

TT No.239: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 8th May 2010; **Chesterfield** v AFC Bournemouth; Coca-Cola League Two; Res: 2-1; Att: 7,702; Admission: £16; Programme: £6 (132pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Chesterfield engineered a dream finish as they bade farewell to Saltergate after 139 years - but couldn't quite manage a fairy-tale. The dogged Spireites snatched victory with Derek Niven's blockbusting strike in the fifth minute of stoppage time, only to discover Dagenham & Redbridge's win at relegated Darlington had denied them a place in the League Two play-offs. Nobody seemed to mind much as the last game at the Recreation Ground concluded with a good-natured pitch invasion. Chesterfield's dire form - just two wins since the end of February - had made an extension to their regular season an extremely long shot. And everyone assembled for this day of days knew it.

During the first half, it was clear to see why Chesterfield's recent results had been so poor. The defenders, with Tonka-built centre-back Kevin Austin the main offender, were content to hoof long, high and mostly aimless balls up towards muscular target-man Barry Conlon, a career-long blunt instrument who lacks the ability to keep possession and bring team-mates into the play. It was horrible to watch. Promoted Bournemouth, who employed a short passing game better suited to the strong wind, looked unbelievably classy by comparison.

The only real drama in a dull opening half came in the 42nd minute when Drew Talbot, to audible groans from the near-capacity crowd, succumbed to pressure from Danny Hollands and diverted a Warren Cummings corner from the right into his own net. A Cherries goal had been coming for some time, and the scruffy nature of it was entirely in keeping with a scrappy contest which wouldn't have looked out of place much lower down the pyramid.

Thankfully, the second half was a stormer. Chesterfield got the ball down, and brought their wide men into the match. What a transformation. Conlon volleyed a great chance over the bar, and visiting keeper Shwan Jalal, whose handling became increasingly suspect as the game wore on, did well to deny Jack Lester after nimble footwork from the crowd favourite had taken him past two defenders. Lee Bradbury escaped with smothering Rob Page in the penalty area. One wag behind us remarked: "That would have been a foul in a rugby match." Conlon then forced the ball into the net, but was flagged offside - all this in the first 11 minutes. Tempers began to fray as both sides got serious, and Marvin Bartley was lucky to stay on the field after a blatant elbow on Mark Allott. Chesterfield, anxious to avoid defeat in this landmark fixture, pushed forward in search of an equaliser. It left them open at the back, and made for exciting, end-to-end action.

With 10 minutes left, the Spireites drew level. As the ball bobbed about amid panic-stricken Bournemouth defenders, Jordan Bowery found Lester, who looped a powerful shot beyond Jalal. Home keeper Tommy Lee had to dive full length to

turn a Brett Pitman header on to a post, while in front of the Kop, Lester saw a downward header come back off the inside of an upright, and an Austin header was cleared off the goal-line by Shaun Cooper. In the first minute of stoppage time, the Cherries broke away, and substitute Alan Connell saw his dipping shot from just outside the box cannon off the bar. As the seconds ticked away, a draw looked inevitable. Then, a throw-in was cleared to the edge of the penalty area, and Niven arrowed a perfectly-struck drive, hit first time on the volley, into the narrowest of gaps between Jalal and his right-hand post. Many fans, braced for the final whistle and already at the front of the stands, raced on to the pitch - including, comically, a young lad in a wheelchair. He managed to get 15 yards before his red-faced helper overhauled him and executed a hasty U-turn. Forty-five seconds later, Saltergate's final, final whistle sounded, and the turf vanished beneath a sea of bodies.

So, how did Chesterfield handle their big day? Could have done better, would by my assessment. There was the usual tawdry cashing-in, which clubs apparently cannot resist in such circumstances. Celebration pre-match dinner for the great, the good and the greedy, overpriced (though otherwise fairly decent) souvenir programme, and acres of 'End of an Era' tat. To make matters worse, we had to endure tacky pop music relating to the colour blue blaring down the public address, and an excruciatingly sentimental description from the match announcer of what a visit to Saltergate has meant. He must have worked on that for weeks. Even the march of fans, led by a village brass band in a thin drizzle and gusty wind, from the nearby town centre to the ground seemed fairly low key. Where was the parade of former players at the ground? This really would have brought some dignity, depth and meaning to the occasion; a way of linking the past with the present. The programme editor went to the trouble of putting together an all-time Chesterfield Dream Team, so why not invite those legends as guests and introduce them, one by one, to the crowd? In most respects, the hour or two leading up to kick-off seemed just like any other Football League match. Even down to the atrocious dancing girls. Why can't we Brits do cheer-leading properly? The sight of pudgy pre-pubescents with blotchy thighs doing the Can-Can in front of the Kop, bending over to flip up short skirts and reveal the word 'Woo' stitched on their gym knickers was, frankly, embarrassing. Whose idea was that?

It had been a while since my last visit to watch a game at the cosy, cramped and archaic Recreation Ground, and its time is clearly up. Chesterfield have been seeking a move to a less constrained site for a couple of decades, and the lack of investment in Saltergate is plain to see. The cranked Main Stand, opened in 1936, is a museum piece. Mostly wooden, it's a fire hazard, and its rust-streaked cladding looks dreadful from every angle. What an image to present to the world. The cover on the Compton Street side, built in the early 1950s, though an all-seat area these days, is draped with ivy and falling to bits. But at least this is an authentic football experience - at least for those, like me, who began watching the game in the early 1970s. Standing on a packed Kop, enjoying heartfelt and stirring renditions of 'Spireite Til I Die', along with some choice anti-Sheffield/Mansfield numbers, all echoing under its low roof, was akin to travelling back in time. Add to the recipe

stinking toilets, old-fashioned floodlights, the whiff of hot dogs, the sight of standing supporters chilled to the marrow on the open Cross Street terrace, and I was reeling in the years. So much lost, and yet how much gained? Football in 2010, on and off the pitch, has become sanitised. And fans of my generation, who can remember how primitive, earthy, working class and resolutely masculine the game used to be, might say that's not necessarily a good thing. Interestingly, my girlfriend, who has been watching football for only about 18 months, was captivated by the tribal atmosphere and the tumbledown surroundings. What does that tell you?

Doubtless, we'll be back in Chesterfield early next season to visit the club's new b2net Stadium, which is nearing completion at Whittington Moor. Judging from what we saw on the way in and out of town, it'll be a soulless venue. As Spireites fans shiver amid row after row of empty seats, gazing out upon an identikit stadium without a sense of location, they might come to dwell fondly upon the homely intimacy of Saltergate. Yes, time had to move on. We forty-somethings have come to accept that, in the same way our fathers and grandfathers did before us. But, as the past slips steadily through our fingers, perhaps we all should be careful what we wish for. How many of us have seen the future - and don't like it?

06/20