

TT No.8: *Andy Gallon* - Tue August 18th 2009; **Heather St John's** v Gresley FC; FA Cup EPR replay; Res: 1-0; Att: 179; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Inadvertently, I saved the best of the north-west Leicestershire non-league grounds until last. St John's Park - in my book - trumps the lot in a list including Coalville Town, Bardon Hill Sports, Ashby Ivanhoe, Ibstock United, Kirby Muxloe, Barwell and Ellistown. That came as a shock. Perhaps it shouldn't, given Heather (pronounced Heetha) St John's longstanding status as a step six club. But the Midland Football Combination is, at least before this trip, wholly uncharted territory for me, so I really didn't know what to expect.

As surprises go, it was among the more pleasant. This really is a most attractive enclosure. In a semi-rural location on the northern edge of a now-peaceful village, whose past was built on the muck and brass of the coal and brick industries, St John's Park, a mile west of Ibstock, is immaculate. Nothing offends the eye. Everything is lovingly tended - by an army of dedicated volunteers who help keep the place spick, span and polished. The present nine-acre site, owned by the club and featuring two additional floodlit pitches, is a huge asset. St John's are ready to expand as they look to cater more effectively for an impressive 14 junior teams, a couple of women's sides and a Saturday academy. To the north of the ground, eight more acres have been bought, and planning permission has been secured for a changing room complex costing £350,000. For such a small community, and when you consider the level of competition for players and resources in this football hotbed, it's a fabulous achievement.

St John's Park is on the left as you head north up Ravenstone Road. With neat, colourful landscaping offsetting the red brick of the single-storey clubhouse and turnstile block, and smart signs abundant, first impressions are favourable. And it gets better inside. Someone, years ago, had the foresight to enclose the ground with evergreen trees. These clipped specimens, which are allowed to grow to a height of about 12 feet, have several advantages. They provide an appealing backdrop (so much better than a concrete or metal fence) to the action and, more importantly, lend a feeling of intimacy and compactness not generally experienced at relatively small grounds. It brought to mind United Counties League Newport Pagnell Town's Willen Road.

A gap in the hedge provides access to the main building, which houses the dressing rooms, a smart bar/function room, offices, toilets and a couple of kitchens. Unusually, there are two refreshment hatches - one serving food, the other hot drinks. The players pass through the hedge and reach the pitch (in beautiful condition for this game) by bearing right and then left beneath a unique red brick structure, tall, narrow and about 15 yards long. This is gabled, with a clock and cosy press/announcer's box above the 'tunnel' and rather fetching integral dugouts and concrete technical areas to each side. A plaque positioned centrally above the

windows of the press box, finished externally in dark wood, indicates the clock was donated by a former member of this friendly little club.

The sole stand is directly opposite on the west side of St John's Park. It also is about 15 yards long, but is squatter and deeper. Finished in grey cladding and with the club's name displayed proudly on its fascia, the stand's propped cantilever roof is supported by two columns painted blue. There are four rows of (mostly) blue tip-up seats, which - and here's another surprise - are padded. A rare treat. A hardstanding path runs round the pitch, which is enclosed with a concrete post and blue metal rail fence. A strip of grass some five yards wide leads up to the glorious evergreen trees. Metal containers, painted dark green, in the north-west corner house the groundsman's equipment. Before St John's arrived here 14 years ago, the pitch was a mushroom field. It drains well because of sandy sub-soil. The floodlights are masts, with four per side and three lamps on each.

From the back row of the main stand, look to the south (or right) and you will glimpse the tower of the parish church of St John the Baptist, after which the club, formed in 1949, are now named. Until 2007, they were known as Heather Athletic. There is plenty of space to park - for free - on unsurfaced land the club owns directly behind this end of the ground. The extra two pitches are to the rear of the stand, with a couple of gates in the evergreens providing access. The players use these pitches for warming up ahead of first-team games. Beyond Ravenstone Road, the land falls away steadily through woods to drop into the Sence Valley Country Park - a lovely place to wander before kick-off. Until 1996, this was an opencast coal mine, supplying fuel for the region's power stations. When the seam, all eight million tonnes of it, was exhausted, the owners handed 150 acres (about a third) of the site to Leicestershire County Council. A series of lakes was created and 98,000 trees planted to create what has become a haven for wildlife (and dogwalkers, too, inevitably). Where brawny industry once flexed its muscles, coot, kestrel, heron and grebe breed.

This FA Cup replay was required after St John's scored twice in the last 11 minutes to secure a 2-2 draw at Gresley FC three days previously. The visitors are a new club, formed speedily earlier in the summer after debt-ridden Gresley Rovers were liquidated. Gresley FC, lucky enough to be able to stay at the idiosyncratic Moat Ground, were forced to take a two-division relegation and are now members of the East Midlands Counties League. With Church Gresley just 12 miles away, this tie attracted a bumper gate, with a number making the short trip from south Derbyshire. But they went home disappointed as St John's won though deservedly to set up a visit to Northern Counties East League Rainworth Miners' Welfare (whose manager, Rudy Funk, was spotted among the crowd making notes) in the preliminary round on August 29.

On a perfect evening for football, a goalless first half saw St John's dominate territory and possession, but Gresley FC create the two best chances. The home team began purposefully, with left-footed right-winger Chris Waldrum (only at the club a week) a threat with his speed and trickery on the ball. He showed on several occasions what a sweet shot he had, while Ashley Spencer and Andy Hill

were driving forces in midfield. Gresley keeper Simon Baldwin made several excellent saves, with his block from Matt Moore in a one-on-one just before the break especially noteworthy. When he was beaten, by a 20-yard Ashley Spencer free-kick, the post came to his rescue, though the referee had blown already for some off-the-ball pushing. Gresley's Jamie Barrett missed a sitter when, found unmarked six yards out directly in front of goal by a Matt Hill cross, he headed tamely at home keeper Tom Gutteridge. Waldrum popped up in the right place in his own penalty box, too, to clear off the line after a corner had been nodded on twice.

Clearly, there wasn't much in it, but you always felt St John's were that bit slicker. Baldwin used his legs to good effect to block goal-bound efforts from Mitch Piggon and Andy Spencer before Gresley's Paul Edwards saw a well-timed flick strike team-mate Barrett almost on the goal-line and bounce away agonisingly for a goal-kick. Waldrum nearly caught out Baldwin (in no man's land having dashed off his line to make a clearance) with a 40-yard effort which sailed a couple of yards wide. And it was Waldrum who got the winner in the 68th minute. A long ball from the back down the right channel deceived the visitors' defence and the St John's winger, using his weaker foot for once, hit a crisp, angled 16-yard volley which struck the advancing Baldwin on its way into the roof of the net. Gresley pushed up, with increasing urgency, in search of an equaliser. Volatile winger Tom Betteridge, all alone at the back post, somehow slid the ball wide of an open goal and, in stoppage time, Gutteridge saved brilliantly with his legs when Barrett went for the jugular with a driven 10-yarder.

St John's banked £750 for winning this tie. In the context of the modern game, it doesn't sound much, but club officials confirmed it would be vital income because sponsorship has, they say, dried up during the recession. The team don't even carry a sponsor's name on their shirts. Apparently, the players were paid expenses last season, but now they're not getting even that. And yet most are happy to stay. Heather St John's are that sort of club. Truly part of the community. Long may they prosper.

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