

TT No.171: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 27th February 2010; **Gresley FC v Whitehawk**; FA Vase Sixth Round; Res: 1-3; Att: 861; Admission: £6; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

In a week during which financial mismanagement in football hit the headlines again, Gresley FC seemed like an appropriate destination as we sought a fixture capable of beating the latest onslaught of wintry weather. Gresley Rovers were liquidated last summer with reported debts of about £350,000, and a group of fans immediately set up a new club to play in the East Midlands Counties League this season. They've done well. The latest incarnation of the Moatmen is still in the championship shake-up, and this game marked their appearance in the quarter-finals of the FA Vase. Chester City, and to a lesser extent Portsmouth, supporters would welcome the news there can be life after sporting death.

Happily, and perhaps best of all, Gresley FC were able to play at the Moat Ground, one of the most characterful enclosures in Britain, and used by the original club. Rovers moved into The Moat, tight and tiny, in 1909. It witnessed some great occasions, not least a compelling run to the Vase final in 1991, but the Southern League title triumph of 1997 under former Football League professionals Paul Futcher and Garry Birtles signalled the start of Rovers' demise. Promotion to the Conference was denied because the ground was not up to the standard required. Star players baled-out, playing fortunes declined, and debts increased steadily before the inevitable collapse of last summer.

Football people, if not their creditors, have a way of shrugging off this sort of heartbreak, starting afresh, and building towards better things. Gresley's stalwarts were no different, and this tie against Brighton-based Sussex County League leaders Whitehawk represented the high point in the new club's short history. A crowd pushing 900 was the biggest seen at The Moat in years. As we shall see later, though, there was no fairy-tale ending.

The fact Church Gresley, a former mining village perched on a lofty spine of land, was able to sustain a senior club in the upper reaches of the pyramid for so long is something of a miracle. But Rovers could always count on a good following in an area dominated by Derby County, and the new club are easily the best supported in the East Midlands Counties League. You might think upwardly mobile neighbours Burton Albion would offer a counter attraction, but the Moatmen and the Brewers have long been fierce rivals. Most Gresley-ites would rather stop watching football altogether than be seen at the Pirelli Stadium. Burton chairman Ben Robinson is, however, keen to build bridges. His financial services company sponsored this match, and included a good luck message in the programme.

The Moat Ground is secreted amid a maze of narrow streets off Church Gresley's main thoroughfare. There's scarcely room to draw breath, and the atmosphere becomes even more claustrophobic once you've negotiated the turnstiles alongside

the entrance on Moat Street, which is so confined it has been made one-way. Put simply, this fascinating venue is a triumph of ingenuity, and brings to mind the wonders worked in similarly restricted circumstances at Kenilworth Road, Luton. Eight separate areas of cover have been shoehorned into a site capable of accommodating just 2,400. In some parts of this higgledy-piggledy ground, which is secured in the vice-like grip of Victorian red brick terraced houses, there is barely room for two people to pass. With a good crowd in, it makes for a vibrant environment, though any sort of rapid evacuation would be impossible.

The Main Stand, on the east side and the nearest to the unprepossessing Moat Street entrance, is the sole nod to modernity. This squat, short, deep structure is, like almost every other surface at the Moat Ground, painted bright red. It replaced a quaint wooden stand which did yeoman service for decades. There are four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats at the front, with boxes for directors (open) and the press (glazed) at the rear. A dark passageway runs along the back and provides access to the building housing the dressing rooms. The players reach the pitch down an alley between the stand and a patch of raised terracing. Also crammed into this side, in a variety of structures, are a kitchen, the club shop, toilets, and a wooden social club. The last listed, near the south-eastern corner, looks like a scout hut. The dug-outs, fashioned from metal corrugated sheeting, are positioned below another raised area of terracing between the Main Stand and the social club. Four floodlight masts tower over this motley collection of edifices.

