

TT No.110: *Andy Gallon* - Tues 1st December 2009; **Burton Albion** v Accrington Stanley; Football League Division Two; Res: 0-2; Att: 2,027; Admission: £13; Programme: £2.50 (64pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

First impressions count - good ones, especially. Before setting out, I called Burton Albion to check there weren't any weather-related problems with this fixture. The helpful woman on the other end of the phone assured me the pitch was fine, and having discovered I was travelling down from the North, urged me cheerily to "travel safely". You don't, in my experience, often encounter that sort of personal touch in the Football League, which leads me to suspect the Brewers have not forgotten their non-league roots, despite joining the 92-strong 'elite' this season.

The Pirelli Stadium, wedged into a parcel of land between busy roads and an industrial estate, is a cut above your average new ground. The scale may be modest, but a bit of thought seems to have gone in to its internal and external appearance, which is restrained, smart, stylish and (as fashionistas such as myself are apt to remark) on trend. Check out the main stand, adjacent to a throbbing roundabout. Tubs of flowers (still blooming on the first day in December) and exotic palms fringe the car park. Attractive silver-grey cladding sets apart the main entrance, with a thoughtful use of the club's name and unusual crest providing a focal point. Through glass doors, and the foyer is light, bright and airy, with a sweeping staircase leading up to the hospitality areas. The club shop, ticket office and study centre are well signed, but unobtrusive. Note the restricted use of Brewers logos in the glazing. Overkill has also been avoided with the Christmas decorations, which proves (if proof were needed) that nothing succeeds like simplicity. Two light tones of brick in the lower parts of the stand give way to grey cladding in the upper and roof sections. This clean, attractive template is repeated round the ground, ensuring an important sense of uniformity and corporate identity. Inside, the main stand has a single tier of black tip-up seats, with yellow examples spelling out Burton Albion. Hospitality boxes run the length of the stand to the rear of the seats, and there is a TV gantry above the halfway line and centrally positioned players' tunnel.

The rest of the ground offers standing room only. The two end stands are identical, with shallow roofs over terracing and, to the rear, bars, again finished neatly, with colour poster photographs of Burton players prominent. Raised concourses at the back are open to the elements and feature a deal of exposed breeze block, indicating a limited budget. The Derby Road end stand, for away supporters, is slightly different because it has a digital scoreboard suspended centrally from its fascia and, in the main stand corner, a raised stadium control room. The proximity of Derby Road and Princess Way means there is limited parking behind the end stands, but the popular side more than compensates. Burton have made the most of the space here by providing a large parking area. Just a shame it's £2 to leave your car there. If you're as tight as me, you'll find ample street parking close by.

An unusual feature is the culverted beck whose course parallels the stand, running between perimeter fence and car park, and is bridged at three points. The popular side features the same 15 steps of terracing as the end stands, and has an open concourse at the back. A bar, larger than those at the ends, is dedicated to Vera Goode and accessed straight from the turnstiles. Albion favour modern 'beanpole' floodlights, with one in each corner. A maroon tartan track surrounds the pitch, and helps tie the four stands together. With a capacity nudging 7,000, the Pirelli (factory just down the road) Stadium is adequate for the Brewers' needs and - possibly - their ambitions.

The site of Eton Park, the club's former ground, is on the other side of Princess Way, the road to Stretton. A mini supermarket, still going strong, is a handy point of orientation for those who visited what was a decent, atmospheric little venue. Miller Homes ('The Place To Be') are in the process of building "luxury homes" on the site. Happily, the road leading into the 'Hopwood' development is named Clough Drive, after the long-serving ex-manager who transformed Burton's fortunes and is now struggling to do anything with Derby County's. Uprooting just 100 yards must have eased the pain of leaving Eton Park for the Brewers fans, and reduced to an absolute minimum any sense of dislocation.

After a promising start to their Football League debut campaign, Albion's results have been indifferent of late. The programme (a non-standard, but appealing, square format I've never encountered before) warned that the team's Tuesday night performances this season have been poor. None as shocking as this third defeat in a week, I'm guessing. Manager Paul Peschisolido noted: "We've decided to take a whole new approach in our preparation, and I'm hoping this will see a change in our fortunes." Back to the drawing board again, then, mate. Accrington Stanley, beset by financial problems, are not among the great powers of League Two, and on this evening, they were hit badly by injury and suspension. And yet clueless Burton, all fumbling ineptness, made the Reds, who at least respected and mastered the bare necessity of retaining possession, look classy and competent. The Albion fans around me agreed it was just as well 25 points had been gleaned from the opening 19 games because adding to that tally would be difficult.

Stanley, backed by about 150 fans displaying their customary impressive array of banners, should have been three or four ahead at half-time. Brewers keeper Shane Redmond made a number of saves, the best of which was in the 31st minute when he somehow clawed away Sean McConville's diving header. He also scrambled to push aside a Phil Edwards effort, and the Stanley midfielder should have scored later with a free header he placed wide of the near post. All Burton could manage in response was a wild volley over the bar from Shaun Harrad. It didn't take long for the Lancastrians, initially defending in depth and playing on the break, to realise how listless and limited their opposition was. As the first half entered stoppage time, Stanley finally made their territorial advantage tell. Tom Lees whipped over a cross from a right flank on which McConville's pace was a constant threat to a leaden home defence, and Leicester loanee Billy Kee, the smallest

player on the pitch and enjoying a rare start, was given the time and room to angle a header across Redmond and into the corner.

Rain, which had started falling 15 minutes before kick-off and was galvanised by a stiff breeze on a raw night, made for unpleasant and progressively trickier conditions. Stanley continued to dominate, though Paul Boertien did register Burton's first shot on target in the 50th minute. Keeper Dean Bouzains dealt comfortably with the right-back's 25-yard free-kick. With 15 minutes left, opposite number Redmond pulled off a superb diving save to turn top scorer Michael Symes' fierce volley around a post, only for the Stanley striker, capitalising on slack work at the back, to side-foot home the subsequent corner from close range. Cue an early exit for many disgruntled Brewers fans, who booed their team off at the end of each half. In one comic moment, home skipper and centre-back Guy Branston, mentally and physically a lump, chased a loose ball into a corner and vanished beneath the stadium control room in the direction of Derby Road to retrieve it. "Keep going - and don't come back," urged one unhappy fan. Belatedly, Burton applied some concerted pressure. A John McGrath corner was allowed to run right through to the back post, where Greg Pearson, unable to deal with a high bounce, headed over from inside the six-yard box. Pearson then almost embarrassed Bouzains with a looping header, but the keeper got back quickly to secure, acrobatically, a clean sheet for the visitors.

On this evidence, the only way is down for Burton, who could get dragged into a relegation battle if the likes of Darlington and Grimsby Town start to improve. Accrington, surprisingly, may have enough about them to stave off for another year the return to the non-league ranks which, surely, awaits them. The Pirelli Stadium, an antidote to tackiness, is certainly worth putting on your calendar.

06/20