

TT No.129: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 26th December 2009; **Godalming Town** v Fleet Town; Isthmian Division One South; Res: 2-2; Att: 161; Admission: £8; Programme: 50p (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Wintry weather in Surrey put paid to any hopes of a Boxing Day 'double' - but at least the main attraction beat the Big Freeze. We had Sandhurst Town's Combined Counties League clash with Camberley Town as our sole 11.30am option, but a check call, an hour and a half before the start revealed the match was off because the pitch was "a mess". There had been a steady thaw since Christmas Eve in this part of the world, but it came 24 hours too late for most of the area's smaller clubs. Which was a bit of a bummer, but a whole lot better than if we had been at home in snowbound North Yorkshire. Godalming Town were much more upbeat about their prospects of playing at 3pm, and fully expected to pass a 10.30am inspection. We arrived at Wey Court shortly after the thumbs-up had been given to a pitch which, though a little heavy beneath a well-grassed surface, was clearly up to the job of staging an Isthmian League derby with Fleet Town.

Our revised timetable left plenty of time to explore this pleasant little town in the heart of the snootily prosperous - not to say alarmingly complacent - Surrey stockbroker/commuter belt. Godalming boasts numerous listed timber-framed buildings, and an attractive setting on the banks of the swollen River Wey, which is overlooked by the shapely spire of the parish church of St Peter & St Paul. Be sure to check out the 19th Century town hall, complete with cupola and 'Pepperpot' nickname. A park and a pub are named after Jack Phillips, the wireless operator born in neighbouring Farncombe who remained at his post on 'Titanic', sending out distress signals almost until the moment the White Star liner foundered in the middle of the Atlantic. The football ground is on the edge of town, adjacent to the A3100 road heading towards the county capital of Guildford. A short walk takes you to the last lock on the Wey Navigation, and moorings busy with narrow boats whose chimneys were smoking lazily in the soft breeze. Lovely. Desperate for fresh air, exercise and all-round respite after a Christmas Day cooped up with my partner's family, I filled my lungs in greedy gulps.

Wey Court is a tidy - if open and exposed - ground built into a bank at right angles to the main road. Access is via an estate of bungalows for the elderly and a small car park adjacent to the social club, a red-brick building with a pitched roof and the air of a scout hut. It was refurbished in 1996. Note an old concrete sign at one end bearing the name Farncombe FC. This Surrey Senior League club folded in 1970, and Godalming moved in, taking over the debts and tenancy. The turnstiles, recycled in 1995 from The Den, Millwall, are round to the left, and bring the spectator out beneath the main stand, which, because it has been cut into the bank, appears deceptively tall from this angle. There is a kitchen and serving hatch next to the turnstiles, with every surface painted in the club's garish green

and yellow colours. The team line-ups are scrawled on a whiteboard by the turnstiles.

The basement of the main stand, about 20 yards long, is taken up by the dressing rooms and toilets. The players emerge from doors at either side, and climb separate sets of steps to reach the pitch. Spectators also use these, which means latecomers have the odd experience of trotting towards the pitch in the company of the teams. At pitch level, the stand, fashioned from breeze block and corrugated metal sheets, is rather less impressive. It's simple propped cover shelters eight rows of narrow wooden benches painted green. My partner's bottom was sore inside the first quarter of the match. Mine, a veteran of many such campaigns, was fine, in case you're wondering. At the back, there is a tiny press box and an area set aside for directors and their guests. The club's name features on the fascia. Netting fills in the largely open screen ends. This stand came from the old Liberty Way ground of Addlestone & Weybridge when they disbanded in 1985.

The only other area of cover is a small - positively dinky - scaffolding stand over a couple of broad steps of terracing to the near side of the goal at the main road end, which features a belt of trees behind green canvas sheets. Concrete hardstanding runs round the rest of the ground, with a concrete and metal post and rail barrier painted white surrounding the pitch. There are four floodlight masts - one in each corner - and the lamps were first switched on in 1992. A strip of grass, fenced off, provides an area for training and warm-ups to the rear of the far end, while Broadwater Park Golf Club stretches away beyond a rather battered perimeter fence on the far side. Over the A3100, and past the canal, the land rises steeply to tree-topped heights. Wey Court is an attractive, lovingly tended enclosure. Its clientele, as you might expect, are a genteel bunch. The only swearing we heard took place on the pitch.

I'm happy to report this was a rip-roaring encounter between two teams pressing for promotion, and more than compensated for the loss of the morning fixture at Sandhurst. The action was end to end, and my partner's brother, an extremely rare visitor to non-league football, was impressed with the quality of the play. Fleet had the best early chances, with Rodney Chiweshe tipping over Darren Wheeler's swerving drive, and a defender smuggling lone striker Mark Anderson's close-range stab off the line after the home keeper had fumbled. Gangly Gs front man Phil Williams was the player to watch. He had pace and skill, but played as if wearing blinkers. The first time he passed to a team-mate, he earned ironic cheers from the home supporters. Williams elected characteristically to shoot from a tight angle when he should have squared the ball, and Fleet keeper Lyall Beazley was able to block. Godalming went ahead in the 21st minute. It was a lucky goal. Glen Stanley fired over a free-kick - more cross than shot - from the left, and Beazley, palm outstretched, could only help it into the net off the far post. The visitors went close twice just before half-time. Chiweshe punched away a James Field free-kick, and Anderson volleyed the rebound wastefully over the bar. Wheeler was then fractionally too high with a 20-yarder.

The languid Williams should have made it 2-0 within seconds of the restart. Through on goal, he rounded Beazley, only for the Fleet keeper to push the ball away with a hand. In the 49th minute, Godalming doubled their lead - again in fortunate circumstances. Beazley's clearance off the deck struck a home player on the back, and fell straight to Williams, who had the simple task of side-footing into an unguarded net from the edge of the penalty area.

Godalming made the fatal mistake of sitting on their lead. Once manager Andy Sinton, the former England cap, had introduced Ed Smith as a second striker, Fleet began to dominate, though they had an escape in the 70th minute when Stanley's floated free-kick from 18 yards struck the bar with Beazley unsighted and motionless. A minute later, the visitors were back in the game. Ed Smith got away on the left side of the box, and crossed for Field to hammer a sublime volley into the top corner from 12 yards. Chiweshe denied Ed Smith in a one-on-one before, with three minutes left, Ty Smith found the top corner with a stunning 25-yarder to earn Fleet a merited point. It's a shame there wasn't a bigger crowd to enjoy such heart-warming festive fare between rivals placed respectively third and sixth in the Division One South table. Gs officials were clearly disappointed with 161 paying spectators, especially given so many other games locally had been postponed.

This was only my eighth Isthmian League ground (those living south of the Watford Gap feel free to shake your heads in disbelief), but, as with the previous seven, it was a positive experience. Decent facilities and good football, though £1 had to be lopped off the cost of the programme because a balls-up by the printers had seen the pen pictures and history of the previous week's visitors Whitstable Town reproduced by mistake. I look forward to seeing more of the Isthmian League. Having a partner from Surrey will certainly help in this regard, and so much more besides, though kinder weather on our next visit to see her folks would be most welcome.

06/20