

TT No.215: *Richard Panter* - Sunday 27th March 2011; **Cheltenham Town v Gillingham**; League Two; Final score: 1-2; Attendance: 3,157 (away fans 559); Admission: £15; Programme: 76pp £3; Match rating: ****.

The previous day I had finally ticked off Morecambe's Globe Arena. Frankly, I can add little to Andy Gallon's precise account in TT138 (Jan 2011). For me this was ground number 56 of the current 92.

This Sunday was to prove interesting in two unusual ways. Firstly, on the way to Whaddon Road I passed a hitch-hiker. This was the first time I had seen someone roadside with an extended thumb for, well...years in fact. The second unusual occurrence happened during the actual match. What happened is the referee blew his whistle and made Gillingham hand the ball over to their opponents because the Gills player had performed something called a foul throw. Apparently, there are rules regarding the taking of throw ins, this correspondent has not seen such an implementation for, well...years in fact!

Further memory searches revealed that, as far as I can remember I have never seen either of these teams in action before, therefore a visit to the genteel Gloucestershire town of Cheltenham seemed like a good idea. From my home, Whaddon Road is just over eighty miles via Evesham. I went this way to both break the monotony of motorway travel and I also wanted to see how Evesham United's new home was progressing. The answer to this is very well in fact. The ground infrastructure, pitch and clubhouse are all in place, trees are planted between the A435 and the ground and the whole surrounding area looks neat and tidy in the extreme. I will certainly be clicking the turnstile there at some point next season. My journey continued past Cheltenham racecourse where (depending who you listen to) the football club are rumoured to be moving to at some point in the future. That is a new football ground, they aren't considering a ground share.

I parked just down the road from the ground at 12.30 and noticed a distinct lack of activity in the area. Strange for what I thought was a two o'clock kick-off. I strolled up to the club shop and tried to buy a programme, now if I wanted one from Bury, Shrewsbury or Chesterfield I was in luck, but if I wanted one for today's game I would have to wait and buy one from an official programme seller. I asked what time this would be and was told about 2 o'clock, a bit tight time wise I suggested only to be informed that it was a three o'clock kick off. Apparently the only place the first ball would be kicked at 14.00 was in my fetid imagination! Incidentally, the programme was neat and tidy and had everything you need if nothing else.

As for the ground, it is a combination of the old and the new. The main stand is not dissimilar to those at Chorley, Barnet and the one which used to be at Christie Park. At a pinch I would say it dates from the late fifties. The outside has been modishly clad in synthetic materials and extended rewards no doubt to

accommodate the corporate activities of the club. As the players and match officials ran out from the centre of this, I assume that some space remains for the changing rooms. There is a small standing paddock with a good view of the dug outs in front of this. In truth this is a fine old structure, sadly one of the disappearing relics of times past. To the left of the main stand there is a covered terrace for home fans. I stood there having paid my £15. Next to this and spanning the entire far side of the pitch is a modern cantilever stand. There is an interesting parallel with Bradford City here as this stand is crammed in between houses. Although, whereas the Yorkshire club did their initial land reclamation in late Victorian times the Robins seemed to have done theirs during the reign of the current Queen. What this means for both sets of house holders is an unrivalled view of football ground architecture. The final side, the far goal line end is also a modern cantilever stand, this entire side is reserved for visiting supporters. Whaddon Road shows its non-league heritage but has moved with the times yet maintains its charm and character.

On the pitch the hosts scored in the third minute, then hit the post but saw the Gills 'keeper grab the rebound, and that was about it until the second half of the second half.

In the sixty fifth minute it suddenly dawned on me how the match had changed. For much of the first hour it was nothing to get excited about. Then the visitors began to turn the screw tighter and tighter. Quite how Cheltenham kept them at bay for so long was a mystery. The Kentish men launched wave after wave of attacks at the Robins. When the home side sought some respite by getting the ball forward their front men were incapable of retaining possession. However, with five minutes of the ninety remaining I was just thinking that Town may just survive the onslaught, against the odds they could possibly hang on to all three points. Then Gillingham struck. Then Gillingham struck again. Two goals in the closing minutes were no more than they deserved. For twenty minutes both sides served up an exciting, pulsating game of football, no quarter was asked or given.

The travelling support, largely quiet for much of the match, were by full time were baying at the tops of their voices as their team re-entered the play off places. As for Cheltenham, they are safe from the drop to the Conference and now will plan for another year in the football league.

35 to go...

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