humble origins playing in the Redditch Sunday League.