

TT No.41: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 30th August 2010; **Grimsby Town** v Histon; Conference National; Res: 2-1; Att: 2,925 (15 away); Admission: £16; Programme: £2.50 (72pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Grimsby and Cleethorpes on a Bank Holiday. Does life get any better? Excuse the sarcasm. It had been a while since a visit to either of these dreary backwoods was in my diary and, boy, neither place has improved. North-east Lincolnshire really must be the end of the line. Some poor souls spend their entire lives here. Can you imagine? It doesn't bear thinking about. I had a friend at university who was from Cleethorpes and supported the Mariners. He never went home for the vacations. That, I suspect, tells you everything you need to know. To make matters worse, on this day the place reeked of cow muck. It was being spread on the fields of Grimsby's vast farming hinterland and the feisty wind, blowing off shore, allowed the stench to permeate every nook and cranny. There was simply no escape. Nostrils twitched everywhere.

There's nothing, save for a walk on the ragged beach and spotting ships in the Humber estuary, to do here, so we'll get straight down to the football. Grimsby Town play in Cleethorpes (every game an away fixture etc. etc.), and have been domiciled at Blundell Park since 1899. Some bits of the ground, notably the original main stand, are almost as old. This is traditional football territory. The ground is hemmed in by rows of terraced homes and a railway line. A hefty clearance over the main stand would, if the tide were in, just about find water; in this case, a murky brown colour. Swimming, anyone? Blundell Park, with an all-seat capacity of close on 10,000, is dominated by the towering Findus Stand. It's got a different sponsor these days, but the signage and information on the club website still refer lovingly to the 'Success on a Plate' connection. We have tickets for the Upper Findus, which offers a superb view of the action. If you get bored, you can go back to ship spotting or attempt to make out Spurn Point to the north-east. The stand, opened in 1982, is a child of its generation. That means ugly external cladding, minimal spend breeze block interiors and arguably the least inviting bar in the game. Some broken plastic tip-up seats in the upper tier have been mended by using colours other than the predominant red. It is, I guess, an indication of Grimsby's declining status - both as a fishing port and a football club which until comparatively recently was in the old Second Division.

From the topmost rows of the Upper Findus, one feels the master of all one surveys. To the left, the Pontoon (fishing term, apparently) Stand is a basic propped cover over re-profiled terracing now covered with seats describing black and white stripes. This structure is dwarfed by a huge shed (in essence, a massively out-sized Lego brick) devoted to the storage of frozen food. That's an awful lot of fish fingers. Beyond this architect's worst night-mare you can see the nicest thing in Grimsby - the Italianate dock tower. Generations of trawlermen must have used it as a seamark, realising they were nearly home. The old main

stand is opposite, and features press benches and a central players' tunnel. Grimsby never did get round to swapping the dressing rooms to the Findus. The roof of this low, dowdy stand curves round in an L shape to meet up with the lookalike Osmond Stand, which is reserved for away fans; all 15 of them today. What exactly do village clubs such as Histon bring to the top tier of non-league football? My witty answer: A sense of proportion, perhaps. Blundell Park has traditional floodlight pylons to go with the dated surroundings. Not that I'm complaining. This is my kind of football ground.

Gallows humour seems to be obligatory among Mariners' fans. Relegation from the Football League last May must have been hard to stomach, and their rebuilt team isn't pulling up any trees this season. Boss Neil Woods (a good coach, but no manager, according to locals) is already under pressure. An abject 4-1 defeat at Rushden & Diamonds two days previously didn't help. Both goalkeepers are injured. Rather than field youth teamer Rob Peet, Woods opted to bring goalkeeping coach Steve Croudson out of retirement. Croudson hadn't played for six years, but despite looking stiffer than a month-old cadaver, won the man of the match award. Two crucial saves, one in each half, helped Grimsby to their first home victory of the season.

Driving home, we had the 'pleasure' of BBC Radio Humberside's take on the match. "A rubbish game," declared sports editor David Burns, possibly still irked by Hull City's relegation and a consequent lack of Premier League matches to cover. Sure, it wasn't great, but it wasn't THAT bad. Woods, a likeable fellow, was extremely candid on air in his post-match interview. Too candid, in my view. Honest managers get sacked quickly. Club chairmen don't want to hear the boss admitting his team is so unattractive, it needs the footballing equivalent of a tummy tuck.

No surprises from Histon. The height of their ambition was a draw. When I followed Halifax Town regularly in the Conference, I saw home game after home game after home game like this. The Stutes got everyone behind the ball, and thumped it as far away from their goal as possible at the earliest opportunity. Grimsby, to their credit, tried to play some nice stuff. But they won't go up with this team. Too many pretty players. In Conference National, all you need for success is several very big lads, a proven goal scorer and a squad of grafters. Woods hasn't worked out the formula yet.

Histon scored first, with their first attack, encouraging them to retreat even further into their collective shell. Neatly worked goal, though. Darran Kempson lost possession near his own penalty area and quick passing left Lee Wootton (23) with a back-post tap-in from 12 yards. Alan Connell, a man admirably unafraid to shoot, equalised decisively from the spot (39) after the referee saw (somehow) a foul by Callum Stewart on Lewis Gobern, who went down like a fisherman on a deck strewn with gutted entrails and rolling in heavy seas. I never like to see a defensive away team prosper, so I was thrilled with Grimsby's stylish winner six minutes from time. Lee Peacock crossed deep from left to right, and Connell crashed a 16-yard volley across keeper Joe Welch and into the bottom corner.

Games such as this won't endear the Mariners faithful to Conference National, however. The crowd was a sparse 2,925, which compared unfavourably to earlier attendances of 5,037 (York City) and 3,405 (Hayes & Yeading). The trend is downward already. It's a long way back to the Football League once you've tumbled out of the elite. And I wouldn't want to start from where Grimsby are now.

07/20