

TT No.67: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 24th October 2009; **Selby Town** v Scarborough Athletic; NCEL Premier Division; Res: 3-2; Att: 429; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

It was all hands to the pump at Selby Town. Not because the rain was tipping down so vigorously from leaden skies when we arrived, but because the opposition was Scarborough Athletic. This meant coping with an army (by Northern Counties East League standards) of visiting fans, and making sure every last money-making opportunity was squeezed from a rare and welcome windfall provided by a crowd four times the average. So it was that the Robins' chairman was positioned outside the ground, known these days as the Selby Times Stadium, waylaying anyone who walked past with an invitation to buy a programme from the boot of his car. So it was, too, that a posse of raffle ticket sellers lurked inside the turnstiles ready to pounce on potential buyers. And so, it was that the kitchen and bar staff in the small social club were braced for a stampede of thirsty customers.

It's amazing how the weather can colour one's view of a ground. It was fine drizzle vile when we got to unappealing Selby, and as we inched through the murk down a gloomy high street dotted with charity shops, my girlfriend promptly christened this former coal mining community 'Drabshire'. The timeworn 'stadium' did not look any less unattractive on the day British Summer Time ended officially for another year. And yet. And yet. For once, the weather forecast proved entirely accurate. Before half-time, the clouds had rolled back, the rain cleared from the west, and a glorious autumn sun illuminated an engrossing contest. Suddenly, the ground, already buzzing with a good atmosphere produced by the bumper crowd, looked a picture. Shortcomings were transformed into assets, and the sight of 11th Century Selby Abbey's west front, bathed in golden light and rising majestically beyond the social club, stirred the senses and warmed the heart. Brilliant.

You can forgive Town, in their 90th anniversary season, for having a shabby ground because the incentive for home improvement hasn't been there for a while. There is talk of a move from purpose-built Richard Street, where they have played since the early 1950s, to a Football Conference-standard stadium on East Common Lane, next to Selby College. But the project appears to have stalled, and whether it will happen at all in a town not too well acquainted with prosperity remains an unanswered question.

The Selby Times Stadium's main entrance and turnstile is at the end of Richard Street, a short cul-de-sac close to the main drag. A vast sports centre (and handy free car park) dominates the area between the town centre and the ground. Next to this, the Robins' nest looks especially dowdy. Irritatingly, given the rain, and irrationally, by any yardstick, the only seats are at the north end (I prefer watching from the side), though the delightfully ramshackle stand which shelters them provides some compensation. This is a simple metal cover painted red, and despite being only four yards deep, requires 18 columns to support its lightweight

sloping roof. There are wide bench seats in the central section, with flat and terraced standing areas either side. The seats in the small directors' box are mostly out of commission. The rear wall, painted white, carries the legend Selby Town FC in large red letters. Modern houses and their gardens lie to the rear, while nets hanging from poles attached to the stand roof prevents stray shots from annoying these neighbours.

The rest of the ground is fairly unexciting. The social club, a low-ceilinged, dimly-lit cavity also housing the club shop, is to the left of the turnstile - and no place for the claustrophobic. It's hard to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but Selby have done their best by covering the structure in white paint. Between the turnstile, near where the team line-ups are tacked obligingly to a board, and the north-east corner, in which has been erected a spotless toilet block, are three broad steps of terracing. Directly opposite, in the centre of the west touchline, is a long, flat-roofed building, done out in red and white, containing the dressing rooms. Bijou dugouts are an integral part of the arrangements, and plain metal gates, again painted red, keep fans away from this most sensitive of areas. There is hardstanding either side. Position yourself hereabouts for the best view of the abbey. To the rear of the dressing rooms is a red-brick Victorian building which bears all the signs of being a primary school.

You can't escape kit stands these days, and Selby have one behind the goal at the south end. It's about 20 yards long and has four steps of metal terracing.

