

TT No.111: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 3rd December 2011; **Binfield** v Flackwell Heath; FA Vase Round Three; Res: 3-1; Att: 194; Admission: £6; Programme: £1 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Every knowledgeable football follower is aware that the FA Vase is the only national knockout competition still taken seriously by every entrant. Both the FA Cup and, to a lesser extent, the FA Trophy have become badly devalued by participating clubs putting these (let's face it) passports to Wembley well down their list of priorities. It depresses me to hear of clubs, many of whom could hardly be described as 'big', fielding weakened line-ups as they keep their powder dry and resources fresh for league fixtures deemed more important. Even fans of some Conference National (and below) clubs regard the Trophy as a waste of time and, in the interests of avoiding late season fixture congestion, something to be got out of the way as quickly as possible.

No such concerns in the Vase, whose reputation (Northern League Whitley Bay's tedious recent domination notwithstanding) seems to grow year on year. There was a palpable sense of excitement and anticipation leading up to the kick-off of this third-round tie at Hill Farm Lane. Neither Binfield nor Flackwell Heath were too thrilled at being paired with opposition from the same (Hellenic Premier) league, but both were eager to make the last 32, with its attendant glamour of 'going national'. Home officials, happy to chat on the biggest day of their season so far, felt their team were the underdogs in this meeting of fifth versus second in the Hellenic Premier. As recently as mid-October, Binfield had crumbled 4-1 at Flackwell Heath in the league.

As it turned out, home fears were groundless. Binfield dominated most of the tie and emerged comfortable winners. At times, Flackwell Heath were so comprehensively outplayed, I began to wonder whether the players were actually interested. Judging by their exasperation, the visitors' bench and supporters certainly were. The first half was one-way traffic in the direction of the Heathens goal. Were it not for the heroics of second-choice keeper Luke Blackmore, Binfield, would have won by the game by half-time. Incredibly, the teams went in level. Funny how often this sort of thing occurs. Both goals came late in the half. With 40 minutes on the clock, James Suarez drilled a 20-yard free-kick wide of Blackmore's left hand and into the bottom corner. Two minutes into stoppage time, Flackwell Heath were awarded a penalty for handball amid a ruck of jumping players. The referee, having denied the visitors a more obvious spot-kick for a trip a minute earlier, could not wait to give it. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Danny Jordan equalised, just managing to beat Dan Weait's full-length belly flop with a weakly struck effort.

The second half continued with the same pattern. Binfield rained in shots, Blackmore pulled off saves. Until, that is, the 71st minute when Ian Davies beat the Heathens keeper with a close-range back-header. As if to prove this was

Blackmore's Achilles heel, Binfield's new signing (brought in the day before the game, I was told by the sage sitting next to me) John Dyer made it 3-1 six minutes later with an almost identical goal. It was too much for the blue rinse elderly woman on the row in front. A chain-smoking Heathens fan, she had defied the ground regulations by puffing angrily on cigarette after cigarette, and now stomped off in disgust. At the final whistle, I dashed into the clubhouse to catch the final results rolling in on the big screen, and heard the respective chairmen shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries. The Binfield chairman was clearly looking forward to the 'national' element of the fourth round, but hoped fervently to avoid "Whitley Bay away". Which, I'm happy to say, his club did.

What, then, of Hill Farm Lane, my first Hellenic League 'tick', facilitated by a long weekend with the de facto in-laws on the other side of the Berkshire-Surrey border? A pleasant rural setting, certainly. Fringed by trees (still glowing with autumn colours this far south) and very much in the middle of nowhere. Given this league features teams from such backwater counties as Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, this was no less than I expected. The ground is north of the village (having got lost negotiating nearby Bracknell's maddening new town roundabouts, I didn't have time to check it out) on land rented from the local authority. Binfield moved here about 30 years ago after one fall-out too many with the cricket club whose facilities they had shared. The clubs, it seemed, grizzled constantly about each other. In my experience, football and cricket are less happy bedfellows even than football and rugby (league or union). The original ground was infamous for mole hills, and the club retained their 'Moles' nickname upon leaving (literally) for pastures new. Gradually, the club have rented more land, on very favourable terms, and now use three full-size pitches catering for 24 teams, many of them junior. The first team pitch is nearest the village.

Access to this hard-to-find ground is through a gate in a hedge off a lane designed for use by tractors - presumably those from Hill Farm. The car park, which extends behind the adjacent second pitch (originally, before the drainage was extended, it was the first team pitch), had the texture of a soggy ploughed field, which seemed appropriate. When Binfield came to this site, a slope had to be levelled and the resulting spoil was used to build up banking at the near (north-west) end and right-hand (south-west) side. Perched on the former is a red-brick clubhouse containing a homely bar and (possibly even cosier) dressing rooms. An ugly, flat-roofed extension provides a bit of cover for spectators and a rather more useful refreshment hatch. The remainder is fairly basic. A kit-stand (how my heart sank), straddles the halfway line on the south-west side and offers four rows of red plastic tip-up seats. Behind it there is more banking. The stand's khaki cladding is echoed in the paint scheme of the breeze block dug-outs either side. The players descend a grassy bank via a railed walkway to one side of the near end goal. There is hardstanding everywhere but the grassy (and glutinous) south-east end, beyond which are trees, a flooded ditch and fields. The floodlights are mounted on spindly masts. On a largely sunny (and from my northern perspective fairly mild) afternoon, Hill Farm Lane is a decent spot to watch football. In torrential rain and high wind, its limited appeal might pall.

I gather (having gently interrogated an official under the guise of idle conversation) Binfield have mixed feelings about the 'improvements' likely to be demanded if their ground is to meet Southern League standards. Some people at the club are loathe to see the main pitch enclosed with an 8ft fence, thus cutting it off from the other two pitches. I got the impression it was felt some of the 'community' atmosphere would be lost, along with Hill Farm Lane's pleasingly 'undeveloped' appearance. More seats will be needed, even though the number they have at the moment is adequate. It is, I guess, the price of progress; or, at least, the price of progress when what happens off the pitch is thought to be more important than events on it. Why bother splashing out on a 30-goal-a-season striker to help secure promotion when the away dressing rooms are a couple of feet short of the length required by the league above? At least the FA Vase can be relied upon. What a great little competition. Roll on the fourth round!

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