

**TT No.69: *Andy Gallon*** - Wed September 15th 2010; **Long Melford** v Halstead Town; Eastern Counties League Division 1; Res: A-A (at 45 mins); Att: 74; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

**THE PLACE:** An atmospheric former wool town comprising a long, broad main street lined with touristy shops hawking antiques, books and fancy food. Suffolk pink is in evidence on many of the attractive buildings. Long Melford boasts an astonishingly large green, extending to 14 acres. Like a film set, the town has little depth. What you see on the main street and along the road leading up to the parish church is pretty much all you get!

**THE GROUND:** Ramshackle and (typically) in the least appealing part of town. How we loved it! The small cover behind the goal at the north end has fallen down, and the precarious netting to the rear of the goal opposite is going the same way. A battered old tractor gathers rust and cobwebs picturesquely amid the weeds at the south end. A Glebe Park-style hedge runs the length of the east touchline, where there is barely room to squeeze in a concrete path for a single line of spectators, and separates Stoneylands from the adjacent cricket ground. The sole stand, straddling the halfway line on the west side, is a kit-built structure. It's the only aesthetically dull thing in the place. We thought we'd stay dry on the top row of seats, but discovered rain dripped in through the open junction of back wall and roof. Next to the stand is the low-slung social club/bar, dressing rooms and kitchen, from which the larger than life Sam French doles out the usual football fodder. Most surfaces are painted in the club's black and white colours, providing a nice sense of unity.

**THE GAME:** Abandoned at half-time. A real bummer. Not as a result of the rain which lashed down from the moment the teams emerged from the dressing rooms, but because of an injury to the referee. The whistler copped a ball in the throat during the first half, and was found coughing up blood in the dressing room during the interval. We were told that Long Melford's assistant manager, a qualified referee, offered to run the line in the second half, while one of the linesmen took the whistle. Derby rivals Halstead, however, weren't willing to go along with the plan, it seemed. All a bit daft, really. After all, this isn't much above park football! In the programme, Long Melford manager Geoff Cleal stressed how important it was for the club's well-being to attract more spectators. This sort of prima donna nonsense won't encourage any first-timers to return! What action we did witness wasn't too clever, either. In the teams' defence, a strong wind and the driving rain made for difficult conditions. Impressive Halstead midfielder Ryan Sutton got the only goal in the 15th minute, volleying home confidently at the back post when found unmarked by Lee Hurkitt's ball in from the left. Sutton, a real bundle of energy, had his sleeves rolled up to his armpits and played like he meant business. Long Melford, before kick-off, were seen as the form team, but Halstead looked much the better side throughout the 45 minutes we got. Which

makes it even odder that the visitors, in the lower reaches of the table, weren't prepared to see the match to a conclusion.

**THE PROGRAMME:** An excellent effort from such a small club. It won't win any design awards, but the content from experienced editor Andy Cussans was interesting. Striker Ashley Skeggs was the player profiled, and when asked which car he drove, replied bizarrely: "Well, mum drives a Rover, sister drives an MG convertible, granddad drives a Rover as well, and my stepdad drives a VW Bora."

**THE VERDICT:** An appealing small town with plenty to see, especially if you chuck in the nearby stately homes of Melford Hall and Kentwell Hall. The ground is endearing, too. Mrs Mills, the old dear on the turnstile, will give you a cheery welcome. Long Melford are a friendly club who appear to deserve better support from the community, though having AFC Sudbury (and, to a lesser extent, Cornard United) on their doorstep can't help in the battle to sign players, lure spectators and entice sponsors.

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