

TT No.61: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 19th October 2009; **Harrogate RA** v FC Halifax Town; UniBond League Division One North; Res: 1-2; Att: 636; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

FC Halifax Town are everybody's favourite visitors in UniBond League Division One North, and Harrogate Railway, never flush with cash, were disappointed not to be hosting the Shaymen on a Saturday. One of their many friendly officials feared fewer fans would make the short trip over from West Yorkshire in midweek, meaning lower takings on the gate, smaller sales of everything from programmes to pies, and less likelihood of supporters hanging about after the final whistle for a pint in the bar. He said the previous weekend's FA Trophy second round qualifying defeat at Shepshed Dynamo, who won 2-1 with an 85th-minute goal, was a double blow. Knocked out of a potentially lucrative competition, and no chance of a midweek replay which could have forced the Halifax game to be shifted to a more advantageous Saturday. Railway average about 150 spectators for home games, and our chap was hoping for up to 350. So, the attendance of close to 650 on a still, clear autumn evening must have delighted him. And the bank manager. It's a shame they ran out of pies before half-time, or the proceeds would have been greater still. No amount of good humour from behind the counter (of which there was plenty) can make up for food in the belly, and coins in the cash register.

Despite the club's name, Station View isn't in genteel Harrogate - it's part of scruffy Starbeck, a straggling suburb on the A59 road towards Knaresborough and York. The London & North Eastern Railway used to have an engine shed here, and workers formed Railway Athletic in 1935, later borrowing £1,500 from the company to buy the land on which the ground was built. The shed, next to what these days is little more than a commuter branch line, closed in the late Fifties, but the Rail survived the subsequent loss of income and players. Today, they rely on a small band of helpers and fans drawn mostly from the village. Hence the importance of windfalls from recent televised FA Cup home ties against Bristol City and Mansfield Town - and this game with Halifax, whose record in all competitions before kick-off showed 17 wins and a draw from 18 games.

This isn't one of the better grounds in the UniBond League. It's too open to be homely, there isn't enough cover, what few seats the club have are in the wrong place, and the steeply sloping pitch isn't suitable, to my mind, for football at this level. Station View is the name of the road leading off a dreary high street dominated by takeaways, unappealing boozers and a busy level crossing which results in endless traffic queues. Ornamental gates on the left lead to the original clubhouse and a series of pitches used by the club's youth teams, which begin with one for those under six. The ground is at the bottom of this cul-de-sac, adjacent to a council depot for gritting wagons. A tiny metalled car park is supplemented by the pitches behind the near end. A turnstile leads into the northern corner. The south west-north east downhill slope of the pitch is apparent immediately.

The north-eastern side of the ground is a 'hotch-potch'. Nearest the railway line, set back 20 yards from the pitch, is a glazed building which used to be a hospitality room for directors, and is now a kitchen and a haven for pie-munching fans. The dressing rooms, in a flat-roofed, whitewashed structure, are next door. A caged 'tunnel' leads to the pitch. In front, next to hardstanding, is a series of portable buildings. These are painted dark green and house the club shop, a media centre (get you) and the boardroom. What used to be the dugouts is now a press box. Beyond the railway, on rising ground, are industrial units and houses.

The near end is open, with a strip of hardstanding. The rear, unsurfaced section is cordoned off, and a battered metal sheeting fence, painted dark green and red, separates the ground from the junior pitches. A tiny kit-stand, 10 yards long and containing four rows of dark green plastic tip-up seats, is positioned on the halfway line on the top side. It is dedicated to the late Shaun Glennon, a former first-team player and junior coach. I suspect this was erected merely to meet grading requirements because the proximity of the bulky Perspex dugouts renders the seats useless if you want an unobstructed view of the action. To the right, as you sit in the stand, are three steps of concrete terracing which run down to the corner flag. The area to the left is uncovered hardstanding. Grass, and a belt of saplings, cannot disguise the ramshackle nature of the perimeter fence, again of metal sheets, and here painted cream. Houses lie to the rear.

Most of the seats are behind the far goal, beneath a flimsy metal cover which takes up the full width of the pitch. The top portion is given over to standing, with red plastic tip-up seats filling in the remainder. The directors' box is amidships, directly behind the goal. To the rear, mature trees tower over the stand. An ugly shed in the corner houses the groundsman's equipment. The Rail have tried hard to unify these disparate elements by using lots of dark green and red paint - their attractive colours. The tactic doesn't quite come off, despite several bright signs displaying the club's beaver logo. This must be a new development because, on my three previous visits to Station View, the badge featured a steam locomotive. Perhaps there is a connection between Starbeck and beavers? Feel free to be smutty. Everyone else was. The floodlights, switched on in 1991, are of the mast pattern, with four to each side. A post and rail fence, painted smartly in dark green and red, surrounds the pitch, but, unfortunately, is obscured by an impressive number of advertising hoardings.

What followed was a fairly typical UniBond League contest between teams separated by most of the Division One North table. No frills, few thrills and infuriatingly erratic refereeing. Halifax did not play particularly well against sorely limited opposition, and were fortunate to depart with another three points. I certainly would not want to watch the Rail's depressing brand of route one football every week. They gamble on the percentage game. Long throws and even longer hoofs into the penalty area in the hope a defensive error will lead to a scoring chance. It must be as tedious to play such bombardment stuff as it is to watch.

A regulation punt into the box gave the Rail an early chance, but Steve Payne cleared Dan Verity's header off the line. Town's Tom Baker responded with a crisp

drive tubby keeper James Mann dived to turn aside before the Shaymen went ahead in the 14th minute. Baker's corner from the right was headed on by Payne, and Nicky Gray, lurking at the back post, forced the ball at the second attempt past a gaggle of defenders and a prone Mann. The lead lasted just eight minutes. One of many Steve Robinson long throws aimed towards the six-yard box was helped on by skipper Ben Jones, and an unmarked James Nestor nodded past the exposed Jonathan Hedge. Halifax were guilty of a shocking miss in the 27th minute. Captain Ryan Crossley was picked out all on his own in front of goal by a Baker free-kick, but the centre-back, possibly with too much time to think, planted a downward header a foot wide of an upright from 10 yards.

The visitors got the winner five minutes after the break. Gray's lovely back-heel gave former Rail player Richard Marshall room to cross on the right dead-ball line, and Crossley knocked it down for James Dean to roll the ball in from four yards. It was the burly striker's 13th goal of the campaign. Halifax went close to a third several times from distance, notably through Dean, but the Rail continued to pepper the Shaymen's box. In an isolated moment of quality from the home team, Zaphaniah Thomas made space to shoot from the edge of the penalty area and was unlucky to see his low effort come back off the inside of Hedge's right-hand post. In the last minute, Nigel Danby, with a miss even more glaring than Crossley's earlier, glanced a header wide when the Town goal was at his mercy. Halifax broke down the other end, and Mark Peers' cross-shot brought a flying save out of Mann when a sideways ball would have given Dean a tap-in for 3-1. The final whistle brought sighs of relief from most in the crowd as the Shaymen's sensational start to the season continued with a 15th successive victory - at a venue where they lost twice in 2008-09.

On this evidence, Harrogate Railway will struggle to avoid relegation back to the Northern Counties (East) League, of which, in 1982, they were founder members. Given the club's small crowds and limited resources, one can't help feeling this (if you'll excuse the pun) is their natural station in life.

06/20