

TT No. 104: Mike Latham - Saturday 28 November 2009: West Midlands Regional League Premier Division: **AFC Wulfrunians 1-0 Bloxwich United**; Att: 120 (h/c); Admission: £3.50; 36pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Every so often the opportunity arises to visit a jewel of a new ground, not a sanitized, concrete monstrosity bought 'off the shelf' but a ground with style, atmosphere and presence. Castlecroft Stadium, the 'new' ground of reigning West Midlands Regional League champions AFC Wulfrunians is an outstanding addition to 'must visit' grounds on any self-respecting groundhopper's list. There can be few better grounds at Step 6 in the country and the ground would easily look at home higher up the pyramid.

Though a 'new' ground in terms of non-league football this season, Castlecroft has a long history and is a case of rugby union's loss very much being football's gain. The Castlecroft area developed at a rapid rate in the post war period with Wolverhampton RUFC opening an adjoining ground in 1950 and Wolves setting up a training ground and building what was effectively their second ground, primarily for use by their youth teams on the site. Wolves officially opened Castlecroft Stadium in 1956 and provided a stand and floodlights. When Wolves eventually moved their training base to another part of the city at Aldersley Stadium and sold off Castlecroft the Rugby Football Union stepped in.

In 1990 the RFU after negotiations with Wolverhampton Council entered into a reported £2,000 per year deal for a 99-year lease at Castlecroft and funded a £450,000 stadium development in conjunction with construction giants Tarmac, setting up for the first time a dedicated national headquarters and administrative base for youth rugby.

From 1990 until 2007 Castlecroft was the RFU's national centre for schools and youth rugby. Many senior international rugby players graced the Castlecroft turf and when England won the World Cup in 2003, all but five of the 31-man squad had developed through the schools and youth system and had spent time at Castlecroft.

The re-developed stadium was officially opened by RFU President Peter Yarranton in 1991 with the main stand doubling as an office block, while a hotel was built adjoining the site which opened in 1992, though the hotel was later sold and the site is now a private housing complex.

Castlecroft Stadium staged around 70 rugby games per year, including Schools and Colts games and international matches. In total Castlecroft hosted over 200 schoolboy internationals. All incoming and outgoing tours were planned and prepared at Castlecroft which was also the base for training camps. But then the RFU then decided to switch their administrative base for youth rugby to Twickenham and stage games at three different centres and so rugby's link with Castlecroft was broken.

Enter AFC Wulfrunians, an old boys team associated with Wolverhampton Grammar School with ambitions of climbing the football pyramid. In the 'Summer of 2009' they signed a ten-year lease to occupy Castlecroft Stadium, which is just a few hundred yards away from their spiritual home. The club was originally formed as an old boys' team in 1922 and played in local leagues, enjoying several successful seasons. Originally based in Penn, they moved to the War Memorial Ground in Castlecroft just after the end of the second world war. In 2005 AFC Wulfrunians was set up to give players a chance to play at a higher level, but as the War Memorial Ground did not meet ground grading requirements they ground-shared at Wolverhampton Casuals' ground to the north of the city. The club earned two promotions in a row and after finishing sixth in their first season in the Premier Division before becoming champions last season. But Casuals' ground did not meet the requirements for promotion to the Midland Alliance.

Castlecroft is situated in a pleasant, leafy, suburban part of Wolverhampton just off the Bridgnorth Road. As you approach the ground a large road sign informs you that you are entering Staffordshire. There is a large drive down to the ground passing a cricket ground on the right-hand side and there is plenty of parking outside. A warm welcome is extended at the entrance and an outstandingly designed programme with some fine editorial is dispensed for just £1- it's just about the best programme I've ever seen at this level of football.

The main stand dominates the ground. With just under 500 seats and a cantilevered design it gives an excellent view of the action. The bar, lounge, refreshment and hospitality areas are situated at the back of the stand. Three sides of the ground are hard standing with the far side, where the dug-outs are located, being out-of-bounds for spectators. A large netting runs along this side to prevent balls being booted into neighbouring gardens. The playing pitch is immaculately kept and surrounded by a neat white-painted perimeter fence and the floodlights are excellent.

This was an intriguing game in prospect with both sides in the top three in pursuit of leaders Ellesmere Rangers. The only goal of the game came early, Myles Fenn finding space in the area to control a left-wing cross and guide a left-footed shot past the 'keeper in the eleventh minute. Bloxwich dominated much of the second half, hitting the woodwork twice and the hosts just about held out despite seven minutes of added time.

The 'Wulfs' are a friendly, progressive club and a visit to their outstanding headquarters comes with my highest recommendation.