

TT No.25: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 5th September 2009; **Dronfield Town v Parkhouse**; Central Midlands League Prem Division; Res: 2-4; Att: 90 (h/c); Admission (incl. 20pp programme): £2; FGIF Match Rating: ****.

The Central Midlands League, which has grown steadily into a great little feeder competition, is renowned for a high turnover of clubs. It's a popular league with travellers because each season generally brings a decent clutch of ambitious new teams to visit. This campaign is no different, but for me, Dronfield Town were the sole recruit for 2009-10 playing at a ground I hadn't ticked off, and so figured well up my 'to do' list. Their home at the Stonelow Playing Fields, in common with most clubs in the Premier Division, isn't anything to get excited about. It's little more than an enclosed pitch with dug-outs, minimal hardstanding and adjacent changing rooms, but a valley-side setting is pleasant and this end-to-end contest against Parkhouse was the best match I've seen this season.

Near-neighbours Dronfield Town and Clay Cross-based Parkhouse are familiar foes. Both graduated to the CML via the Hope Valley League and the Midlands Regional Alliance. Town, who evolved from a club for juniors established in 1998, began as a veteran's side called Dronfield Cavaliers. They changed their suffix to Town for 2000-01 and joined the MRA ahead of 2005-06. Town now have 30 teams, including boys and girls, under their umbrella. But the senior open-age side are the focus of attention, and went into this derby having won two and lost one of their opening three fixtures since winning promotion, in what has been a promising start.

Stonelow Playing Fields, owned by Dronfield Town Council, are located halfway up the northern flank of the steep-sided valley through which the River Drone flows. Dronfield's traditional football venue, the Coach & Horses Ground, occupied these days by UniBond League First Division South Sheffield FC, is about a mile to the west. Town use a pitch in the south-east corner of the Stonelow site. An unmade car park off Shireoaks Road is small and can be oversubscribed, especially on days such as this, when South Yorkshire League cricket club Coal Aston's second team had a home match. Follow the attractive, tree-lined cricket ground's boundary round to the left and you'll come to a smart, modern pavilion. Town's pitch can be glimpsed through a line of tall trees ahead, and their dressing rooms are on the ground floor of the pavilion. This structure is built into a bank, so, to reach the dressing rooms, you need to pass it and dive down to the left before bearing left again. A word of warning for programme collectors: Town don't appear to make any attempt to sell their issue to spectators. The ground is not enclosed, so they cannot take a gate. To obtain a programme, which is included in the admission price, knock on the home dressing room door and ask. The diffident will miss out! On our visit, refreshments were available in the cricket pavilion, but may not be when the summer game's season ends.

An aggregate path leads from the pavilion, down a grassy bank (as good a vantage-point as any if you can avoid the dog mess), and on to the pitch, which has a

north-south slope and is enclosed by metal railings. The only hardstanding, another aggregate path, runs the length of the northern touchline. Opposite are dug-outs, each located in the eastern portion of the pitch. These are made of breeze block and decked out in Town's striking red and black colours, but marred by the ever-present graffiti and in need of a refreshing coat of paint. Beyond this side are drab factory units, though the view across the valley, with its mixture of houses and woods, is some compensation. Town share a common border to the west with another cricket ground, used by South Yorkshire Leaguers Dronfield, and this may hit hopes of climbing the pyramid if they choose to stay at Stonelow. There is room only for a strip of grass behind the goal at this end. The other (eastern) end is similarly restricted, being hard up against a line of conifers, with houses to the rear. Threadbare netting suspended from poles has a hard task keeping wayward shots out of the neighbouring gardens. This is an open, exposed spot, giving the day's stiff breeze, *carte blanche* to whistle round the ears of players and spectators alike.

Despite the tricky wind, the teams served up a cracking game, which was preceded by a close formation fly-past from the Red Arrows. Not something that happens here every week, I imagine. A decent crowd, swelled by a good number of visiting fans, had gathered by kick-off, despite the counter attraction of Sheffield FC entertaining Mickleover Sports in front of 263 down the road. Parkhouse, among the early frontrunners in the Premier Division, looked like they were going to run away with things as they dominated much of the first half. Incredibly, the visitors found themselves 2-1 down at the break, with Dronfield also missing a penalty, but roared back in the second 45 minutes to emerge comfortable winners.

Parkhouse didn't so much set their stall out from the kick-off as open an entire market and apply for a Royal Charter. Their fast, incisive play left Dronfield scrambling, and Mark Needham and Jamie Howard had both gone close before Adam Smith shot feebly at keeper Nick Siddons and Tom Carnall cleared off the line from Chris Sharman. A Parkhouse goal was as inevitable as a soggy September, and duly arrived in the 18th minute. Ryan Williams whipped in a free-kick and Matt Rhodes got the jump on his marker to bullet a header into the bottom corner from 10 yards. Rhodes then struck a post from a tight angle when a cross almost caught out Siddons, and this seemed to wake up Dronfield. They went straight down the other end and won a penalty in the 31st minute, though Sharman's challenge on John Doran did not look especially untidy. Home skipper John Perkins' spot-kick was, as the cliché goes, a nice height for a goalkeeper and Mick Fulton, whose shot-stopping was excellent, dived to palm the ball away.

Needham squandered another one-on-one before Fulton produced a save of Pele-Banks proportions (and I don't exaggerate) to deny Aidan Ashton. This stunning moment of action heralded two Dronfield goals in the last three minutes of the half. Dave Gray slipped a pass through for Ian Parkes to break away, and though he seemed to have overrun the ball, the midfielder just managed to clip it past the advancing Fulton and watched it roll over the line. In stoppage time, Parkhouse

failed to clear their lines at a corner and Danny Welch made them pay by ramming a loose ball into the roof of the net from 10 yards. Truly a tale of the unexpected.

The second half was more predictable. With 56 minutes gone, Sharman equalised with a perfect penalty (no stopping his crisp, well-placed effort) after Parkes had clumsily and unnecessarily brought down Needham. Howard's pinpoint pass with 18 minutes left gave Parkhouse skipper Dave Chambers the opportunity to beat Siddons when through on the right side of the box. Chambers then rolled a similar effort wide and John Parsons clattered the crossbar with a 20-yard free-kick as the visitors looked for a decisive fourth goal. It came in the 81st minute. Adam Smith scampered on to a long ball and had the composure to outwit Siddons. Game over. Victory left Parkhouse third, two points behind leaders Yorkshire Main, with Dronfield sinking towards mid-table.

What long-term future Dronfield Town have at Stonelow Playing Fields is hard to see. It is a potentially difficult site to develop, and the proximity of houses could lead to problems when it comes to erecting cover and floodlights. Surely, the sensible course of action would be to negotiate a groundshare with Sheffield FC at the Coach & Horses Ground. Whether the Oldest Football Club in The World would give any house room to a young upstart is, of course, a matter for conjecture, but Town's defeat by a better team should not conceal the fact they are a go-ahead outfit who deserve to be helped along.

06/20