

TT No.97: Andy Gallon - Sat 22nd November 2008; **Farnham Town** v Sheerwater; Comb Cos League Div. One; Res: 0-3; Att: 30; Admission: £4 (incl. 16pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: **.

One really does fear for the long-term survival of football venues in places such as the Surrey stockbroker belt. Leafy Farnham, the antithesis of neighbouring barrack room bolthole Aldershot, is the sort of place in which rugby union inspires deeper affection. Indeed, injury-prone England fly-half and sometime World Cup hero Jonny Wilkinson began his kick-and-clap career in this posh neck of the North Downs. The appealing Memorial Ground is surrounded on the better part of three sides by smart new houses, the asking prices of which both bemuse and amuse those viewing them from a Northern perspective. Farnham Town's home must be worth a small fortune to those avaricious property developers, who, no doubt, cast covetous glances in its direction every time they drive past en route to the fancy shops in the twee town centre. It cannot be long, surely, before this ground is swamped by the encroaching tide of commuter-land concrete. I was amazed we didn't bump into a woebegone Canute in the car park.

With this in mind, it's worrying that Farnham, formed in 1912 and founder members in 1975 of the London Spartan League, appear to be up against it on the pitch. The leading side in the Combined Counties League, with serious ambitions of stepping up to the Isthmian League, as recently as 1992, Town now find themselves languishing in Division One of the former, populated by has-beens and never-will-be's. The previous week, an understrength line-up was spanked 6-1 at bottom-of-the-table Chobham. Shocked chairman Geoff Chapple, he of multiple Woking FA Trophy triumphs fame, was scathing about the performance in his programme notes for the Sheerwater match. He pointed to "a complete lack of application, effort and desire", saying it had "allowed Chobham to score as and when they wanted. Thankfully, they decided to stop at six. There can be no excuses for players that simply could not be bothered to put in the necessary effort and passion." This display must have been better, though Town had eight players out through injury - even Chelsea would struggle to cope with that sort of handicap - and were well beaten by their visitors. Of more concern, I'd suggest, is the apparent lack of interest in the club shown by a community in which bridge, sudoku and the Times crossword probably rate higher than football amid the daily concerns of its well-heeled residents. My party numbered five - and turned out to constitute a sixth of the paying spectators. Just as well we went, really. If Aldershot Town had been at home, chances are my silver-tongued blandishments, would have fallen on four pairs of deaf ears and the Recreation Ground would have been our sporting destination.

After the Georgian splendour of Farnham's handsome, if overtly preening, town centre, the Memorial Ground is something of a comedown. It lurks behind the pleasing lines of the whitewashed Memorial Hall, off West Street, and is as

compact an enclosure as you could find. The bottom floor of the hall houses the dressing rooms, and both players and spectators take the same route across a sloping tarmac car park to access the ground via a gap in the perimeter fence and a pay hut on the halfway line on the ground's west side. Modern Perspex dugouts are directly in front as you enter. A hardstanding path climbs gently, footpath fashion, to a grassy bank behind the north goal. This pleasant knoll, enjoying the advantage of decent height, offers the best vantage point. A small stand, 20 yards long by about four yards deep, is positioned off centre, and is the only cover. Its rear wall is painted in the club's claret and sky-blue colours, and a column-free roof shelters three rows of white plastic seats; 50 in all. To the rear, houses, some very new, boast a splendid view of the pitch. Nobody, so far as I could tell, took advantage of a benefit unlikely to feature in local estate agents' particulars. Oddly, one of the homes has a clock set in its wall.

There is hardstanding on the east side, which is the widest part of this tight little ground. A small triangular patch of grass allows for kickabouts - formal and informal - with new red-brick houses threateningly hard up against the club's boundary fence. The low, broad tower of the parish church of St Andrew, one of many delightful man-made ornaments in swanky Farnham, peeps above the rooftops and provides the only landmark of note. The clubhouse, a large wooden hut, stands at an angle to the pitch in the north-eastern corner. On a teeth-chattering, chilly day, this proved such a haven for the frostbitten we missed the first five minutes of the second half. There is a refreshment hatch and a bar, with a TV providing half-time updates from around the country. Don't, by the way, be fooled into thinking you can get into the ground from this side. There is wing mirror-scraping access down the cramped, but canny, Mead Lane, though the car park is out of bounds to football followers and a gate in the wooden fence adjacent to the clubhouse remained padlocked throughout the afternoon.

Farnham's claustrophobic shortage of space in a capacity of just 1,500 is exemplified by the south end. The boundary fence is so close to the pitch, there isn't room for any spectator accommodation. Netting, suspended from poles, helps to keep wayward shots out of the gardens of the new homes built on the site of what was once a door factory. I imagine the decision to close it down was an open and shut case. Keep going, and you'll stumble across the north branch of the River Wey. In an indicator of their former status, Farnham have floodlights. It is a mast system, with four per side and three lamps on each.

After this fixture, Sheerwater were dashing home to Woking to celebrate their 50th anniversary with a slap-up dinner, and this comfortable victory got the party started early. Farnham, fresh faced youngsters for the most part, did a deal of huffing and puffing, but were always chasing the game having conceded an early penalty, awarded on the intervention of a linesman. The visitors scored a soft second before half-time to leave the home lads gazing forlornly up the side of a mountain. Farnham were more competitive after the break, but went close just once after a combination of passes out of keeping with their other efforts. Sheerwater's third goal in the last 10 minutes put the outcome beyond reasonable

doubt. The jury of five returned their verdict and I was outvoted 4-1 in favour of an early getaway. Leaving before the final whistle? A lifetime first, I think. Still, it wasn't a particularly good game, and was spoiled by a referee who became increasingly fastidious as time wore on and the temperature plummeted. He was happy to let dangerous challenges pass by unremarked, but eager to fish out his yellow card for dissent. No wonder players get frustrated. But not, perhaps, as frustrated as those developers who have to put up with football being played where desirable residences could be.

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