

TT No. 103: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 26th November 2011; **Belper United** v Southwell City; CML South Division; Res: 2-2; Att: 52 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***

It is always nice to get done a ground on the 'endangered' list. Alton Manor, home to Belper United since about 1990, falls into this category. Not that club officials could shed much light on what the future holds. Apparently, Peveril Homes (slogan: homes to build a life in) have planning permission to build houses on the ground. Clearly, the whole area was once open pasture, but an estate (presumably also the work of Peveril Homes) has been constructed up to the ground's western boundary, and the northern perimeter is now a building site. There is also evidence of houses being erected beyond a copse on the southern side of the ground. To the casual observer, the developer's drooling maw seems poised to snap shut and swallow Alton Manor whole. A gruesome fate. I was told Peveril Homes had been given the green light to build here provided they constructed a new ground for United close by. But the club, re-formed in 1969, are now under the impression that may not happen. Left in limbo, unaware of how long they have left at their present home, they are covering all bases by busily hunting for an alternative site in the district. Having achieved Central Midlands League status only last summer (by winning promotion from the Midland Regional Alliance), this obviously ambitious club are desperate to retain it. So, that's how the land lies. Go while you can, would be my advice. Ominously enough, this game was played out against a backdrop of half-built houses, scaffolding, cement mixers and heavy plant.

Though basic, Alton Manor is a pleasant set-up. Local rivals Belper Town (of whom more later) play on the floor of the Amber Valley at Christchurch Meadow, next to the River Derwent (with its spectacular weir), close to the town centre. By contrast, United's ground is about 400 feet higher, right on top of the watershed. Just the place to be on an afternoon when powerful gusts of wind rattled loose roof slates and flimsy chimney pots! The topological relationship between Belper's senior clubs reminded me of the situation in neighbouring Matlock: Town on the valley floor; United (former CML members) up on the moors. I remember the latter vividly because it sleeted when I went there one bitterly cold December day.

Access to Alton Manor is via Nailers Way, an estate of depressingly pastiche new builds. You know the sort; a little bit Tudor. They contain four bedrooms, but two of them are hardly bigger than cupboards. Don't we, in Britain, have the smallest new houses in Europe? I imagine the residents will be glad to see the back of United (if it comes to that) because the club's tiny car park at the near (western) end isn't big enough to accommodate everyone's vehicle. Latecomers have to park where they can. All a bit messy. The largely level pitch is laid on a shelf in terrain which falls from north to south. On each side, there is barely room for a single line of spectators, owing to the proximity of building work (to the north) and a grass

bank (to the south). It explains why the only stand - a simple propped cover - is positioned in the north-east corner. There is a little more space at each end, but not much. Next to the car park is an octagonal, red-brick building which houses the dressing rooms. United don't lay on refreshments, leaving the way open for an opportunist 'caterer' (a grubby trailer peddling unhealthy options) to set up shop in the north-west corner. I wasn't tempted. Neither was a woman who'd brought a flask. "I'm not putting money in HIS pocket," she was overheard to spit. The pitch is enclosed by a post and rail barrier, and there are dug-outs on the southern touchline. There aren't any floodlights, which meant a 2pm kick-off and a distinctly murky last 20 minutes. The setting (for the time being) is largely rural, with green hills visible not far away to the east and west.

All the excitement was crammed into the opening half-hour. A fellow hopper (who, by an extremely odd coincidence, had also travelled from York) told me before kick-off he'd seen visitors Southwell figure in three goalless draws, so imagine my delight when Belper went ahead inside a minute. A daft square pass in the City defence was intercepted by Joe Wheeler, and he shot confidently past keeper David Parkes. United, fourth in the table, were well on top and made it 2-0 in the 20th minute. Mike Brewster's 20-yard shot was parried by Parkes, and Jordan McRobie, unmarked at the back post, tapped in the loose ball. Then came an unexpected turn-around. Inside 60 seconds, Southwell had pulled one back. Belper failed to clear their lines, and Tom MacDonald poached a soft strike from close range. Goal of the game arrived on the half-hour when Grant Russell, given time and space in the inside right channel to pick his spot, crashed a sublime low drive into the bottom corner from 30 yards. Home keeper Adam Jablonski really should have done better.

As the wind rose, so the contest petered out. The second half proved terribly tame. Wheeler struck a post with a 46th-minute volley, City's James Spence saw an 87th-minute headed winner chalked off for a mysterious infringement spotted amid the gloom by a linesman, and, in stoppage time, United sub Matt Smith somehow side-footed over the bar when all alone eight yards from goal.

As the final whistle sounded, I raced (Le Mans style) for my car and sped down the hill to catch the second half of Belper Town's Northern Premier League Division One South match with high-flying Carlton Town. I've been to Christchurch Meadow three times, but figured I might as well see another 45 minutes of football before heading home. The gateman let me in for nothing (it is £7 here if you watch the whole thing) and a chap in the boardroom knocked a third off the programme's £1.50 cover price. To boot, I was cheered enormously to discover the half-time score was 0-0.

What followed was an interesting comparison to earlier events at Alton Manor. Both surface and play were of a higher standard, but I didn't care for the constant bitching at the officials by the home bench. Town aren't in good form, and their manager's frustration was obvious. Also, the play acting from the players soon became tiresome. With a goalless draw seemingly inevitable, former Town striker Ruben Wiggins-Thomas scored a couple of late goals to keep Carlton on course for

promotion. In the 78th minute, he headed home at the back post and three minutes from time raced onto a long clearance and smashed a well-struck drive across the keeper and into the far corner. Fourth straight home defeat for Town, whose fans left early in droves. The crowd was 169, plus me and another chap with a United programme sticking out of his pocket and who, presumably, had been among the hardy few on the hilltop earlier.

I don't often bother with this sort of 'double' (we anally retentive types like to see a full 90 minutes), but it was an enjoyable afternoon in a place for which I've long had a soft spot. Perhaps it is Belper's magnificent former textile mills (one of which towers over Christchurch Meadow) which make a West Riding lad feel so at home. Should United move to a new ground (by choice or otherwise), it would not be any great hardship to return to this canny little town on the Derwent's bonny banks.

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