

TT No.143: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 23rd January 2010; **Heanor Town v Greenwood Meadows**; East Midlands Counties League; Res: 3-4; Att: 74; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Trig and trim, the Town Ground at Heanor is an enclosure of considerable charm. Its utilitarian infrastructure won't win any awards for grand design, but a pleasant upland setting amid an orderly estate of red-brick semis compensates for such shortcomings. Lovers of the quirky will find plenty to please the eye at a three-sided venue contiguous with a cricket club and whose terraces - some of which are delightfully archaic grassy banks - offer distant views of the rolling hills to the south. Those same terraces and banking must have been packed in 1958 when a record crowd of 6,511 saw Heanor lose 5-1 to Fourth Division Carlisle United in the first round of the FA Cup.

Town, whose spicily varied life since formation in 1883 has seen them play in nine different leagues, are tenants of Amber Valley District Council. This sort of arrangement is frequently a source of friction and frustration to football clubs, but the Lions are content with what they get for their money. Council workers tend the pitch - and do a great job. A gang of them had been down in midweek to repair the damage caused by the recent wintry weather, and got the surface in impressive condition for this fixture between teams respectively positioned second and fourth in the table before kick-off.

Heanor's heart, the market place, is two minutes' walk from the ground - and scarcely beating. This isn't a prosperous town. The collapse of the coal industry during the 1980s was followed by the demise of its textile counterpart in the 1990s, and the ongoing recession has added insult to those injuries. The feeble market is down to a handful of stalls, and its traders were already packing their bags by half-one in the afternoon. Unappealing charity shops abound. And yet just off the market place a big Tesco is thriving. Revelling in its role of traffic-congester-in-chief, the store attracts the same frenzied attention as aid trucks dishing out bags of rice in Haiti. The retail giant wants to expand its operation here, and judging by posters in their window displays, Heanor's surviving smaller shops are desperate to have the plan stymied. Trouble is, once the likes of Tesco, a voracious and ruthless pursuer of profit, are permitted a foothold in your community, complete takeover is the inevitable ambition and outcome. One day very soon, we will regret bowing to the blandishments of such destructive forces. To get a perspective on Heanor's lofty location, nip round the back of the 12th Century parish church of St Lawrence. The terrain plunges away giddily into the valley of the River Erewash, with the M1, a bold slash across the landscape, clearly visible in the distance.

At the Town Ground, Heanor secretary Keith Costello, overseeing pre-match preparations, kindly offered us a tour behind the scenes. Turn right once through the main gate on Mayfield Avenue and three buildings, all different, fringe the

south-western boundary of the cricket pitch. The first is a social club, owned by the football club and now open seven days a week. It's a handy source of income, and neat enough, though Keith concedes a lick of fresh paint wouldn't go amiss. Beyond, the next building houses the old dressing rooms and the committee room, which is still in use. These dressing rooms, warming as a bowl of porridge, are used by the club's 10 other teams - eight junior, and one each for over-35 veterans and women. The walls of the committee room are adorned with interesting mementoes. There are programmes dating back to that FA Cup run of the 1950s, Team of the Round awards marking FA Vase heroics past, and a photograph of Nigel Pearson, as captain of Sheffield Wednesday, lifting the Rumbelows Cup at Wembley in 1991. Pearson, along with Nigel Clough, began his career in Heanor's black and white colours. Further round the boundary is the cute whitewashed pavilion of the cricket club, also called Heanor Town. They play in the Derbyshire League.

Back at the main gate, where a table acts as a turnstile, you enter opposite the common border between the two pitches. To the left, set back from the pitch behind a wide area of tarmac, is a boxy stand containing 50 red plastic tip-up seats. This structure, of grey metal sheeting on a blue metal frame, is about 25 yards long and four, deep. Alongside, in an undistinguished flat-topped red-brick block, are the new dressing rooms. Refreshments are served from a hatch at the far side, close to the ground's north-west corner.

The north side is the most interesting part of the Town Ground, and is dominated by a larger and newer version of the stand behind the near goal. Straddling the halfway line, and also set back from the pitch, this is some 40 yards long and five, deep. It replaced an earlier structure condemned by what the Lions regarded as an over-zealous safety inspector, hammer in hand and eager to sniff out rust. Strangely, the new stand was merely built over the existing terracing, which is most unsatisfactory. The two steps are unnecessarily wide, and slope down slightly towards the pitch. Posture rendered awkward, and no crush barriers to provide support, standing on them is an uncomfortable experience. The club should have rebuilt the terracing because there is room for several tiers with smaller tread depths. In front of the stand are low, narrow dug-outs, made from red brick, with a shared roof of battered metal sheeting. Note the presence at this point of the only remaining section of a traditional white picket fence. This has been replaced elsewhere by a bog-standard post and rail barrier painted white. On the west side of the stand are three broad steps of terracing covered in grass, with a grassy bank filling in the area to the east. To the rear is a piece of waste ground with a pitch laid out for juniors. The square tower of St Lawrence's (presumably not novelist D. H. Lawrence, born in neighbouring Eastwood and, in his day, as racy as Jilly Cooper) provides a welcome focal point beyond. The north-east corner of the Town Ground was the only part of the playing surface deemed a little heavy at a mid-morning inspection ahead of our game. There is a good reason for this. When council workers, years ago, used a crane to erect the floodlights, they inadvertently broke some of the drains in this area.

