

**TT No.17: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 29th August 2009; **FC Brimington** v Phoenix S&S; CML Prem Division; Res: 1-1; Att: 45 (h/c); Admission: £2; Programme: £1 (12pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

Worksop Town's loss appears to be FC Brimington's gain. The latter, newcomers to the Central Midlands League Premier Division this season, are, along with the Sheffield Wednesday women's team, using the Tigers' well-appointed former Sandy Lane ground, having reached an agreement to do so with the landlord. Worksop, for reasons not, it seems, altogether clear, have been locked out of the ground since May 2008, and were forced to groundshare with Hucknall Town last season and for the 2009-10 campaign are bedfellows of Ilkeston Town. FC Brimington, formed only in March 2007 as a Sunday league team by ambitious chairman/manager Cliff Thomas, capitalised on a horribly messy impasse (or worse) to gain access to Conference North-standard facilities overnight. This, I imagine, was most welcome because the club had moved on quickly to the Sheffield-based Blades Super-draw League, but were struggling to find a suitable home in or near their home village, located between Chesterfield and Staveley. It does mean, however, that a Derbyshire club are playing their home fixtures in neighbouring Nottinghamshire. Make of that what you will.

Functional Sandy Lane, built to replace Worksop Town's lamented Central Avenue ground when it was sold off to give shoppers more space to park, opened in 1992 on the site of a former sand quarry, landfill site and council recreation ground. Since then, industrial and retail units have all but surrounded it. This has probably never been an attractive spot - and it certainly isn't now. You reach the tiny car park via a hard-to-spot ramp close to a retail outlet. The solitary turnstile block at the east end of the ground is alongside a two-storey social club, which, clad mostly in wood, has a vaguely continental air. This building, the only one that appears to have felt the hand of a designer, jars against its dreary surroundings. The bar, featuring leather sofas, on the ground floor is rather nice, though. It, and the tea dispensed, went down rather better with the travellers present than the news that, for some reason, the Central Midlands League had bought FC Brimington's entire stock of new lapel badges.

Behind the near end goal is a gem of a stand - a basic tin cover about 10 yards long. In common with everything else, it is painted in Worksop's amber and black colours. Given the depressing turn of events, it's all a bit sad. A couple of portable buildings next to it used to be Town's club shop, if my memory serves me correctly. The north side of the ground is an uncovered, wide concrete terrace, with scrub and railway sidings behind. Perpsex dug-outs are positioned either side of the halfway line, with supplementary wooden benches provided for those not important enough to get a seat under cover. A large kit-stand - about 20 yards long and with four rows of black plastic tip-up seats, dominates the narrow west end, beyond which there are houses.

The most arresting feature of Sandy Lane is its curious main stand. This high, narrow, symmetrical structure, which has a break in the middle as if the victim of an earth tremor, runs between the two 18-yard lines. Considering its lack of depth - there are just five rows of black or green plastic tip-up seats - and how relatively new it is, an astonishing 10 columns are required to support the roof, which makes obstruction-free viewing extremely difficult. The roof, in fluted metal panels, bends suddenly at the front to form a deep fascia. Two-storey glazed red-brick blocks at each end appear to be kitted out for use by the 'prawn sandwich brigade', and serve to make access to the stand an awkwardly single-file operation. Flanking the structure, and maintaining that sense of symmetry, are two small kit stands, each with four rows of black plastic tip-up seats. They help give Sandy Lane an impressive 1,000 seats in an overall capacity of 3,200. The dressing rooms are housed in shabby portable buildings squeezed into an oblong patch of land behind the main stand, with a short, caged tunnel between the main and kit stands at the east end of the ground giving players access to the pitch. The pitch barrier, and the fence enclosing Sandy Lane, comprises an ugly, messy mixture of styles and materials. The floodlights are mounted on slender masts, with three to each side. Not, all in all, a particularly appealing venue. Even the pitch looks worn in places, despite the season being only a few weeks old. To offset all that, and offset it does, the welcome for new visitors is genuine and friendly.

Still, it must feel like Wembley to the FC Brimington players, who went into this match on the back of a 5-1 win - their first in the CML - at fellow newcomers South Normanton Athletic. With sharper finishing, they might have repeated that score against Phoenix Sports & Social, who hail from the post-industrial frontier-land between Sheffield and Rotherham. After the novelty of discovering the home team (for whatever reason) were wearing shirts with names and squad numbers, there turned out to be more excitement in the opening four minutes than most of the rest of the first half. Brimington skipper Elliott Christie volleyed high and wide when found unmarked 10 yards out by an Andrew Bath cross. Home keeper Adam Valente had to dive full length to push aside a low effort from Tom Colclough, and Jamie Ketteringham somehow managed to stand on the ball when a simple tap-in would have put Phoenix ahead. As happens so often, Brimington broke down the other end immediately and a Jervais Christie cross from the right was swept into the net from close range by Michael Gartlan, a striker who impressed throughout with his pace and ball control. Some start!

Inevitably, the momentum eased and the early promise petered out, but the visitors levelled with 34 minutes on the clock. Aron Cross sliced a shot from a corner, and when the ball reared up off a defender's arm, Reece Wooley ignored the clamour for a penalty to ram it home from eight yards. Phoenix almost had an interval lead, but Tom Colclough's angled drive flew inches wide. Close enough to get us out of our seats. Brimington bossed the second half, but couldn't find a way past keeper James Hallows. They really stepped up the pressure in the last 25 minutes. The closest they went to a winner was when Andy Athey had to clear off the line after an Elliott Christie shot had struck big Phoenix striker Steve Spence - more ornament than use in his own box - and rolled towards the net. Hallows

saved well with his legs as Gartlan attempted to 'nutmeg' him from an acute angle in a one-on-one. Home skipper Christie lunged at a low Gartlan cross to the far post following a dazzling run along the dead-ball line from the forward, but was agonisingly unable to make contact.

Phoenix had a couple of chances, too. Wooley, all alone 16 yards from goal when picked out by Dave Parry's free-kick, narrowly failed to lob Valente, who had to stretch to make the catch, and the Brimington keeper later smothered a low drive from substitute Cross. But you got the impression neither side would have scored again if the game had been extended to midnight.

As a postscript, there is hope of an end to Worksop Town's exile. A company by the name of Commercial Estates Group wants to build a retail and industrial estate on the 55-acre former Vesuvius UK site in the town. The development, very much in its embryonic phase, is planned to include, among other things, a hotel, a superstore and a community sports stadium, which has been earmarked for the Tigers. In the meantime, Sandy Lane exists in a strange sort of limbo. Used by teams who struggle to attract any sort of crowd, and with facilities way in excess of what either need. Daft, isn't it?

06/20