

TT No.107: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 2nd November 2010; **Chesterfield** v Accrington Stanley; League Two; Res: 5-2; Att: 6,034 (123 away); Admission: £18; Programme: £3 (72pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

THE PLACE: You've got to feel a bit sorry for Chesterfield. It really is neither nowt nor summat. The old coke town cannot hold a candle to neighbouring Sheffield and Nottingham, both of which are more stylish, more interesting and, well, more 21st century. Chesterfield does have one thing going for it, however. It's not Mansfield. If you're up for a pre-match wander, the famous crooked spire is the one attraction worth seeing. It's attached to the parish church of St Mary and All Saints. Various colourful legends attempt to explain this visually arresting phenomenon, which experts prefer to describe in two parts - inclination (or lean) and spiral twist. The latter is thought to be a product of design, and the former, put more prosaically than local mythology, a result of building with unseasoned green timber, a lack of skilled craftsmen (men generally, in fact) owing to the so-called Black Death and an absence of cross bracing. I've got some sympathy. I'm rubbish at carpentry. A coffee table, the only thing I made in school woodwork class, collapsed when one of my brothers sat on it.

THE CLUB: Famous (briefly) for producing goalkeepers and (even more transiently) being robbed of a place in the 1997 FA Cup Final by pompous schoolteacher David Elleray's lousy refereeing. Yes, Chesterfield, formed in 1866, are one of the Football League's under-achievers. But they are among the lower divisions' great survivors. Long-time rivals Halifax, Grimsby, Darlington et al have crashed out of the League, but the Spireites battle on. Off the pitch, the club had wanted to escape the urban straitjacket that was Saltergate for as long as I can remember, and finally wriggled out under the wire during the summer, as the sun set on their crumbling (but lovable) old place after 139 years of football there. The move to the 10,400-seat b2net Stadium has proved a shot in the arm. Chesterfield top League Two, and attendances are climbing.

THE GROUND: New and fairly underwhelming. Take a pinch of Huddersfield and a spoonful of Shrewsbury, and you're getting close to the recipe for the b2net Stadium. Let's start with the positives. It's not miles out of town, which to Chesterfield fans accustomed to the accessibility of Saltergate, must be a good thing. Its aesthetic (you can tell my girlfriend watches Project Catwalk) is restrained and reasonably stylish. Exterior cladding in dark blue and charcoal looks pretty cool. There are red-brick walls of fame in the south-west and south-east corners for those intent on getting noticed. Oh, and parking isn't the nightmare I feared it might be. I don't pay to park (any place, anytime, anywhere, and certainly not in football club car parks), but managed to secure a free spot just 200 yards from the east stand turnstiles. Result.

Now for the rest. The four stands (the budget didn't allow for filled-in corners) are essentially the same, though the west - or main - and east stands roofs describe

shallow arcs, whereas those at the north and south ends are parallel. The presence of a superstore (that's the club shop, in old money), a ticket office and a line of executive boxes above the single seating tier gives the west stand a trace of individuality, while there is a TV gantry at the back of the east stand. See how, amid a sea of blue plastic tip-up seats, I'm struggling? Below stairs, the concourses betray the strength of Chesterfield's spending power. Exposed, untreated breeze block is never anything but HM Prison chilly. The prices of the junk food on sale did nothing to warm me. Why anyone would pay £2.50 for a blackened crust pie or £3 for a plastic pint of fizzy pop lager is entirely beyond me.

The stadium, which nods to tradition by having corner floodlight masts, is an island marooned in a car park. Its neighbours include, predictably enough, a Tesco Extra megastore, a hotel (presumably overrun by business travellers; tourists don't go to Chesterfield), a KFC and sundry industrial units. This, I'm afraid, is what it's come to.

THE GAME: If I'm honest, the first floodlit league fixture at the b2net didn't promise much, but a work assignment in Derby provided a golden opportunity to tick this ground off on the way home. Killing two birds with one tank of petrol always wins with me! Most of the League Two table separated the teams, and it was a wild night of swirling wind and driving rain, so I entered the ground with some foreboding. Happily, it was a cracking contest on a pitch as immaculate at the end as it was at the start. A real tribute to the b2net's ground-staff and drainage system because it bucketed down from three o'clock in the afternoon.

Don't be fooled by the score. Accrington, whose passing football was very easy on the eye, were the better side for most of the first half and a substantial chunk of the second. But leaders Chesterfield's finishing was razor sharp. Every time the Spireites got a sight of goal, they scored. However, it was easy to see why there have been so many high-scoring games at the b2net lately because the home team's defending was distinctly average. At times, even the business of concentrating looked like hard work.

The teams were away faster than Fernando Alonso. We had two goals - and a good deal else - in the first 20 minutes. Top scorer Craig Davies raced on to a stunning Derek Niven through ball to put the Spireites ahead, but Phil Edwards levelled from the spot after the referee (on the blind side of the incident) awarded a penalty for a dubious 'foul' by Scott Griffiths on Peter Murphy. Stanley, allowed loads of room on the right flank, were on top when Jimmy Ryan sent a 25-yarder whistling fractionally over the bar. Chesterfield then turned the game on its head with two goals in a minute just before the break. Tricky Jack Lester was upended in the box by clumsy Kevin Long, and Danny Whitaker hammered home the spot-kick. Moments later, Stanley were guilty of 'fannyng' about on the edge of their penalty area, allowing Lester to nip in, steal possession and give the hosts a wholly unmerited two-goal interval advantage.

The next goal would be crucial, and Chesterfield got it 10 minutes after the restart when Davies did well on the right and crossed low for Whitaker to angle a neat

flick past Alex Cisak. Stanley continued with their pass-and-go stuff, and pulled one back on the hour. Sean McConville crossed from the right, and Terry Gornell got ahead of his marker at the near post to finish with some aplomb. The score was given a misleading impression in the 88th minute when Davies - who looked yards offside - was allowed to continue and shoot across Cisek and into the bottom corner in a one-on-one. Richly entertaining stuff, as you'd expect from two teams who cannot defend.

THE PROGRAMME: It's easy to be seduced by the sleek glossiness of modern Football League issues. Scratch the top coat, however, and there's rarely a fresco lurking beneath. Chesterfield's programme, though not quite a masterpiece, was a decent work of art. Plenty of effort was put in, and this edition included several original and interesting features. How many times do you get to say that? Exactly!

THE VERDICT: After the rust, dust and quirks of Saltergate, Chesterfield's new home is hardly a venue to cheer the connoisseur. In common with most new stadia, the b2net is as functional as a faucet. It does a job without blowing its £13m budget. I guess you can't have a meaningful design concept, such as at the Emirates, when spending is so tightly restricted. Clearly, this is how the future will look - almost everywhere. We simply don't see enough of the innovation produced at, say, Dorchester Town and Dartford. I strongly suspect the groundhopping hobby could die a death once football reaches the point where every stadium is identical.

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