The north end comprises a strip of flagged hardstanding less than two yards wide. Two simple covers flank the goal, behind which is the high wall of gardens belonging to the adjacent red-brick terraces. It's a close relationship, and netting suspended from telegraph poles prevent it from becoming even more intimate. A wooden snack bar has been squeezed into the north-western corner, and its proximity to the pitch means its counter has to be protected by an angled sheet of metal mesh. There are three pieces of cover on the west side, which is a little over two yards deep. The central cover shelters three rows of wooden tip-up seats, and its overhanging fascia makes for 'letter box' viewing. There are a couple of steps of terracing either side. More netting, this time attached to the four floodlights masts, ensures the ball is kept within bounds. Houses and their gardens lie beyond. The south end is similarly narrow, with more cover between the goal and the south-western corner. A second turnstile, accessed via a track threading a route through gardens, is located behind the goal. The pitch here is a switchback affair - famously so - and surrounded by a post and rail barrier painted white and infilled with plastic mesh. The Moat Ground is a complete 'hotch-potch', and hopelessly equipped to meet the needs of the 21st Century spectator. But it's a real gem; a museum piece. Long may it ward off the attentions of over-zealous grading inspectors.

It's a shame, Gresley's players froze, in every sense, on their big day. The home team were outplayed in the first half, and were lucky to go in level at the break. They were on top for the first 20 minutes of the second half, but couldn't score again when they had the visitors rocking. Against the run of play, Whitehawk

regained their composure and the lead, and when they added a third goal on the break, there was no way back for the Moatmen.

Whitehawk, managed by former West Ham United full-back George Parris, are tipped by many to lift the Vase this year. They were competent, rather than classy, on a sticky pitch which cut up badly, particularly when sleety rain began to fall after half-time. But they did dominate from the start, and their opener in the 16th minute came as no surprise. A slip by Gresley left-back Richard Butler allowed Wes Tate to cross from the right flank, and when the ball was helped on by Darren Freeman, Scott Kirkwood improvised superbly to beat keeper Gary Hateley with an overhead kick from 12 yards. Danny Davis was a couple of yards wide with a speculative 20-yard lob after a misunderstanding in the home defence, Tate brought a good save out of Hateley after losing marker Butler, and Josh Jones volleyed across goal when unmarked at the back post. Out of the blue, Gresley equalised in the second minute of stoppage time. Matt Hill swung in a corner to the near post, and it somehow defied left-back Darragh Ryan and keeper Lloyd Anderson's attempts to clear.

Spurred by that undeserved piece of good fortune, Gresley, now playing down the slope, bossed the early stages of the second half. Brian Woodall sent a 20-yard free-kick whistling inches over the bar, Tom Betteridge half-volleyed into the heavens from inside the six-yard box having been picked out by a Jamie Barrett cross, and Gareth Langford went close from distance. But Whitehawk silenced the home fans with their second goal in the 66th minute. And what a beauty it was. Substitute Kev Townsend played a lovely ball inside right-back Hill, and Jones crossed deep for Tate to score with a simple diving header as Hateley struggled to make up the ground from his near post. Hawks keeper Anderson used his legs to thwart Royce Turville in what proved to be Gresley's last decent opening. With 74 minutes on the clock, the visitors went 3-1 up, killing the tie. Another great ball from midfield sent Tate away down the middle, and he worked the ball on to his left foot before slipping it past the advancing Hateley. The Hawks almost added to their tally in the closing stages. Hateley dived full length to turn aside a low Richard Carpenter free-kick from 18 yards, and the Gresley keeper then blocked a Sam Crabb effort in a one-on-one. Gresley's final flourish, a 20-yard shot on the run from skipper Carl Slater, was saved well by Anderson.

Whitehawk will take some beating in the two-legged semi-finals of a competition which is so much more egalitarian, and therefore of greater appeal, than the FA Trophy. Gresley FC must now look to mark their debut season with title success in the East Midlands Counties League, and kick-start the long climb back to the village's former status in the pyramid. Whether the anachronistic Moat Ground can survive to match the club's ambitions stride for stride remains to be seen, but in an era of depressingly homogenous new grounds, let's hope it does. Hurrah for the anomalous!