

TT No.231: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 26th April 2010; **Bradford PA** v Kendal Town; UniBond League Prem Division Play-Off S-Final; Res: 2-1; Att: 608; Admission: £8; Programme: £2 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

I can date the start of my fascination with Bradford Park Avenue FC to the late 1970s, and a trip one muggy Sunday afternoon with my father to watch a cricket match in the former 'Woolopolis'. Yorkshire were playing Roses rivals Lancashire at Park Avenue in a limited-overs game. I fell out with cricket at a very young age, mainly because whenever we went to see the sport live, the players tended to spend more time off the pitch than on it. This occasion was no different. A cloud drifted over the sun, and a halt was called. A spot of rain, and the teams headed for the pavilion. Bored witless as only a teenager can be, my attention was drawn to the adjacent football ground - the crumbling ruins of the former home of Bradford Park Avenue. This was a club, my father related, which had once featured in the First Division - and during the 1930s boasted a certain Jack Gallon (no relation) on the playing staff. Dating to 1880, but rebuilt in 1907 to hold 37,000, the ground was originally the home of a rugby club which became, without dipping too deeply into the tangled history of professional sport in this city, Bradford Northern/Bulls RLFC. Surely, exploring the mortal remains of a very substantial stadium would be more fun than the apparently endless wait for the action to resume on the cricket square?

Risking life and limb among rotten and missing timbers, I found a way into the so-called Dolls House, the wonderful and traditional pavilion which stood in one corner of the ground. Boy, was it musty! After brushing off dust and cobwebs, I moved on to the main stand, designed by well-known Glasgow architect Archibald Leitch - and once a thing of gabled beauty. By this time, six years after the ground had staged its last game, the stand was falling to pieces. My tour continued. The floodlight pylons were coated with rust, weeds grew out of the open terracing at the Canterbury Road end, the pitch had become a mass of thistles and rosebay willow herb, and the terrace cover at the Horton Park end was full of holes. What a shame I didn't have a camera with me because, barely a year later, everything was gone. The bulldozers stampeded in and tore down the remaining structures brick by brick, plank by plank, memory by memory. A sad end for a famous old club, which fell into an irreversible decline in the mid-1960s, and was voted out of the Football League in 1970, before being wound up four years later after the ignominy of a season sharing Valley Parade with Bradford City. The whole sorry tale is told, extremely well, in an excellent book, 'The Avenue', by Malcolm Hartley and Tim Clapham.

As we know, the supporters were determined to keep alive the Bradford Park Avenue name - even if the club's spiritual home had been razed. Re-formed in 1988, the Avenue's nomadic early years were spent at Manningham Mills and then on the Bramley and Batley rugby league grounds before they settled at the council-

owned Horsfall Playing Fields near Low Moor, a mile from their former midden in Horton. With an Athletics track round the pitch, and only one side of any real use to spectators, it wasn't an ideal venue - but at least the Avenue had it to themselves. I'd visited several times over the years, but always found it an unappealing place. The facilities were shabby, and relatively poor crowds distanced from the pitch produced little in the way of atmosphere. How things have changed!

The Avenue have got a money man behind them, and the Horsfall Stadium (as it's known now) has been transformed. I was taken aback by the scale of the revamp. The sole stand has been refurbished, repainted and re-seated - using white plastic tip-ups acquired for nothing from Lord's cricket ground. Smart new buildings, housing a social club, a well-stocked shop and a cafe, along with a boot and team room, and accommodation for the physiotherapist, have been provided next to the main entrance, and the fence round the track has been infilled with green and white panels. It's great to see because suddenly the Avenue seem purposeful, professional and productive.

