

TT No.130: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 28th December 2009; **Braintree Town** v Hampton & Richmond Borough; Conference South; Res: 1-1; Att: 503; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Not many people would choose to break in the Essex town of Braintree a journey between Surrey and North Yorkshire. But Cressing Road fitted most of our requirements for the long-haul home through steadily dipping temperatures. The game was definitely on, both teams had plenty to play for, the ground wasn't too far from a route via the relatively quiet M11 and A1, we could get off the clogged M25 sooner rather than later, and, most importantly, here was a venue living on borrowed time, and therefore well worth visiting. Braintree Town hope to move within the next three to five years to a 6,000-capacity stadium at Pod's Brook Road, adjacent to the A120 in the direction of Great Dunmow and Stansted. It will be a multi-sports complex, with a hotel and conference facilities. How many times have you heard that hackneyed description? There are issues to overcome, not least Braintree District Council being keener on a site much closer to the town centre.

The impasse has left the football club with a problem. More than £140,000 was spent on Cressing Road in 2007 to achieve a 'B' grading and so secure promotion from the Isthmian Premier to Football Conference South. With the Iron now pushing for a place in the top flight of the Conference, an 'A' grading is required. As things stand, Town could go up, but would need to have numerous improvements in place within 12 months of doing so. The bill for these has been calculated at £600,000 - rather pointless expense in light of a move which cannot come quickly enough. The club are seeking aid from the Football Stadium Improvement Fund, and want the council to chip in as well. Judging by the tenor of the programme notes, Town, who own the Cressing Road site, clearly feel the local authority owe them. Two years ago, when selling off a parcel of land to pay for the revamp, the club had to pay the council £400,000 to be released from a covenant. And they were also asked to hand over another £44,000 towards, among other things, a play area and roadworks. Frankly, Town are going to need all the help they can get if they are to attain an 'A' grading. In his calm appraisal, chairman Lee Harding referred to it as a "challenge your board has feared over recent months".

Cressing Road, which holds 4,151 and has cover on three sides, is a tidy, well maintained ground, but lacks the X factor which would make it truly memorable. Poor access and limited parking are major drawbacks. Two sharp left turns take you from the road into town off the A120 and into a housing estate of art deco flat tops and narrow thoroughfares. It's most unsatisfactory, and the problem is exacerbated by a tiny, unmade car park at the rear of the Clubhouse End. Turnstiles in the north and west corners provide access to this part of the ground. The clubhouse, far more appealing inside than out, and dressing rooms are

squeezed into the space between the car park and an uncovered terrace behind the goal. These are housed in a low, narrow red-brick block with a pitched roof. A group of portable buildings to the right of the terrace includes an excellent club shop, on whose windows the team sheet is thoughtfully taped. A new block of flats towers over this end. Heaven knows what the disruption must have been like during their construction.

The top of the open terrace is a good vantage point from which to survey Cressing Road. The main stand, extended recently to a length of about 40 yards, straddles the halfway line on the right-hand side. It is a boxy, unattractive structure in blue metal sheeting with six roof columns ensuring there is no obstruction-free viewing from seven rows of blue plastic tip-up seats arranged in four bays. There is shallow terracing either side, and four spindly floodlight pylons, a system erected 42 years ago, positioned to the rear. Behind, there is another football pitch.

The Cressing Road side stand, to the left as you look down from the terrace, is reminiscent of the scratching shed at Dagenham & Redbridge. Its low, pitched roof shelters four steps of terracing, with four floodlight pylons located behind in a scruffy piece of grass apparently used as the club's dump and main storage area. The presence of bulky dug-outs, Perspex on brick bases, in front of the stand either side of halfway does little to improve the quality of the view from here. With both managers and their assistants taking up every inch of the technical areas, a position well away from the middle is needed to see any of the action. A centrally located scaffolding TV gantry doesn't help the situation. The tiny wooden shed at the back of the terracing is home to the public address announcer. Again, there is shallow terracing either side of this cover, which runs between the outer edges of the two penalty areas.

The stand at the Quag End, towards which the pitch slopes slightly from the halfway line, is the most characterful in the ground. Though low, narrow and only about 20 yards long, it somehow requires 13 columns to support an angled roof which shelters a couple of steps of terracing. The barrier round the pitch is fashioned from steel, with corrugated panels used to fill in any gaps left by breaks in the advertising hoardings. All the stands are painted blue, with yellow fascia trim, and this helps tie the three together. A blue fence, of corrugated metal sheeting, encloses the ground, and has a unifying effect. Note the angled corners of the ground - a legacy of a former running and cycling track, and one of the few quirky features of Cressing Road. Inoffensive, but uninspiring.

This was a fairly typical Football Conference contest. Lots of energy and commitment, but nowhere near as much composure and skill as one would like. Braintree, who began life in 1898 as the works team of Crittalls, a window frame manufacturer, hence their 'Iron' nickname, were just outside the play-off places before the game got under way. Judging by the moans from those around us, Town haven't been playing well of late. The gate was some way below their league average of 544, suggesting four matches over the festive period is too much for many pockets. Not that the opposition, Hampton & Richmond Borough, was much

of a draw. The visitors, who knocked Braintree out of the FA Cup earlier in the season, were just a couple of spots above the relegation zone.

But, as we discovered when playing Town's pre-match results prediction game, the league table does not tell the whole story. For long periods, the Beavers were the better side. They defended their lead tenaciously, were capable of moving the ball about nicely, and with several big lads in their line-up, could outmuscle Braintree in key areas of the pitch. Borough were almost denied a point in a rousing finish at odds with the fairly mundane nature of what preceded it.

A dull first half was enlivened by two incidents of note. In the ninth minute, Iron keeper Craig Holloway denied Dave Tarpey from a tight angle after slick interplay between Craig Dundas and Karl Beckford. But Holloway had no chance with Borough's goal 20 minutes later. Marcello Fernandes aimed a free-kick at the stocky Dundas, and when home skipper Paul Goodacre headed away weakly, Beckford crashed the loose ball into the top corner from the edge of the penalty area. The elderly woman standing next to us summed up Braintree's efforts as "rubbish, rubbish, rubbish".

Town, whose decent approach play was spoiled by a failure to find a decisive final pass, were much better after the break. George Purcell brought a smart save out of Matt Lovett with a rising, angled drive, and substitute Brad Quinton was a foot wide with a 25-yard free-kick. Borough remained a threat on the break, and Beckford wasted an opportunity to clinch the points when he shot tamely at Holloway from 10 yards after a Dundas pull-back had fallen kindly for him. Two minutes later, and with 14 left, the home team grabbed a deserved equaliser. Purcell crossed from the right flank, and Mike Power got ahead of his marker on the edge of the six-yard box to prod the ball past Lovett. It set up an exciting climax. Sean Marks, another Braintree sub, shot hastily when he had time to pick his spot, and Borough's Fernandes was inches too high with a dipping free-kick from 20 yards. Deep in stoppage time, Lovett made a superb save to preserve a point for the visitors. Purcell smashed a 20-yard free-kick goal-wards, and the Borough keeper, reacting instinctively, somehow diverted it over the crossbar.

So, testing times ahead for Braintree - on and off the pitch. The reality is they would be better off avoiding promotion until the new stadium is ready. The team may not be good enough to go up this season, but progress cannot be held back deliberately and indefinitely. Steely determination will be needed to see the Iron through a tricky predicament.

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