The east end is lovely. Tarmac hardstanding backs on to another grassy bank, along which runs a belt of mature trees. Behind a tall, wire mesh fence are the back gardens of more red-brick semis on Mundy Street. A traditional cricket scoreboard used to stand on top of the banking in the south-east corner, but sadly this wonderful structure has been demolished since my last visit in 2001. Portable metal barriers separate the two pitches, though, the presence of two industrious ball boys apart, the south side is effectively off limits to spectators. Adding to the overwhelming Englishness of the scene, a bowling green has been squeezed into the area between the cricket club's southern boundary and the houses on Stainsby Avenue. You will notice how both pitches slope downhill from north to south. The floodlights here are also worthy of note. Those in the south-west and north-east corners are mounted on bulky mobile phone towers, while more familiar beanpole masts are used for those in the north-west and south-east corners.

With Heanor becalmed by the ravages of winter, this was the club's first home game since December 12th. Town's regulars greeted each other wryly with handshakes, and 'Happy New Year' messages, while veteran programme editor Stan Wilton reflected gloomily on how many issues had been compiled in recent weeks, and then sent straight to recycling as snow piled upon snow, and postponement followed postponement. It was our first footy outing since December 28th, and, boy, was this thrilling contest worth the wait. Greenwood Meadows led on three occasions, and each time Heanor pegged them back. But the Nottingham-based opposition scored again - and held off a late assault from the Lions.

The visitors, all pace, cohesion and movement, looked hot from the kick-off. Heanor, with two big lads in the middle of their back line, struggled to match the tempo. Home keeper Sam Ogrizovic was called on to make two spectacular saves before Greenwood Meadows went ahead in the 15th minute. Zeke Jenkins beat three defenders on a run to the left bye-line, Theo Smith laid back his low cross, and Chris Atkins, unmarked on the edge of the box, thumped a low drive confidently into the net. Heanor had an escape when David Durrant took an age to control the ball at the back post, and struck an upright with his close-range shot, while Aled Biggs headed an Atkins corner off his own goal-line after Ogrizovic, clearly hesitant on crosses, lost the ball in flight. With 26 minutes gone, Heanor equalised. Greenwood Meadows were dispossessed in midfield, and top scorer Dan Williams raced on to a through ball, rounded keeper Paul Farnsworth and slid home from a tight angle. There was controversy two minutes later. Atkins and Adam Kay went down as they chased the ball into the box. Referee Steven Watts, whom we thought had a very good game, awarded a penalty, without consulting an assistant just 10 yards from the incident. Smith waited for the protests to subside before blasting his spot-kick into the bottom corner. Unstoppable. There was still time for two more goals before the break. Heanor levelled in the 35th minute with a cracking effort. Williams crossed from the right to the back post, and Jay Lee Hodgson, a player who could strike the ball cleanly with both feet, battered a 10-yard volley past Farnsworth almost without pausing for thought. Within four minutes, Greenwood Meadows led again. Heanor failed to clear in their penalty

area, and Craig Meakin zipped an angled 12-yarder through a jungle of legs and under Ogrizovic. Phew!

Games such as this often peter out in the second half. Not this one. Five minutes after the restart, Hodgson smashed a volley into the roof of the net, only for his effort to be ruled out for pushing his marker. Ogrizovic used his right leg to deny Meakin when the visiting midfielder looked a certain scorer, and Farnsworth brilliantly tipped over a rasping Ashley Grayson drive. Graham Wells dragged a shot across the visitors' goal when through on the left side of the box, but Heanor made it 3-3 in the 62nd minute. Farnsworth booted a back pass straight to Williams, and the burly striker returned it with interest from 20 yards, finding the net via an upright. Three minutes later, Greenwood Meadows went 4-3 up. Smith, whose pace and close control were simply dazzling, evaded the attentions of three Heanor players to cross from the right corner. Ogrizovic came and failed to claim, leaving Durrant to direct a looping header into the unguarded net. The hosts pressed for a fourth equaliser, and were denied a point in stoppage time when Hodgson was flagged offside as he beat Farnsworth from 12 yards. Greenwood Meadows, recording their ninth win in 11 away league games, climbed to third, with Heanor, beaten at home for only the second time this season, dropping to fourth.

What a great first match of 2010. With the threat of waterlogging still a very real one, we had a list of other options as back-up on our drive down to Derbyshire - but we headed home with Sports Report safe in the knowledge we couldn't have done better for entertainment anywhere in the country. Full marks to both teams.

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