

TT No.168: Paul Roth - Sat Feb 20th 2010; Gloucestershire County League; **Brimscombe & Thrupp AFC** vs. Ellwood FC; Res: 0-1; Att: 55; Programme: 20 pages for £2 including admission; Weather: Sunny with promise of Spring in the air; Altitude: The Meadow varies in elevation as to where you stand upon it! 61m (200.131ft) above sea level is a mean approximation of its sublimation.

Periodically over the years I've passed by The Meadow, the home of Brimscombe & Thrupp AFC, both by train on the GWR line that runs between Swindon and Gloucester and on the A419 London Road that links Cirencester with Stroud. It's a splendid venue, though I doubted that I'd ever attend a match there. But following their re-elevation to the SGCL this season, coupled with the fact that the club are regular programme issuers, my previous incertitude has been rendered misplaced.

Brimscombe and Thrupp, villages inexorably conjoined, lay due east of Stroud, within the Frome Valley. The derelict Thames & Severn Canal and River Frome course along its bottom with its steep, wooded sides ascending sharply upwards.

Readers might be surprised to learn, as indeed I was, that Brimscombe was once a busy port and important local commercial centre during the Industrial Revolution. It was built to transfer cargo from Severn Trows, which travelled from the River Severn down the Stroudwater Navigation, to Thames Barges that carried their goods eastward to London.

If you search out the Ship Inn, at the foot of nearby Brimscombe Hill, the pub sign there depicts the Severn Trow with its double-masts, resplendent under full sail. Boat builders Abdela & Mitchell constructed state-of-the-art paddle steamers for export all over the world from their shipyard here. Until 1964 you could have alighted at Brimscombe station. Today, long after Dr. Beeching's axe has fallen, Stroud is the nearest railhead.

The Lilywhites were founded in the same year as the Gloucestershire FA, 1886, and have been playing at The Meadow for over 100 years. The Stroud League was formed in 1902 and the club won the initial championship. 1922 saw the Gloucestershire Northern Senior League created. Once again, AFC Brimscombe were inaugural winners. During the 1970s they narrowly missed out on election to the Hellenic League, in fact by just one vote, but it was at this period in their history that hard times befell them. Bouncing back during the 1980s, AFC Brimscombe, who had in the meantime amalgamated with Thrupp FC, won divisions two and one plus the County Cup in the space of just three seasons.

2008/09 proved to be another successful campaign, promotion back to the senior division from the northern section again being achieved.

Parched, following my 164-mile westward journey, liquid succour was sought and found in varied institutions along the way. If the view from the public bar window, across the snow-covered hills, at the Black Horse in Amberley isn't the finest in all

England, then I challenge anyone to show me finer. I could easily have thought myself transmigrated to the French Alps!

The Meadow is a spectacular location. Entry to it is accessed through a narrow driveway, just past the impressive roadside hoarding that advertises the club's forthcoming fixture. Upon entry, a sharp right turn leads to the car park, a veritable quagmire today. Laying before and below you now, The Meadow.

Its northerly side accommodates a characterful corrugated iron-fronted stand, an open air seated dais for that all important alfresco half time cuppa, changing block, a still-to-be-finished and further raised-up disabled viewing platform and modern clubhouse; the club's history is descriptively portrayed with words and pictures, both old and new, on its walls. Dugouts are situated opposite and the whole is surrounded by a white concrete post and metal rail barrier

Blue and white goal netting, the club's colours, complete the breath-taking setting. Even the encroaching heavy industry is somehow softened, almost camouflaged, by the area's bucolic magnificence.

Helpful club secretary Clive Baker had reserved me a copy of the excellent, twenty-page, colour programme. This can also be purchased at the aforementioned entry point. Clive was at pains to explain to me that the pitch had been under water as recently as Thursday morning; luckily it drains as quickly as it floods!

Ellwood, from the Forest of Dean, presently prop up the league table and with this in mind I incorrectly anticipated a comfortable home victory. Reduced to ten men midway through the first half when their No. 5 was sent off, the visitors defended doggedly and rather against the run of play took the lead through Julian Addis' score on the stroke of half-time.

In fact, so near to teatime was this strike recorded that the ball was never brought back to the centre spot for the game to restart, the players instead headed off and up the steps for a well-earned hot drink, leaving me wondering if referee Steve Thomas had actually awarded a goal. He had and Ellwood clung on to this slender lead as if their very lives depended on it. The latter forty-five minutes were mostly Brimscombe's but try as they might, and despite hitting an upright and the crossbar, they couldn't breach their obdurate guests' goal line. The scalpel needed to slice through a determined defence was patently lacking today.

The 2 o'clock kick-off, I do like those, meant I was back in Margate by 7.19pm, able to recount my day's wonderment to my long-suffering wife who listened with admirable attentiveness, and able to enjoy a leisurely glass or three of Pinot Grigio before settling down to watch 'Celebrity MR & MRS'. Could a day be more complete?

Its uncommon that all the ingredients that constitute the perfect groundhopping experience come together quite so exquisitely. It's only my humble opinion, but I reckon Brimscombe and Thrupp AFC's Meadow ground is one of this country's greatest Non-League footballing venues.

FGIF Star rating: 5*.

06/20