

TT No.207: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 3rd April 2010; **St Andrews** v Holwell Sports; East Midlands Counties League; Res: 4-3; Att: 24; Admission: £3; Programme: None; FGIF Match Rating: ****.

For the second Saturday running we travelled to Leicester in expectation of goals - and were again rewarded with a sack-load. Eleven at Anstey Nomads the previous weekend, seven at St Andrews on this occasion. It was, though, a much tighter game amid the sylvan, and unexpectedly sunny, surroundings of Canal Street. Things looked bleak for the Saints when, trailing 2-1 to Holwell Sports, they had midfielder Tom Hill sent off in the 53rd minute for a second, caution-able offence. But the hosts, oddly resilient given their indifferent record this season, recovered to lead 3-2, and having been pegged back once more, won an end-to-end thriller from the penalty spot with almost the last kick of a breathless afternoon.

Such frenetic activity was quite a contrast to our pre-match entertainment. We were up and off down the M1 early so we could get in a walk along the towpath of the Grand Union Canal's 35-mile Leicester Line, which runs past one end of the St Andrews ground in Old Aylestone. I've always had a soft spot for canals, and parts of this well-known watercourse are lovely. Formed by amalgamations of once-independent canals, it joins the River Soar in Leicester, and provides a link with the River Trent and the Trent and Mersey Canal. We were heading the other way, in the direction of the famous staircase locks at Foxton. With birdsong in the air, trees budding and the unfamiliar warmth of sun on our backs, it felt, at long last, as though summer was just round the corner. Our picnic lunch was consumed perching on the gates at the picturesque King's Lock, where dazzling daffodils contrasted sharply with the whitewash of the quaint former keeper's cottage to make a quintessentially English scene. We then retraced our steps, and continued towards Leicester as far as Aylestone Mill Lock. Here, a patient heron could be seen scanning the foaming water below a weir on an adjacent beck before giving up hope of a meal, and flapping with graceful wing beats across the tree tops and into the distance. Remembering we were here for football, we dragged ourselves reluctantly away from the charms of the towpath and past the Aylestone Meadows nature reserve, next to which the Saints' ground is located. The club were founded in a pub called the Rifle Butt, and when this was demolished in 1973, they progressed from playing friendlies and entered the Leicestershire City League. The Saints became founder members of the East Midlands Counties League last season after a stint in the Premier Division of the Leicestershire Senior League.

Canal Street is such a peaceful spot, it's hard to believe the traffic and takeaways of cheerless Aylestone Road are just 200 yards distant. Such tawdriness seems a world away beyond a delightful arched bridge over the canal and down a single-track lane. When this bridge was closed for repairs a few years ago, St Andrews almost folded. The ground, which also features two pitches for the club's numerous junior teams, is built on a triangular site narrowing sharply to the south-west

owing to the convergence of the canal, the River Biam and the track-bed (now a footpath/cycleway) of the former Great Central Railway main line to London. It's a fairly basic set-up, but surprisingly spacious and undeniably pleasant.

The access lane passes a small car park for the nature reserve, continues through metal gates painted in black and white stripes (the Saints' colours) and beyond a pay box in the eastern corner before bending round to the right between a tiny stand and a plain building housing the social club and dressing rooms. It then peters out in an unmade car park at the far end. The stand, about 10 yards long and fairly modern, is positioned close to the halfway line on this, the north-east, side. It is a propped cantilever of metal sheeting painted dark green, and shelters three rows of blue plastic tip-up seats. A railed-off path alongside acts as a 'tunnel' down which the players reach the pitch having hopped across the access lane. The red-brick social club, under whose pitched roof lurks a refreshment hatch, was rendered unbearably gloomy by the necessity to close the curtains and block any view of the action. With them open, it might be a place worth lingering - if only to examine the historical team and action photographs on the walls.

