

**TT No.232: *Andy Gallon*** - Tue 27th April 2010; **Tadcaster Albion** v Hemsworth MW; Northern Cos East League Division One; Res: 2-1; Att: 452; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*\*.

An evening in Tadcaster really doesn't get more exciting than this. A huge crowd turned out at Ings Lane in perfect weather to see if Albion, noted largely for under-achieving down the decades, could win what manager/chairman Paul Marshall had dubbed the most important game in the club's 118-year history. At stake was the Northern Counties East League Division One title and promotion to the Premier Division for the first time. And yet, if Albion failed to beat mid-table Hemsworth Miners' Welfare, 7-1 winners the previous Saturday, they would end the season with nothing. A fat zero. Zilch. Nada. A draw or a defeat would be enough to secure only third place behind Brighouse Town and Leeds Carnegie, who would be the two clubs going up. Not much pressure, then, eh?

That heat rocketed numerous degrees when, with less than two minutes on the clock, speedy Hemsworth striker Damien Liddle beat the Taddy offside trap and lobbed keeper Tom Ryder from 20 yards. Not in the script. After that hammer blow, Albion struggled to find any cohesion, and the visitors looked like adding to their tally. Home defender Paul James almost sliced a cross into his own net, and Gary Welka somehow volleyed over the bar from inside the six-yard box after James Page had nodded back a Liddle assist. The best Albion could come up with on a hard, bumpy, threadbare surface was a Tom Woolard drive keeper Dale Walstow turned over, and a Marc Thompson effort which deflected off a defender and flew a foot wide of the target. Half-time arrived, and frankly we wondered where even one Tadcaster goal was coming from.

The second half was a different story, however - virtually one-way traffic in the direction of the Hemsworth goal. Referee Jane Simm (the first woman in the middle I've ever seen, and not terribly impressive) denied Albion what looked an obvious penalty for pushing five minutes after the restart, and Woolard, a class act, glanced a header fractionally wide. Walstow then made a brilliant diving save to push aside a well-struck 18-yard effort from the Taddy front man. This - at last - lifted the crowd, and in the 67th minute the home fans were roaring in acclaim of an equaliser. Hemsworth failed to deal with a hopeful punt into the box, and skipper Danny Pitts rose highest to the rebound to head home from a couple of yards. Game most definitely on!

Substitutes were introduced by both teams, and the minutes ticked by. Albion went to three at the back as they sought that crucial winner. And still the minutes ticked by. Then, a remarkable escape. A rare Hemsworth attack resulted in two powerful shots on target in quick succession - and both were cleared off the goal-line by desperate home defenders. Burly Albion striker Kevin Smith - awful in the first half; awesome in the second - sent a 20-yard free-kick dipping over the wall, but it also cleared the bar. Was the evening going to end in anti-climax? No! With

just four minutes left, Smith showed great close control and nimble feet wide on the right to make space for a cross. Walslow, who had looked increasingly hesitant under lofted balls, fumbled - and predatory substitute Mike Braithwaite stabbed in the winner from inside the six-yard box. It prompted scenes of wild celebration, matched only by those which greeted the final whistle. A jubilant Pitts raised the cup in front of the main stand as Albion celebrated their first trophy success of any sort in the Northern Counties East League. Well done, too, the NCEL officials for bringing the cup and medals with them on the off chance Tadcaster triumphed. The post-match presentation crowned a night to remember.

This league has a number of attractive grounds - and Ings Lane (or Zinspire Park, as it's known now as part of a sponsorship deal) is one of the most appealing. Its picturesque setting alongside the River Wharfe is both a blessing and a curse. Lovely it may be, but the pitch is prone to flooding - often to a height above the corner flags. The ground has the advantage of being 100 yards from the High Street - and the disadvantage of being hard to find. Without the floodlights as a guide, you could drive around for ages looking for the right-side street to dive down. However, any navigational trouble you may have will be forgotten once through the turnstiles.

Prosperous Tadcaster is worth a wander before seeking out Ings Lane. The Romans, keen to find a crossing point on the Wharfe, called the town Calcaria (meaning 'Limestone'), though its heyday did not come along until the early 19th Century, when more than 50 coaches a day passed through, en route from either London or Leeds to York. Boozers will know that Tadcaster boasts three breweries, all happy to supply the large number of former coaching inns with their products. As I followed bits of the town trail in warm sunshine, I noted, with some amusement, a bill for the local Wetherby News shouting 'Massive Week for Taddy'. As if anyone could be in any doubt!

Ings Lane is tucked into a plot of land between the Wharfe and the many buildings of the John Smith's brewery. Ah. My least favourite pint. Most of the facilities are on the near (west) touchline. These consist of a flat-roofed structure housing the dressing rooms, social club, snack bar and toilets. A cream paint job makes it a lot brighter than it would otherwise be, and large windows offer a great view of the pitch. There are bits and pieces of terracing and seats in front, either side of central steps leading from the dressing rooms to the pitch. Enterprising Albion had got a barbecue going next to the building.

There is a small kit stand behind the goal at the north (High Street) end. This shelters four rows of plastic tip-up seats in Albion's traditional red and blue colours. The club switched to a yellow and navy strip a few years ago, apparently because the players' numbers were difficult to read on red and blue halved shirts. Behind this end is a tarmac car park. The far (east) side is dominated by towering trees laid out as an avenue down which a footpath picks a course between the ground's perimeter fence and the river. Hardstanding, which is laid round the ground, is the sole spectator accommodation here. Watch the game from this side, and you'll see, despite the presence of more mature trees, how the mostly ugly

John Smith's brewery buildings (not to mention a pungent hoppy whiff) dominate the town. Note the brick dug-outs. Unusually, they are not a matching pair. The bottom (south) end features a broad area of grass leading up to a hedge, behind which there are some modern detached houses. A white post and rail barrier, surrounds the pitch, and there are three floodlight masts on each side of the ground.

It's a charming venue which, for the first time, will host Premier Division action next season. The wait for promotion has been long, and Albion are sure to enjoy the impending adventure - win, lose or draw.

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