

TT No.36: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 12th September 2009; **East Stirlingshire** v Queen's Park; Scottish League Division Three; Res: 1-0; Att: 393; Admission: £10; Programme: £1.50 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

It's getting on for 20 years since I visited Ochilview for a Stenhousemuir game - and little remains of the ground I remember. That, in my view, is a cause for regret because the revamp has left what was a charming, if fairly undeveloped, village venue rather short on character and appeal. The original wooden main stand, which dated from 1928 and - infamously - on completion did not have any means of reaching the seats, has been razed unceremoniously, leaving the north side of the ground empty and soulless. Opposite, a new stand, seating 700, took its place and a large cover over new terracing at the west end was erected. Down have come the old floodlights and, worst of all, the ground now features a plastic pitch. State of the art, maybe, but it just ain't grass. Why are they permitted in senior football? Thankfully, in the south-west corner, Stenny's wonderful turnstile block, resplendent in the club's maroon colours, has survived the modernisers' attentions.

Local big guns Falkirk slummed it here for a couple of seasons while their new stadium at Westfield was being constructed, and former neighbours East Stirlingshire are 12 months into a five-year sharing arrangement having turned their back on Firs Park, which they deem incapable of being brought up to the latest standards required by the Scottish Football League. In the match programme, chairman Spencer Fearn insisted the Shire would not be returning to Firs, despite the Scottish Parliament having rejected the club's appeal against the refusal of planning permission for the redevelopment of the site. Fearn is, however, committed to finding the Shire a new home "in the Falkirk area", though he intimated there is no hurry to leave Ochilview.

The new main stand, positioned between the penalty areas and clad in maroon and grey, is a resolutely functional item. It is a propped cantilever, with seven rows of steeply-raked maroon plastic tip-up seats and partial screen ends. In the centre at the rear, looking down upon the players' tunnel, is a glazed hospitality area. Curious 'tripod' floodlights, reminiscent of the design once seen at Kilmarnock, are mounted on the roof. From the seats, there is a marvellous prospect of the shapely Ochil Hills, which range across the northern horizon and distract the eye from the uninviting scrub on the other side of the ground's boundary fence. The tiny dugouts, fashioned from tin sheet, jostle for space along the north touchline with discarded portable goals used when Ochilview is turned over to the community. It looks a bit messy and amateurish. Along this side, netting, suspended from posts and perhaps 20 feet high, is used to keep muddy footballs off the waxed bonnets of posh, parked motors.

The west end cover, which runs the width of the pitch and has eight roof columns, is battleship grey and as uninspiring as the main stand. The disused - and horribly shabby - flat-roofed buildings in the north-west corner used to house Stenny's

social club. An eyesore, they need to go. Bizarrely, a tarmac road, complete with markings, runs behind the goal at the east end and provides access to car parking on the north side in space freed up by the former main stand's demolition. Floodlit artificial pitches beyond the road are on offer to locals, some of whom may live in the modern housing estate behind them. The bulk of the floodlights are mounted on those ubiquitous masts.

Well, I'm afraid to say this wasn't a very good game at all, to our disappointment and that of a crowd capitalising on astonishingly warm weather by wearing almost as few garments as the players. Still, the man on the PA with verbal-diarrhea, seemed to enjoy himself. He talked (bollocks, mostly) from first opportunity to last. Some people really should not be let loose with a microphone. The decisive goal was as scruffy as the rest of the proceedings. In the 64th minute, Simon Lynch (how far distant his days at Celtic must feel) rammed the ball home from a couple of yards after Paul Weaver's low, hard ball into the box had bounced off several bodies.

Queen's Park were left to rue a penalty miss four minutes before the break. Shire keeper Jamie Barclay, on loan from Falkirk, dived to his right to parry Martin McBride's spot-kick and recovered quickly to block the Spiders striker's follow-up. The visitors from Glasgow were later denied by the crossbar when Michael Daly met a David Murray cross with a powerful eight-yard header. And Ian Watt missed a sitter in somehow spooning over an unguarded net from close range. The hosts had their moments. Skipper Craig Tully went close from distance, and Michael Bolochowekyj's volley brought a stunning reflex save out of Scott Black.

All in all, then, an unsatisfactory afternoon. Stenhousemuir will doubtless feel pleased with the transformation since 1994 of their hitherto unpolished home, but for the ground's enthusiast, there is scarcely any cause for celebration. The town of Falkirk once had three smashing stadia. But memories of Brockville are now buried under a supermarket, Firs Park is used only for East Stirlingshire training sessions, and latter-day Ochilview fails miserably to tantalise the eye. That's progress, I suppose. Accept it. Move on.

06/20