Horsfall Playing Fields opened in 1931 as an extension to Harold Park, which is located immediately behind the gabled pavilion (echoes of Park Avenue!) on the south-east side of the ground. Dedicated to Harold Gathorne Hardy, a prominent member of the family behind the success of the Low Moor Ironworks, this wonderful Victorian park, to which the public has had access since 1885, is well worth strolling through before kick-off. It boasts a lake, abundant bird life, stylish landscaping, and a couple of impressive statues. The main entrance to the Avenue's ground is off Cemetery Road, and leads into the area behind the goal at the south-west end. Here can be found the new buildings, clad in grey with green detailing. From this spot, the six-lane tartan athletics track makes the pitch seem far away indeed. The stand, now so spick and span, is over to the left, and runs the length of the home straight. Most of the seats are covered, and there is terracing at each end. The letters BPA are picked out using green seats. Twelve columns supporting the cantilever roof make obstruction-free viewing a challenge. Perspex dug-outs, natty with green and white striped backs, are located either side of the halfway line. Behind, in the area leading up to the A58 Halifax Road, is a cricket square and a couple of football pitches.

The pavilion, which features a viewing balcony, is opposite the stand, and contains the dressing rooms. Space for spectators on this side is limited to a narrow strip of terracing. The far end, where there is a long jump runway, is a grassy bank, rising to an unmade car park and the semis on Park Road. A substantial turnstile block is positioned in the east corner. There are three floodlight towers, set back from the track, on each side, and a hammer cage in the south corner. Converting an athletics stadium into a football ground is usually an awkward and unsatisfactory business, but this is probably about as good as it gets. At least bright colours have banished the previous drabness.

The Avenue found themselves in the UniBond League play-offs after missing out in a four-way battle for the Premier Division title. West Yorkshire rivals Guiseley took

the honours on the final day of the regular season, though second place guaranteed the Avenue two home games in the play-offs. This opener turned out to be quite an evening. The above-average crowd warmed to an exciting contest featuring three penalties, two of which were missed. Kendal Town, who brought a coachload of noisy fans with them, battled to the end and pushed the Avenue all the way.

The Lakelanders should have taken an early lead, but Danny Wilson scuffed the ball wide after doing well to work a close-range shooting opportunity. Ten minutes in, and the hosts went ahead. Aiden Savory, whose name is a headline writer's dream, met a cross from the right with a looping header which went in off the underside of the bar. Savory had the ball in the net again four minutes later, but was flagged offside. Kendal equalised in the 15th minute. A corner was swung in towards the near post, and Wilson glanced a header across tubby keeper John Lamb. The Avenue's Damien Reeves rolled a shot a foot wide and, just as it looked as though we'd reach the break all square, the home team got a lucky break. Skipper Simon Baldry (on this evidence, hard to believe he's an ex-pro) crossed from the right, and when the ball struck Paul Byrne's arm, the referee pointed to the spot. Rob O'Brien crashed his penalty low to keeper David Newnes' right.

Wilson was fractionally off target with a header soon after the restart, but Kendal were given a great chance to level in the 54th minute. Amjad Iqbal was ruled to have handled in the box. Harsh. It appeared a clear example of the referee 'evening things up' for his earlier decision. Darren Green's spot-kick was unconvincing, however, and Lamb dived to his right to palm the ball away, with Wilson making a hash of volleying in the rebound. Kendal, knowing their season was hanging in the balance, then went to three at the back, pushing an extra man up. It didn't produce much in the way of chances at the end they were attacking, however. The Avenue went close through Savory and Reeves, while Iqbal was left holding his head in disbelief after somehow heading over when unpoliced at the back post. The game's third penalty came 12 minutes from time. Kendal captain George Melling clumsily pushed Savory as the Avenue striker was shaping to shoot, but O'Brien this time aimed straight at Newnes, and the keeper made a comfortable save. Newnes then pulled off a flying parry to turn aside a classical diving header from Savory, and Kendal substitute Carl Osman was an agonising foot wide with a glancing header in stoppage time. The Avenue now host Boston United in the Play-Off Final on Saturday, and would, I imagine, be disappointed with a crowd of anything less than 1,500.

It's good to see the Avenue doing well, though every time I go to the Horsfall Stadium, I can't help wondering what I'd give to watch just one game at the old ground. Park Avenue is still there, albeit in a much-reduced form. Yorkshire no longer use the cricket square for first class fixtures, while the remains of the football ground are restricted to half the pitch, a couple of banks of overgrown terracing, and some boarded-up turnstiles. A depressing sight.

