

TT No.164: Mike Latham - Saturday 29 January 2011: West Midlands (Regional) League Premier Division: **Stafford Town** 2-3 Goodrich; Attendance: 70 (h/c); Admission: £4; 28pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

The frost on Friday evening was deeper than originally forecast and ruined hopes of my intended trip northwards. Mid-winter Saturday mornings have been stressful lately, with all the bad weather about, spent huddled in front of the computer trying to find a new ground to visit. With games steadily being called off, I had virtually given up of a definite thumbs-up until, on the off-chance I made a call to the Stafford Town secretary and was delighted to get a friendly and positive reply- 'Yes, the game is on.' It was music to my ears.

Stafford Town are a relatively well-established club, founded back in 1976 by Gordon Evans. Town originally played at Burton Manor Sports & Social Club in the Staffs County League and were a nursery side for the senior club in the town, Stafford Rangers. They had something of a nomadic existence and even ground-shared for a time at Rangers' Marston Road ground, reaching the Midland Football Alliance after lifting the championship of the West Midlands (Regional) League in 2000.

In 2004 Mr Evans returned to the club as chairman and, with the club facing difficulties it was decided to move to the Rowley Park athletics stadium and re-group back in the West Midland Regional League Division One. Since then the club has steadily built up its infrastructure and in 2006 attained Charter Standard Community Club status, winning a national award within that category in 2007. The club now has male teams from Under-8s through to adults, female teams from U10s to adults and a disabled section, fielding 19 teams in total, an astonishing success story.

In March 2010 all the tremendous work undertaken by Mr Evans and his committee came to fruition when Stafford Town moved into their first permanent home, fittingly named Evans Park. The ground is located at Riverway which runs between Weston Road and Lichfield Road crossing the River Sow to the east of the town centre. Evans Park is located behind the Stafford Cricket and Hockey Club, a club formed back in 1864 who moved to Riverway in 1984.

Built on part of a large amount of flat land next to the river, Evans Park was funded to the tune of £647,375 recognising the club had become such an important sporting hub in their community. The Club was awarded £497,375 from the Football Foundation, the UK's largest sports charity and received a further £150,000 as part of the Community Club Development Programme (CCDP).

CCDP, I learnt from talking to a couple of club officials, is a Government funded scheme, managed nationally by Sport England and delivered by the Football Foundation. Its major objective is to develop links between the country's leading junior clubs and their local communities, by providing quality coaching and safe

environments for young people to enjoy football. It is the aim for Evans Park to become a hub of the local community and for the facility to be fully utilised.

Evans Park is certainly an impressive site, its focal point a well-designed cantilever stand, which currently holds 250 seats but with room for expansion. The club rooms are located under the stand and, for the supporters on match-day there is a well-appointed tea room and lounge. The rest of the ground is flat standing behind a neat perimeter fence and the whole site is surrounded by a smart green security fence.

Mr Evans is on the gate to greet friends old and new and kindly enquired as to if this was my first visit to the ground. He warmly welcomed me, said that they had fortunately rolled the pitch on Friday afternoon and so had defeated the ravages of the frost which claimed many other fixtures in the area. The tea bar was first-class, the locals friendly, the programme informative and nicely designed and there were lots of good vantage points to enjoy the game on a sunny, crisp afternoon. The floodlights at Evans Park, I was told, are impressive but, as a welcome sign that winter is at last receding the game finished, just, in natural light and they were not required.

Goodrich had conceded 73 goals in 23 games, Town 61 in 22 so a goal-less draw looked highly unlikely. So, it proved as both sides carved out numerous chances in a fast-flowing and entertaining spectacle. The visitors took the lead three times and might have rued some profligate finishing had Town, who played the last half-hour with ten men after one of their defenders was red-carded managed to convert a couple of late chances.

I really enjoyed my visit to Stafford Town. Several friends who had visited Evans Park before me were full of praise for the facilities and warm welcome and I was not to be disappointed. Located down a small road off Riverway that leads behind the cricket club, there is ample parking and for those on foot the ground is within easy walking distance of Stafford town centre. A visit here comes highly recommended.

07/20