The pitch, well grassed, but sticky as a hot cross bun, is surrounded by flagged hardstanding and a barrier of white concrete posts and black metal rails. Opposite the stand are two substantial dug-outs, also painted dark green, beyond which the junior pitches stretch away. A belt of trees and some rather nice examples of the hedge-layer's art separate the south-eastern end of the ground from the canal, which flows past the back gardens of desirable detached homes on the far bank. The Biam and the railway lie beyond the north-western end, on the other side of a tree-fringed grassy bank. Peeking over the boughs in the southern corner is the spire of the parish church of St Andrews. The floodlights are mounted on masts, with three strung out along each touchline. To further assist your direction-finding, the Walkers Stadium is about a mile and a half to the north-east.

Neither of these teams has been in good form of late, and both languish in the lower reaches of the EMCL. The Saints were battered 7-1 at Canal Street by Gedling Town the previous Saturday, while Holwell slumped 6-1 to FC Gresley in midweek. St Andrews are noted (at least by me) for their exceptionally poor crowds, the second lowest average in the league, and only a decent following from the Melton Mowbray-based visitors kept the attendance above an embarrassing level.

Yes, this was an exciting game, but spoiled - certainly for my partner - by the constant dissent shown towards the three match officials by the players and benches of both teams. So much for the FA's Respect campaign. When fixtures have to be cancelled because of a shortage of referees and linesmen, perhaps the penny will drop. Such carping, habitually accompanied by foul language, is unnecessary. Is it me, or is the problem getting worse?

Holwell were unlucky not to take an early grip when Leigh Fox's 20-yard free-kick cannoned back off the crossbar with home keeper Adam Smith beaten. It was clear the sides were evenly matched, and St Andrews did not edge ahead until the 31st

minute, a unmarked Will Robinson nodding in at the back post having been picked out by Josh Richards' cross from the left. The visitors levelled within a minute. Smith dived full length to push aside a low shot from Liam Prenderville, and Nick Hardy slid home the loose ball from an acute angle.

Five minutes into the second half, Ian Bitmead got on the end of an in-swinging Ryan Whatley corner to head in from close range and give Holwell the lead. It was the 100th league goal St Andrews have conceded this season. When Hill walked following a late tackle, adding to his role in an earlier incidence of 'handbags', the Saints looked in big trouble. But lanky striker Clint Gunn, all arms and legs, and impossible to pin down, was a real threat with his pace and link-up work, while Holwell's inability to get their offside trap functioning properly meant the home team had chances when breaking quickly out of defence. In the 61st minute, Gunn raced on to a long ball, and with Holwell waiting for an offside flag that never came, he rammed a firm shot past the advancing Paul Burton. Two minutes later, the Saints were 3-2 up. Gunn flicked a pass through, and with the visiting defenders again pushing up in a ragged line, Richards had the room to aim across Burton and into the far bottom corner.

Could the 10 men hold out? No. With 68 minutes on the clock, Holwell equalised. Smith saved from Mark Tinsley, and when Hardy crossed to the head of Tinsley for another go, Rob Pitman was on hand to side-foot into an empty net. Tom Sansome rescued the Saints with 11 minutes left when he got back to clear off the goal-line after Pitman had slipped a shot under Smith in a one-on-one. And just as a draw - perhaps the 'right' outcome - looked inevitable, foolish Fox manhandled Richards in the box, and Gunn smashed home a confident penalty to secure the points.

Given there was nothing other than pride at stake, this was an entertaining encounter. One's opinion of a ground is inevitably coloured by the state of the weather. On such a nice day, Canal Street is an appealing destination, though I imagine I might feel differently on a cold, wet night in November. The back chat (and that's being polite) which marred this game we can definitely do without, though I fear, given football's propensity to imitate life, seeking respect for authority figures is an increasingly forlorn hope.

Note: A programme was produced for this game, but not issued. The editor's car broke down en route to the ground from Loughborough. At the time of writing, I am waiting for a copy to arrive in the post.

06/20