

TT No.4: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 11th August 2009; **Wigan Robin Park** v Holker Old Boys; NWCL Division 1; Res: 2-0; Att: 35; Admission: £4; Programme: £1.50; FGIF Match Rating: **.

Being a completist (a form of mental illness, they say) can be a pain. For the hopping mad, one of the affliction's most unpleasant symptoms is an inability to resist the urge to visit grounds you know, months in advance, you are not going to like. I positively abhor watching football in athletics stadia, and yet, over the years, have suffered at Gateshead, Corby, Chelmsford, Grange Harlequins, Grantham and Meadowbank - to name a handful off the top of my head. And now I have suffered at Wigan Robin Park. Having procrastinated over this venue throughout last season, with relief I can tick it off, safe in the knowledge I won't need to go there again. Ever.

Of course, none of this is personal. Modernised Wigan isn't in any sense an attractive town, but I've been to far worse. Robin Park Arena (slogan: Yours to Enjoy) is neat, tidy and doubtless a key community asset. The football club's people are Lancashire friendly, bursting with enthusiasm, and their programme, which is edited by goalkeeper Jay Foulds and tries hard to be offbeat, has a nice line in self-deprecating humour. The game wasn't great, though the home team could not be blamed for the opposition's deficiencies. It's just the experience of watching football from such a distance, across an Athletics track and in an almost empty bowl, does nothing for the spirit. To tell the truth, I was glad when it was over. This sparsely-supported club realise a lack of atmosphere is a problem because, according to the programme, they have plans "to help put some soul into the place". Making matters worse, the rain fell from the moment I dropped down into Wigan after a convoluted 10-mile ramble from the M61 through the wilderness of Westhoughton, Hindley and Ince. The weather reminded me of my first visit (in 1984, for a rugby league match at long-gone Central Park) to this former cotton and coal-opolis. It chucked it down that murky day, too. Endlessly. They must be connoisseurs of precipitation in this part of the world. No wonder comic Peter Kay, from neighbouring Farnworth, knows all about "that fine rain - the sort that soaks you through".

Two pluses for RPA: It's well signposted (a good job because Wigan's infernal internal road system is acutely disorienting) and there's plenty of free parking. We're out of town here (26 minutes' walk to the centre, according to a finger post), so the stadium is located amid a uniformly ghastly retail development. I'm sure this sort of thing works beautifully in, say, France or Spain. But we Brits just don't seem to pull it off. It all seems so, well, seedy and depressing. Just how grotty and tacky will it look in another decade? Unlike nearby Trencherfield Mill, which you pass on the way to Robin Park. This hulking red brick former palace of industry, visible from the stadium stand's seats, inspires awe in 2009, so goodness knows what the locals felt a couple of centuries ago when its towers and chimneys first

reached for the sky. Canalside Trencherfield, in the 'Wigan Pier Quarter', is mostly apartments now - "the iconic centrepiece of a vibrant urban village". Can you believe some people actually fall for that sort of guff?

RPA, as functional as a lavatory, will never attain icon status. It opened in 1985, and was revamped in 1997 thanks to £6.2m of Lottery cash. Civil engineers Birse built the place, including the 1,200-seat stand, which faces you on the west side when pulling into the car park. Already, the infrastructure looks frayed round the edges and the 'welcome to' signs are showing their age. I guess you could describe the design as futuristic. There's plenty of glass, with outer cladding in silver and royal blue sheeting. Slap next door, to the north, is the similarly bland 25,000-seat shared home of Wigan's professional football and rugby league clubs. Gaze upon it and marvel at the size of the ego of the man who gave the DW Stadium its name. To the south of RPA are acres of floodlit artificial pitches while, across the road, is another architectural monstrosity, which turns out to be a fitness centre. It's called Profile. Bum and tum heaven.

