

TT No.229: *Andy Gallon* - Wed 6th April 2011; **Aberford Albion v Mount St Mary's**; WYL Div. One; Res: 3-2; Att: 22 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: None; FGIF Match Rating: *****.

THE GROUND: On a perfect spring evening, with blue skies finally revealed after a day of varying cloud, Bunkers Hill was a joy to behold. In every respect, this tidy little ground is more impressive than the facilities generally seen in the West Yorkshire League. There is a small wooden stand (modern rather than ancient) on the west touchline, with substantial dug-outs alongside. The dressing rooms are housed in a fairly new stone-built block in the north-east corner. A post and rail barrier encloses the broad, flat pitch, though there isn't any hardstanding or floodlights. Fields (on this occasion, freshly ploughed in fertile furrows the colour of plain chocolate) rise and fall - respectively - to the west and north. Most of this linear village is north of Bunkers Hill, with the spire of the parish church of St Ricarius a notable landmark. Grass banking beyond the goal at the south end gives the ground a slightly enclosed feel. Aberford's crowning glory is positioned on top of the banking - wonderful Victorian almshouses, built in Gothic style, to house retired workers from the Oliver Gascoigne estate. Nowadays, as Priory Park, they are part of a terribly mundane business centre, which depressed me slightly.

THE GAME: Contrary to my expectations, this clash between two sides in the lower half of the First Division table turned out to be one of the best contests I've seen this season. I don't usually bother with football at this level, unless a club issues a programme, but Aberford is just 16 miles from my front door and the fixture presented an ideal opportunity to acquire another 'tick'.

For no reason I could fathom, the match kicked off 10 minutes late at 6.25pm. By 6.26, the Albion (to borrow West Bromwich parlance) were 1-0 up. Mount St Mary's, who had hot-footed across from nearby Leeds after a day's work, had a stiff breeze at their backs and equalised in the 10th minute before going ahead 15 minutes later with a goal direct from an in-swinging corner.

The second half was a completely different story. Aberford dominated from the off, and their relentless pressure finally told in the 75th minute when they equalised with a free header. Mount's best player struck the crossbar with eight minutes to go in the visitors' only attack of note after the break. Just as a draw seemed inevitable, the same Albion player who got the opening goal half-volleyed a superbly-taken winner in the third minute of stoppage time, by which juncture twilight was well advanced and the breeze distinctly chilly. Bravo to the two WAGS behind the goal at the north end. They didn't budge for the whole match, despite having the elements right in their faces.

Astonishingly, Aberford have a third of their 30 league games still to complete - and we're in April! I had a chat to some of Albion's players before kick-off, and

they were bemused at referees being happy to play on rock hard pitches in spring, and yet reluctant to do so in the depths of winter.

THE CLUB: Albion's history, to be poetic, is something of a mystery. I can say their previous ground used to be next to the southbound carriageway of the A1 before the hitherto congested section in this neck of the woods became two-laned and several troublesome roundabouts removed. This ground was clearly visible to passing motorists, and vanished under gleaming lanes of tarmac between 20 and 25 years ago. Traditionally, Albion play in red and yellow stripes, but appear to have ditched this highly distinctive Catalan-style strip in favour of boring old plain red.

THE PLACE: Now a rural backwater, Aberford used to be a key location on the Great North Road, and was reckoned to mark the halfway point between London and Edinburgh. The village was an important coaching stop in the days when horses were the fastest way of getting from A to B. Many of the houses in the village, which lies on the narrow Cock Beck, have large arches, through which coaches once arrived and departed. The grand White Swan Hotel is a survivor from the coaching era. The modern A1 motorway runs about 200 yards east of the wide main street, along which this elongated settlement is strung out for at least a mile.

THE VERDICT: To be frank, a far more enjoyable evening than I was expecting. Bunkers Hill is a very pleasant ground with, for this level of football, excellent facilities. Wouldn't it be lovely if Albion ran to a programme, though?

07/20