

TT No.30: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 21st August 2010; **Heath Hayes** v Stratford Town; Midland Alliance; Res: 0-1; Att: 93; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

It's fascinating to ponder how a ground's setting can be transformed over a period of decades. Take, for example, the Coppice Colliery Ground, home of Heath Hayes, one of several clubs in fertile football territory encompassing the area north of Walsall, including Cannock Chase. Visit now, and it's a semi-rural idyll, tucked away in a quiet corner amid trees and assorted greenery. But what a different scene it must have been when the eponymous pit, sunk in 1893, part of the South Staffordshire coalfield and nicknamed The Fair Lady, was operational. Heath Hayes, then with the suffix United, formed in 1965, the year after the colliery closed. In 1954, Coppice miners had broken the national production record, raising it from 25 to 80 cwt a man. Some of those involved with the club today were colliers at the pit and played on the ground when it stood in the shadow of the winding gear. The muck, dust and noise then can only be imagined. If you know the ground, the pit head was in the grassy field, now an overspill parking area, to the rear of the banking behind the goal at the near end.

Heath Hayes, despite keen competition for spectators, sponsors and goodwill from bigger neighbours Hednesford Town and Chasetown, are a club on the rise. This is their debut campaign in the Midland Alliance, having won the Premier Division of the Midland Combination last season. Prior to our visit, they'd done well, winning two and drawing one of their league fixtures, and reaching the preliminary round of the FA Cup. Hayes weren't impressive in this match, though. Without injured star striker Alan Haycock, they struggled to make an impact up front. Stratford Town, winning for the third time in eight days, despite being obliged to field a youthful academy graduate in goal, were tougher and slicker. The men from Shakespeare Country really ought to have won more convincingly.

This being an English August, the match kicked off in torrential rain. The downpour lasted fifteen minutes, abating not a moment too soon. Any longer, and abandonment might have crossed the referee's mind. To our astonishment, the deluge was replaced by bright sunshine. The brolly's role switched from parapluie to parasol in a split second. The rain didn't help anyone. The pitch cut up badly, and the teams, playing at a frantic pace, had trouble producing anything quite as fluid as the monsoon. The only real chance of a wholly humdrum first half fell to Stratford's Dan Polan. Put through on the left side of goal by Nicky Pugh's sweet pass, Polan was stretching as he swung his right-boot, and the ball flew high and wide.

The second half was a huge improvement. Both teams opted for a more controlled approach. Hayes were given a warning they failed to heed in the 55th minute. Stuart Herlihy got up well to meet a James Husband cross, and his looping header was going in, but keeper Oliver Crutchley managed to reach back and flick the ball

over the bar with one hand. On the hour, the hosts squandered their best chance. A Karl Wallis cross from the left picked out Peter Howells, unmarked 10 yards from goal, but he somehow sent a glancing header wide. That miss looked even more costly five minutes later when Herlihy scored what proved to be the winner. Tim Jackson fired over a corner and Crutchley raced off his line to make the catch, but the experienced Herlihy beat the keeper to the ball and headed down into an empty net from 10 yards. Crutchley did much better in the 78th minute when he blocked Dave Pearson's effort in a one on one. There was drama in stoppage time. Stratford substitute Sean Pugh was impeded by Andy Tuck just outside the box. The referee, behind play, awarded a penalty, only to change his mind on the intervention of one of his assistants. Jackson curled the resulting free-kick over the wall and against the bar, with the rebound hacked clear. A second goal would have given the score a fairer reflection of the visitors' superiority.

The Coppice Colliery Ground is a short distance from Five Ways, a meeting of roads after which the village now known as Heath Hayes was originally named. An unmade track leads into two parking areas covered in the same fine aggregate. The field beyond is where the pit was. A wrought-iron gate, with the initials HHFC picked out, gives access to one corner of a tidy little ground. The pay hut, stuffed full of detritus, isn't used. A chap - a former Coppice miner, it turned out - sitting on a chair and nursing a cup of tea took the money for admission and run-of-the-mill programmes. The best view of the ground is from the top of the overgrown banking at this end. All the spectator facilities are on the near side. These (looking down the ground) consist of a narrow, modern stand sheltering a couple of rows of seats, a newish red-brick block housing the changing rooms, a portable building serving refreshments, a squat, smart main stand with wonderful padded seats, armrests, a redundant players' tunnel and the club's name on its fascia, and a small tin cover. There is hardstanding everywhere save the bottom end. Three (why, I don't know) whitewashed dug-outs add some interest to the touchline opposite the main stand. Mature trees surround all but the near end, giving the ground a compact, rural atmosphere. There are four floodlight masts on each side, and the pitch barrier is a post and rail job painted in the club's blue and white colours. The sole aesthetically jarring note is struck by the modern buildings which tower over the main stand beyond the club's boundary. Hayes have been told by the grading police they need to erect a 6ft perimeter fence. The club have had an estimate of £24,000, a sum way beyond them, therefore they will wait to see if they avoid relegation before attempting to raise it.

To my mind, one of the key differences between league and non-league football is the type of people involved. I despair of the characters that populate the professional game, but the folks at Heath Hayes, a club who don't pay any sort of wages, are a smashing bunch. They really couldn't have been more welcoming. There's a sense of humour and a good team spirit here, too. We arrived in time to watch the customary choreographed warm-up, and were amused to see one of the home players going through his stretches in a tight, pink leotard bearing the legend HHFC W****r of the Week. If you can't enjoy your football at this level, what's the point of bothering?

