

TT No.117: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 9th November 2010; **Darlington** v Tamworth; Conference National; Res: 1-0; Att: 2,625; Admission: £5; Programme: £2.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: *.

THE PLACE: Darlington, a station-stop on the East Coast Main Line between more important places and once home to three locomotive works, was built on the railway, to which it helped give birth. The industry here isn't anywhere near as important as it once was and, in common with much of the North East, the town has had to try a certain amount of reinvention following the decline of its traditional sources of income. Darlington is one of the more aesthetically pleasing urban places in the region, and certainly knocks spots off the likes of Middlesbrough (grim), Hartlepool (grimmer), Stockton (grimmer still) and Sunderland (trying hard, but still grim). It's just a shame that the football club's ill-advised relocation in 2003 from lovable Feethams to the loathsome Darlington Arena means there's now no real need for visiting fans to go to the town centre, highlight of which is the market area.

THE CLUB: In a bit of a mess, frankly. I wonder, in all seriousness, whether the move from centrally located Feethams to the wind-blown wilderness of the southern bypass will be the death of a club which has become impoverished and ignored, even in its own backyard. Friends who follow Darlo tell me they don't know a single fan who prefers the Arena to Feethams. The former is entirely inappropriate for the Quakers' needs and, despite being built with attracting greater support in mind, has had the opposite effect. Darlington have never been anything but lower division strugglers, and after last season's ignominious second relegation from the Football League, they are now floundering in Conference National's muddy middle reaches. Chairman Raj Singh is working hard to build the bridges so spectacularly dynamited during the ownership of the abrasive George Reynolds, whose reign was a public relations catastrophe. Desperate to win back the hearts and minds of stay-away fans, Singh slashed admission prices from £18 to £5 for this fixture, and was rewarded with a crowd a thousand up on the previous weekend's FA Cup first-round tie with Bristol Rovers. The pulse flickers, without indicating a return to rude health is on the cards.

THE GROUND: The most infamous white elephant in football and something, sadly, Darlington are stuck with. The Darlington Arena was built to satisfy the enormous ego of Reynolds. He instigated the move from homely, quirky Feethams, adored by football fans everywhere and, after the construction of a new east stand, perfectly adequate for the Quakers' requirements. But, for some time safecracker Reynolds, that wasn't enough. His legacy, about as welcome as nuclear waste, is the monstrous Arena, dumped at the end of Neasham Road, beyond the railway line, where the last house in Darlington gives way to pockmarked, scruffy fields. It is a vast, empty, echoing bowl. The Arena seats 25,000, though a condition set down by county and borough planners means only 10,000 can ever be occupied. Madness!

Less than half the stadium is ever in use, though goodness knows what the upkeep for the whole costs each year. Tiny crowds, averaging about 1,600 this season, make watching the Quakers akin to attending reserve team football. Who, apart from the sad, the lost and the lonely, can be bothered with that? Precious few of the canny folk in Darlington, it seems. For many, the club is now out of sight - and out of mind.

The infrastructure of the stadium is fine. It is designed for a Premier League club, something Darlington will never be; can never be, given the proximity of the Boro, Sunlun and the Toon. Take the anomalous Arena out of its geographical and sporting context, and it's an impressive venue. A white and grey lozenge, it floats on an asphalt bed of parking spaces. The inverted steel triangles which embrace the stadium and support the continuous cantilevered roof, on whose fascia the floodlights are mounted, are plainly visible from outside, and give a very good idea of how the thing was constructed. It's like a giant Meccano set.

The main entrance, in the centre of the south stand, leads to a cool, intimately lit foyer. Photographs, along with framed programmes and newspaper cuttings, tell the story of Darlington's happier yesteryears. This stand also houses the ticket office, club shop (too big for the paltry tat on sale) and a dismal 'sports' bar. Inside, a line of executive boxes is positioned to the rear of the single tier of red plastic tip-up seats which sweep right round the stadium in forty separate blocks. The tonal monotony is broken by slogans picked out with black and white seats. There is a central players' tunnel, flanked by dugouts so sturdy they might have been designed with an atom bomb attack in mind. A tartan track, perhaps five yards wide, runs round the pitch - and serves only to distance spectators from the action. The corners are filled in, the roof panels fluted, and the Arena has the feel of a scaled down version of Middlesbrough's Riverside Stadium. With crowds as small as Darlington's, one gets the impression one is touching the void here. Out there, beyond the boundary, is a soulless hinterland of misery. I could cry for Darlington's supporters, I really could. They never asked for any of this.

THE GAME: Watched by Darlington's best crowd of the season and therefore unspeakably dreadful. Inevitable, eh? When Conference National is good, it's close to League Two standard; when it's this bad, it's like Sunday morning stuff. Even at a fiver, I felt ripped off. A shapeless, joyless contest, almost entirely devoid of excitement, skill and goalmouth incident, could have done nothing to tempt the night's extra fans to return - at full prices - this weekend when leaders Crawley Town come here. How on earth Darlington and Tamworth knocked Football League opposition out of the FA Cup three days previously, I cannot fathom. Even the goal, in the 35th minute, was a joke. On-loan Marc Bridge-Wilkinson slung over a free-kick from the right and Danny Hone sent a looping header towards James Severn, the Tamworth keeper, who clearly thought it was going over the bar. Imagine his horror when the ball dropped into the net.

Darlington (four straight wins now) were poor; Tamworth (two wins in 12) abysmal. The goal apart, just two other incidents are worth mentioning during a first half played out in a biting chill wind. Liam Hatch, a clumsy oaf in the middle of the

Quakers' defence, headed onto the roof of the net, and tricky Lambs wide man Danny Thomas found the side netting with an angled drive following a determined run from midfield by Daniel Bradley.

The second half was scarcely better. I wrote nothing - substitutions aside - in my notebook until 16 minutes from time, when Severn flung out a hand to divert wide a free-kick from Aaron Brown which had drifted right across goal, evading everyone. Sub Jefferson Louis then headed straight at the Lambs keeper from a good position, and in the last few minutes, Tamworth woke up. Seb Lake-Gaskin forced Sam Russell into a one-handed tip over (his first save of the night) and moments later the sub had the ball in the net from close range, but was flagged offside. Darlington then wasted time until the final whistle sounded - and brought me sweet, sweet relief. Never have I been so eager to get on the A1!

THE PROGRAMME: Darlington, at least in my time watching football, have always done a pretty decent programme, and the 2010-11 version is no exception. The rather dreary cover changes for each game, and the image of Bridge-Wilkinson chosen for this fixture was bizarre. However, it's hard to knock the contents. Considerable effort has been put in, and the presence of numerous columnists indicates the high level of regard in which the club is held. At least in some quarters.

THE VERDICT: Go, if you must - but take a handful of anti-depressants.

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