

**TT No.218: *Andy Gallon*** - Mon 12th April 2010; **Curzon Ashton** v FC Halifax Town; UniBond League Division One North; Res: 0-5; Att: 803; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

Groundhopping is a lot of fun, but there's nothing like the emotional involvement of watching one's own team - especially when they're in the running for championship glory. This emphatic victory over a side with play-off ambitions took FC Halifax Town four points clear of sole title rivals Lancaster City at the top of the UniBond League Division One North table. It's been a remarkable five days for Neil Aspin's men. Trailing 3-1 at Garforth Town with three minutes of normal time remaining, Town looked dead and buried. But a sensational comeback saw them win 4-3, before then hammering Lancaster 4-0 at The Shay in front of more than 3,000 fans - the biggest crowd in the whole of the UniBond this season. How do you follow that? By taking apart a Curzon team rated by many as one of the best footballing outfits in the division. That's how!

Enough already, I can hear you groan. So, groundhopping hat (or anorak) back on, a few words about Tameside Stadium. It's a relatively new venue with none of the girl-next-door appeal of Curzon's former National Park home at the grotty end of Katherine Street, about a quarter of a mile away. The football ground, which opened in 2005, is part of a Tameside Borough Council-owned complex also containing an athletics track (rather grandly titled Richmond Park Stadium) and a full-size 3G pitch. So far, so familiar. Curzon, who attract woefully poor crowds in an area where competition for spectators is fierce, have really landed on their feet with this set-up. It may be lacking in character and distinctive features, but it has everything a club their size is ever likely to need. See how effortlessly I can patronise?

Access is a pain, unfortunately. There is a chicane to negotiate on Richmond Street just outside the main entrance, and motorists heading away barely get a sniff from the traffic lights guarding the new main road linking Ashton-under-Lyne town centre with the eastern section of Manchester's M60 orbital motorway. Parking is usually perfectly adequate, but the number of spaces available couldn't cope with the volume of traffic for this game. Curzon's last two home fixtures had attracted 60 and 154 fans - and between 650 and 700 supporters from Halifax meant homeowners in the adjacent housing estate had to put up with cars littering their pavements. Still, as I always say, if you choose to live close to a football ground, you've got to expect some disruption. Even at Curzon Ashton, a club born in 1963 following the merger of Curzon Road and Ashton Amateurs. They reached this level of football via the Manchester Amateur, Cheshire and North West Counties Leagues.

As you head down the access road, the athletics track is to the left (south), and the football stadium is ahead (west). The vertiginous height of Curzon's slender corner floodlight pylons is apparent immediately, but even these are dwarfed by

the four telecommunications masts beyond the 3G pitch. The main stand, positioned between the penalty areas on the south touchline, has a touch of Nantwich Town's about it. Bog standard, its red-brick superstructure gives way to yards of silver and grey metal cladding. It provides seven rows of blue plastic tip-up seats, with glazed hospitality boxes to the rear, behind an uncovered concourse. The legend TMBC is picked out in white seats. The players' tunnel is central, and has a Perspex dug-out to each side. I'm betting the roof, high and narrow, won't keep the rain off many punters. Not much use in Manchester, then.

The same could be said for the stand opposite, which bears some resemblance to the one Northwich Vics built before departing Drill Field, and shelters a percentage (let's be kind) of its 18 steps of terracing. This, too, sits between the penalty areas. At each open end is terracing extending to seven steps, with Heath Robinson netting suspended from poles to the rear looking incongruous amid such clean lines. What Tameside Stadium really lacks is colour. Grey, silver and blue make for a very cold ambience. A few white tiles, and it would resemble a public toilet. The crush barriers are interesting - to a collector of such oddities. Painted blue, they have lots of tightly-packed uprights and, the stand on the north side apart, are positioned in such a way at the front as to be of limited use. To the side of each stand are areas of terracing identical (if shorter) to those behind the goals. Three external features are worth mentioning. Saddleworth Moor, beautiful despite its Moors Murders connection, rises majestically above the rooftops of Ashton over to the east, a grubby beck runs behind the west end, and passenger trains can be seen and heard clattering along the railway line between Miles Platting and Ashton at the far side of the athletics track and 3G pitch. As train sets go, it's a bit of a museum piece because there is still one of those old nineteenth Century wooden signal-boxes and a gantry (the right collective noun?) of manual semaphore signals.

Right, can we get back to the Shaymen? Most Town fans had feared this would be one of our trickiest games in a season which has brought just two league defeats. We were very fortunate to beat Curzon 1-0 in the reverse fixture early in the campaign. I'm sure, Lancaster supporters had this one down as a banana skin. How wrong we all were! Town scored after 50 seconds, and again in the ninth minute. When it became 3-0 on the half-hour, the contest was over. Halifax cruised through the second half, introducing all three subs to give their star players a rest. Even then, they added two more goals - and Curzon, desperately disappointing, barely managed a single shot on target. The only individual on the pitch to perform less impressively than the home players was referee Scott Oldham. He was terrible, and maintained the UniBond's unwanted reputation for clueless match officials.

Nicky Gray got the early opener to settle Halifax nerves. Tom Baker, a bundle of energy in midfield, swung a corner in to the near post, skipper Steve Payne's bullet header was palmed away brilliantly by keeper Michael Hale (otherwise as dodgy as they come), and Gray volleyed home from eight yards. Curzon clearly learned nothing from that set-piece because the second goal was very similar. A Baker corner to the near post, and this time Payne nodded straight in. Andrew Lundey

volleyed over for Curzon before Town's top scorer James Dean was clearly pulled back in the six-yard box as he shaped for a tap-in. Mr Oldham, way behind the play, was unmoved (and probably unsighted), and his linesman on the near side was of no (ahem) assistance. Undeterred, Town added a third when Dean's vision gave Gray room to angle a shot across goal, and when Hale got a touch, Lee Gregory stabbed the loose ball home from close in. Richard Marshall and Payne (again from a Baker corner) were fractionally off target in the run-up to half-time.

Curzon brought on two subs for the second half - but couldn't make an impression. Eight minutes in, and it was 4-0. A cross was fired over from the right, and Dean, spotting Hale yards off his line, looped in a header from outside the box. Curzon's Dean Canning hit the side-netting after a strong run on the right side of the penalty area, and Baker, shortly before leaving the pitch to a standing ovation, sent a 20-yard free-kick whistling inches over the crossbar. Phil Edghill was too high with a header for the hosts, and Halifax wrapped up a good night's work with another goal in the 87th minute. Sub Luke Richardson broke away down the left, and his low pull-back was swept in by Marshall. Joy for Halifax and their hordes (at this level) of fans; gloom for Curzon, who have not won any of their last four games - all at home - and could struggle to secure a place in the play-offs.

I can't get too excited about Tameside Stadium. Sadly, we've all seen this sort of set-up time and time again. It may be bland; it may be boring - but it's as good a place as any to watch one's team win by five clear goals!

06/20