Walk through RPA's glazed and stencilled main entrance (past a male receptionist so bored his pulse must be scarcely detectable) and keep going in a straight line to reach the seating tier. Less than half the surface area of this cantilever stand has seats, with 12 rows nearest the finish line reducing to four about the 50m mark. The ugly oblong, flat-roofed box bolted on to the north end is an indoor sprint hall. At ground level, there is a kitchen and refreshment hatch (Called 'Robin's Nest'. Can it get worse?), serving on this damp night pies with disappointingly soggy crusts. And yet Wiganers are supposed to be pie experts. Tastefully decorated and generously spacious function and hospitality rooms are located to the rear of the seats, with floor to ceiling windows providing a great view of the action. Shame they're out of bounds to your average punter.

Look carefully across the long/triple jump runway and the eight-lane running track, and you will spot the football pitch - immaculate, and once described as the best in Wigan. Robin Park were formed in 2005 to provide regular action on a surface hitherto used only occasionally for junior and amateur stuff. The Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust hatched the plan with locally-based coach John Neafcy, who still manages the team. The fledglings whizzed through the Manchester League and did well on their North West Counties League debut last season, without quite managing to clinch another promotion.

From the seats, RPA, dubbed by the programme 'The Wembley of WN5', is impressive. The track glows a warm red, offsetting the green of the firs which fringe the stadium to the north, east and south, and provide pleasant landscaping. Unobtrusive floodlights on low masts are dotted about, but none obscure the 180-degree vista. The DW Stadium's south and east stands loom large to the left and, beyond the weed-choked River Douglas and one of the least appealing stretches of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, there are rows of what appear to be disused factories. Or engineering works. Summat like that. Wigan town centre, ahead, still features a number of mills and chimneys, with Trencherfield dominant over to the right. Just ignore B&Q's warehouse in the foreground. Large Perspex dugouts are

positioned either side of halfway on the east touchline, and there's a hammer cage in the south-east corner, inside the synthetic track's second bend.

Binoculars at the ready? Right, let's have the teams out. Both had figured in goalless draws on the campaign's opening day three days before, so something, you'd think, had to give. In the event, Robin Park proved much the better side. They moved the ball about nicely and kept possession well. Holker Old Boys, from 87-mile distant Barrow and one of this league's furthest flung clubs, are never any great shakes and on this occasion looked pretty limited. They came into the match only during the last 20 minutes, during which the home lads seemed to switch off.

The first goal followed a fairly tame 25 minutes. Holker's delightfully named Chris Squirrell, in attempting to prevent the ball going out for a corner, hooked it sideways towards Ben Morsby and the keeper caught the heels of Ryan Small as the Robin Park midfielder nipped in opportunistically. A soft penalty. Chris McNally, whose pace and close control made him a real threat throughout, sent Morsby the wrong way from the spot with a low shot. Morsby did well to deny elusive winger Sean White from 20 yards and then McNally in a one-on-one before James Deane somehow headed into the turf from inside the six-yard box and saw his effort bounce over the crossbar. McNally was at the heart of the second goal a minute before half-time. He made a nuisance of himself just outside the penalty area and the ball ran to an unmarked Small, who beat the exposed Morsby from 16 yards.

The second half never really got going. Holker, however, did manage to create some chances. Mike Kewley was just too high with a well-struck free-kick from 25 yards and team-mates Graham Capstick and Squirrell were near with close-range headers. Captain Capstick, incidentally, claimed a world record a couple of years ago when he scored with a fluke header from 57 yards. But Robin Park, for whom McNally almost caught out Morsby with a surprisingly powerful 16-yard header, always looked comfortable and the game meandered uneventfully towards the inevitable outcome of a home win. By the final whistle, I was pretty bored and distinctly ready for home.

So, go, if you feel you must, to Robin Park Arena, but don't expect to be startled. There's very little to recommend it - unless of course you're a completist, or on the books of Wigan and District Harriers and Athletics Club. How on earth do they fit that on a vest?

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