

TT No.212: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 26th March 2011; **Chippenham Town** v Chesham United; Southern Premier; Res: 1-0; Att: 457; Admission: £9; Programme: £2 (68pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

THE PLACE: Truth to tell, sleepy Chippenham came as a relief after 24 hours amid the relentless hurly burly of neighbouring Bath's tourist-choked streets. Swapping swarms of camera-toting Japanese for spotty Wiltshire adolescents going through their 'yeah but no but yeah but' routines was an exchange I made with a light heart. Chippenham is one of those communities whose presence on a main railway line comes as a surprise, especially given that express services stop here regularly. The local council's official free guide suggests this is "one of the West Country's most dynamic towns". I guess when the competition includes the likes of Trowbridge, Frome, Corsham and Warminster, the claim does not seem quite so outrageous.

And we caught Chippenham on a good (that is, market) day. It meant the main drag, between the River Avon and the fifteenth century Yelde (or Guild) Hall, was a hive of colourful activity. I've never 'got' street markets, but cheery Chippenhamers seemed well pleased with the acres of tat being hawked. The town is often referred to as 'Little Bath', though this has more to do with the type of stone used in its buildings than the availability of World Heritage Site-style attractions. Chippenham's wealth was based on weaving, canals, cheese and the railway. The Westinghouse Brake & Signal Company (trust me, it's famous) used to have a large works here.

This quartet of industries has seen better UK days, leaving Chippenham to provide cheapish (I add the last three characters from a Northern perspective) accommodation for workers priced into commuting by the inflated demands of the housing market in Bath and Bristol. A shame, but a familiar tale repeated up and down the land. Chippenham is trying hard to lure visitors now that its traditional industries survive only in the memories of the elderly. The tourist information centre boasted two members of staff, which was at least one more than I expected to find. It is an inescapable fact, however, that most of what is worth seeing (for example, Lacock Abbey and Castle Combe) is not located within Chippenham's town boundaries.

THE CLUB: Chipp (as the locals refer to them) have come on a bit since my cousin, Richard, turned out for them in their Western League days. The friendly chap in the club shop kindly, and without prompting, unearthed some programmes from the mid to late-1990s so I could see Richard's (my dad's sister's son) name in print.

The Bluebirds (as no-one seemed to refer to them) were formed in 1873; a time, according to the programme, when "Livingstone was discovering the places that we now go to on long weekends". Not Bath, then, I'm thinking. Chipp joined the Western League in 1904, but serious decline in the 1960s saw them drop into the

Wiltshire League. Western League status was regained via a stint in the Hellenic League, and it's been pretty much - go, go, go ever since. They were beaten finalists last season in the Southern League Premier Division play-offs (described as a "magnificent achievement" by the programme editor), and aim to go one better this time.

I thought their manager looked familiar. Turns out he's Adie Mings, whom I saw playing for Bath City against my own team, Halifax Town, several times in the 1990s. Chippenham, having lost all their December home fixtures to the wintry weather, had to reduce their wage bill after Christmas. I noted, with some amusement, the sponsor on the rear of their shirts was Costcutter. Wonder when they came on board?

THE GROUND: Rather disappointing. I had expected better. The old main stand is mildly diverting, though this has been spoiled by the addition above of a box-like social club. The remainder of the ground fails to excite. There's too much in the way of portable buildings (Chippenham must set some kind of record for their use), kit stands, uninspiring covers and bits of terracing that wither to nothing owing to lack of space. This is the club's real problem. Hardenhuish Park is hemmed in by a multi-sport complex which embraces cricket, tennis, hockey, athletics and bowls. Oh, and there's a sexy airdome, which dominates one corner. Oddly, there is no mention of football on the sign alongside the road to Bristol, adjacent to which the Bluebirds are marooned, half a mile from the town centre. The pitch isn't up to much, either. It slopes from end to end and from side to side. At this stage of the season, after an endless winter's bombardment by the less helpful elements, it is horribly bumpy.

THE GAME: With both sides hoping to secure a place in the play-offs, this was a match neither dared lose. Chesham could afford to draw; Chippenham simply had to win. The inevitable outcome was a cagey contest, short on goalmouth action and thrills, long on niggles and dissent. Still, it was tense. From the opening moments, it was apparent a single goal would be enough to secure victory. Chippenham got it in the 52nd minute, when the visitors' defensive wall obligingly jumped over Lewis Powell's 20-yard free-kick, allowing the striker's low shot to sneak into the corner of the net keeper Shane Gore had elected not to guard.

The closest Chesham went to a goal was in the 44th minute. Bluebirds centre-back Nathan Rudge, a man whose middle name ought to be 'hesitant', messed up once too often, leaving Steve Wales through on goal. Wales's shot beat keeper Chris Snoddy, but Rudge's fellow defender Ashley Williams got back to clear off the line. Seconds later, Chesham keeper Shane Gore produced a superb one-handed parry to prevent Luke Gullick lashing into the net from 10 yards.

Powell's goal apart, the second half was mostly about huff and puff. Chippenham were terrified of being too adventurous, lest they concede an equaliser, and Chesham were never quite determined enough to find one.

THE PROGRAMME: A weighty tome. Sadly, much of the 68-page content turned out to be fairly worthless padding. Examples included, under the heading As Time Goes

By, match reports from 2005 and 2006, along with an apparently essential directory of clubs in the Southern League, a bemusing look at the Southern League Division One Central promotion race, and screeds of uninteresting statistics. Town fans must find the fortnightly repetition of their club's history and pen pictures an excruciating bore. I'd far rather have, say, a 24-page programme full of lively, interesting and unusual features, selling at a cheaper price. Less really can be more!

THE VERDICT: My first Southern League 'hop' since September 2008 (Brackley Town, in case you're curious) and enjoyable for its novelty value. Also, my first football match in almost three months. However, if I say the post-match chicken jalfrezi I enjoyed in the splendid curry house near the Yelde Hall will linger longer in the memory than either ground or game, I imagine you'll get the picture.

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