

TT No.147: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 30th January 2010; **Fleetwood Town** v Hinckley United; Conference North; Res: 3-1; Att: 1,442; Admission: £11; Programme: £2 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Perhaps someone ought to tell Fleetwood Town. The ambitious Fylde club have been rebuilding their Highbury ground bit by bit since 2006, and on Wednesday Wyre Borough planners will decide whether or not to give them the green light to complete the fourth and final phase of the work. This is a 2,000-seat 'flagship' stand along the east touchline, and, judging by drawings on the club website, it will bear a striking resemblance to the structure on the Mold Road side at Wrexham's Racecourse Ground. Slated to contain community facilities, offices and a souvenir shop, construction could start by April, with completion scheduled for early 2011. Fleetwood, who have kept residents informed throughout the revamp, are confident the council will play ball. Three new stands have already transformed the appearance of what was a tatty, tired and haphazardly laid out venue, and the last piece of the jigsaw will banish memories of the way things used to be. But consider this: Wouldn't Town really have been much better off starting afresh at a new site?

Hemmed in by houses, the physical constraints of the parcel of land on which Highbury is built have made compromises inevitable during the revamp. It's an awkward conversion - an aesthetic mish-mash. The all-seater Highbury Stand, opened last August, on the west side stops abruptly soon after the halfway line because of the need to retain the old block containing the dressing rooms. The human right of homeowners to have light through their back windows has resulted in the terraced stand at the south end also being cut short, well before reaching the south-west corner. None of the stands are particularly tall - again, I imagine, to keep the club's neighbours happy. Worse still, some of Highbury's original shortcomings have not gone away. These include astonishingly inadequate access down what is little more than an alley off Highbury Avenue, and virtually no on-site parking. When you think of the empty brownfield sites dotted around Fleetwood, Town's decision to stay put and simply improve what they have seems bizarre in the extreme.

Town, and their 'Cod Army' of fans, may be thrilled with the shiny new facilities, but there is nothing here to excite the grounds enthusiast. The three new stands, erected at a cost of about £1m, are all bog-standard cantilevers - the sort seen across the country. Highbury could now be anywhere. And owing to the physical restrictions of the site, the stands don't even have the advantages of symmetry and uniformity. At least the old set-up, developed piecemeal since staging its first game in the 1930s, had some individuality. Remember the stand behind the park end goal, with Fleetwood Town spelled out in huge white letters on the red back wall? Do you recall looking for traces of the speedway track, used by the

Fleetwood Flyers team, complete with future world champion Peter Craven, during the 1950s?

Still, let's give credit where it's due. Chairman Andy Pilley is the man behind the shake-up at Highbury. When he arrived, the place was falling to pieces. This west coast visionary has kept his promises to the community, and Town are now close to winning a place in Conference National, the pinnacle of the non-league game. That's some achievement for a club which had to start again in 1997 having gone bust. The locals clearly approve. In 2002-03, Town's average gate in the First Division of the North West Counties League was just 115. This season, it's 1,091 - and the attendance of 1,442 for today's top-versus-third encounter was way above that. Pilley, despite Fleetwood's relatively mild micro-climate, also had the foresight to invest in frost covers, which form a dome under which hot air can be blown. While most clubs have struggled to get a game on during the deep freeze of the past two months, carefree Town have chalked up seven consecutive matches at Highbury. It must be the best £15,000 Pilley has ever spent. He also splashed out £125,000 on re-laying the pitch and installing new drains. Those decisions have proved a boon for groundhoppers stymied by the unexpectedly harsh winter. In short, Fleetwood offer a solid Plan B if, as on this day, frost sabotages Plan A.

Highbury is tucked away in an unappealing residential district on the east side of Fleetwood, once a busy fishing port. Without the presence of the new Football League-quality beanpole floodlights, the ground would be impossible to spot. A gap in the red-brick semis on Highbury Avenue is an unlikely - and wholly unheralded - main entrance. There is a tiny car park behind the Highbury Stand. Note how the original Main Stand has not yet been demolished. As odd a sight as you will see at a football ground, it is hard up against the back of the new stand, with its roof leaning over its neighbour as if a rakish item of headgear. Access is via turnstiles in the north-west corner. Beneath the Memorial Stand - at the Memorial Park end, opened last summer and holding 1,473 - is Jim's Sports Bar. This I found overheated, cavernous and short on seats, and I didn't linger longer than it took to check out the club shop, which was in the charge of a sullen teenage girl, who avoided uttering a single syllable during my two-minute transaction.

The Highbury Stand, built on the remnants of the speedway track, offers 550 red plastic tip-up seats in six rows. It's an extra quid to transfer, but we didn't pay because another uncommunicative teenage girl collecting the money let us walk past without challenge. It left one wondering about the level of organisation at the club, particularly when spectators arriving from twenty to three found the unremarkable programme had sold out. At least the chap sitting next to us was friendly, and revealed he had been converted to the club earlier this season. Having enjoyed the atmosphere on his first visit, he hadn't missed a home game since. Adjacent to the Highbury Stand, beyond a canvas concertina players' tunnel, is a red-brick, pitched-roof structure housing the dressing rooms.

Part of the south end is taken up by the 621-capacity Percy Ronson Stand, the first phase of the redevelopment, and, in common with its counterpart opposite, a cover over about 15 steps of terracing, with two rows of red crush barriers. The

hotchpotch collection of buildings on the east side is destined to be bulldozed. These include a low shed (presumably the groundsman's lair), a social club, and a couple of stacked containers masquerading as executive boxes. Rudimentary indeed. A flimsy scaffolding TV gantry is perched on top. Phase four of the revamp cannot come soon enough. The floodlights are corner masts, with eight lamps on each. None of this, unfortunately, is in any way memorable. Dull, dull, dull. You gaze about, and think: So, what?

The game was competitive and lively until the 56th minute, when Fleetwood killed off the opposition by going 3-1 ahead. Hinckley were up against it from the first minute. Pacy winger Sean Clancy broke strongly down the left flank, and Adam Warlow got to his team-mate's cross a split second before Knitters keeper Christopher McKenzie to steer in his 18th goal of the season. The visitors recovered from that early setback to produce the better football in the first half. James Mace equalised in the 32nd minute, turning quickly on a loose ball in the penalty area to poke it into the roof of the net from 10 yards. But Fleetwood regained the lead in stoppage time. Jamie Mullan, whose selection as man of the match prompted guffaws from the regulars around us when announced over the barely audible public address, raced on to a long ball from the back, out-muscled his marker and beat the advancing McKenzie in a one-on-one.

Fleetwood dominated a tepid second half. They scored again just before the hour when Nick Rogan made the most of a neat dink from debutant Anthony Barry to slip the ball past the exposed McKenzie, who had a thoroughly unhappy afternoon. His kicking was awful, he slid to his knees twice when making clearances, and the more he was goaded by the home fans, the worse he got. Hinckley needed an immediate reply, but faded after Andrew Hall, with only keeper Craig Dootson to beat, squandered their best chance by over-running the ball. From that point, both teams were content to play out time. Fleetwood remain three points clear at the top, having played two games more than title rivals Southport, who won 2-1 at Stafford Rangers.

I couldn't in any way recommend the new Highbury, other than as a standby when the weather is inclement. It will look less disjointed when the much taller, deeper and more impressive flagship East Stand is open, but one can't help speculating how the ground, and especially the area around it, will cope with bigger crowds, and far larger away followings, if Town secure promotion to Conference National.