Hardstanding has been laid either side. Part of the sports centre's vast car park is directly behind, and beyond can be glimpsed the shapely spire of the parish church. A barrier of white concrete posts and red metal rails surrounds the pitch, which the players, prior to the rain, had complained was too firm. They, at least, welcomed the drizzle. Chipboard, painted a fetching shade of rust, has been used at either end to fill in the barrier. The ground is enclosed by a grey metal fence about eight feet high, and there are four floodlight masts on each side.

Leaders Scarborough Athletic have carried all before them in the Premier Division of the Northern Counties East League this season - but this cannot have been one of their better performances. Injury-hit Selby, fourth before kick-off, outplayed their opponents, despite conceding inside the opening two minutes, and deservedly avenged a 5-2 thrashing over on the east coast on September 19. It's the second time I've seen the Robins in 2009-10, and they impressed me as much on this day as they did in winning 2-1 at Arnold Town on August 22 (see TT010). They are mobile, keep the ball on the deck, and give their all from first to last. It's a shame they are unable to tempt more local people through the doors.

I feared a drubbing when the visitors steamrolled in front almost from the kick-off. Appropriately named Selby centre-back Scott Pickles got in a mess on the half-way line, and Boro moved upfield quickly. Ryan Blott fed Craig Hogg and he played the ball inside to Scott Phillips, who, without breaking his stride, smashed an 18-yard shot past keeper Adam Mitchell and into the roof of the net. Undaunted, the hosts equalised in the seventh minute. Steven Lyon adopted a shoot on sight policy from 20 yards, and his out-of-the-blue volley fairly fizzed into the bottom corner,

beyond Arran Reid's full-length dive. Now we had a game on our hands. If Lyon's goal took the wind out of the sails of the Seadogs fans, Luke Ibbetson's second for Selby in the 20th minute left them feeling positively beached. A cross from the right was allowed to go through to the back post, and Ibbetson forced the ball in from 10 yards. Then the sun came out and, unless you'd come from Scarborough, all was right with the world.

Referee Jimmy Price had a poor game, and looked in the wrong nine minutes after the restart when he declined to give Boro a penalty after Mark Griffin seemed to be brought down by Chris Gowen. Bizarrely, he later awarded Selby a spot-kick for a Dave Hartas challenge on Duncan Bray before consulting a linesman, whose flag had clearly been raised to indicate offside! Town, profiting from the visitors reducing to three their defensive resources and pushing an extra player up, went 3-1 ahead in the 61st minute with a lovely goal. Bray, who would be a tremendous player with another yard of pace, skipped round Hartas on the right side of the box before ramming a low shot across Reid and into the far bottom corner. Selby, capable of breaking swiftly and dangerously, always looked likely to add to their tally, but Boro pulled one back with a minute left. Substitute Paddy Miller swung over a free-kick from the left and Ian Beckram, in attempting to volley clear, succeeded only in slicing the ball on to a post, and past his own keeper, from the right angle of the box.

Unhappily, the game ended in acrimonious chaos. During stoppage time, Boro's Danny Moore, believing the whistle had gone for a free-kick, picked up the ball in the area and was booked. Ibbetson's tentative penalty, at a nice height for a keeper, was turned aside by a diving Reid, but the voluble complaints from the visitors - clearly not used to losing - continued after the final whistle and the referee showed a red card to Dave Kemp and cautioned Phillips. It left the assessor, standing a few yards to our right, writing furiously on his clipboard as the players left the field. An excellent game, and a great advert for this league, marred only by the referee's incompetence. Nothing new there, then, eh?

Heading home up the A19, we decided we were pleased the sun had put in an appearance because (and perhaps this is human nature) we left Selby with a much more positive impression of the ground, its football club and the town. The Robins could do with sorting out the uncertainty over their future, though. Richard Street may offer little room to expand, but it is a central site with good parking. However, a minimal maintenance policy in the hope of a move elsewhere isn't going to work if those great expectations aren't met.

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