

TT No.122: Andy Gallon - Mon 26th December 2011; **FCUM** v Ashton United; NPL Premier Division; Res: 2-1; Att: 1,926; Admission: £8; Programme: £2 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

My track record on declining unwelcome invitations is pretty good. Down the years, firm in the face of emotional pressures, I've shunned all manner of social events, from parties to weddings, mostly because I had better things to do. Saying no to close relatives at Christmas isn't so easy. Some months ago, my girlfriend and I resolved on a family-free Yuletide. Just the two of us. Home alone. Stress free. Fabulous. Planned entertainment included a Northern League football match (or maybe two) on Boxing Day. However, a December 21st visit to York from my Mum (on her birthday) ended with an invitation to Huddersfield for a return fixture. On Boxing Day. It was, I found to my surprise, impossible to decline. As (bad) luck had it, the family's team were playing away, in dark and distant north Lincolnshire. My two brothers, home for the festivities, preferred to attend the highest-level non-league fixture available and a 45-minute drive radius of the lunch table restricted options still further. That is how we ended up at FC United of Manchester, the most preposterous club in football.

I don't get FCUM; simply cannot see the point of them. The fact the four guys sitting behind us in the main stand at Gigg Lane (according to the programme, FCUM's 'temporary home') spent almost the entire game talking about Manchester United said it all. Yes, I sympathise with those unfortunates priced out of Old Trafford by the advent of the Greed (sorry, Premier) League. Less so with those who dislike the Glazers. Long before the ghastly Americans came along, MUFC had ceased to represent everything that was good and wholesome (Busby, Charlton etc) about English football. Take this sort of protest to its logical conclusion, and one ought to find FC United of Newcastle (disenfranchised Toon Army troopers) playing in the Northern League or FC Villa of Aston (disaffected Brummies) turning out in the Midland Combination. If Old Trafford didn't sell out effortlessly for every game, it might be a different story at FCUM. Given the option of a seat at OT (as the programme had it) or a perch at Gigg Lane, you just know which would be first pick. Interest in FCUM is waning, without doubt. On my only previous visit to see them at their 'temporary home', the crowd was in excess of 4,000 - for a North West Counties League fixture. The Bloke Next to Me that day had travelled from Derby! For this match, the gate was below 2,000 - and that much better than many attendances this season. Everyone around us was over fifty. FCUM's support - literally - is dying off.

I don't know (or care) what FCUM pay Bury to rent Gigg Lane, but it cannot be cheap. The hand-to-mouth Shakers need the money, and surely won't feel inclined to do MUFC spawn any favours. The collapse of the Ten Acres Lane project was a serious blow to FCUM's ambitions of becoming an independent entity, though they now hope to build a stadium of their own at an alternative site, playing fields in

Moston, and are busily raising money towards it. All they'll need then is a few supporters of their own; rather than MUFC fans, hearts and minds still very clearly at OT, going through the motions of following someone else. A couple of the many flags draped over the ranks of empty seats at Gigg Lane spoke of 'Childhood Memories'. Eh? How can watching scratchy NPL stuff in a fifth full, borrowed, all-seater Fourth Division ground well outside Manchester equate to standing on a packed Stretford End in the Seventies and Eighties marvelling at the stars of the era? To borrow a Simon Inglis analogy, one is comparing a superstore with a corner shop. Or is supporting FCUM really only about mindlessly waving scarves and chanting a medley of silly songs? Goodness knows, even the music piped through the PA system was from the Seventies and Eighties. Just one side and one end of Gigg Lane were open for this game, and this reflects FCUM's inability to be taken seriously by football fans up and down the country. They lack the charm of a traditional non-league club, and do not exude any of the glamour (real or imagined) of a Football League outfit. What, frankly, is the point?

Before we get on to the game (very watchable, thankfully), let's skip quickly around Gigg Lane. Sadly, now the terracing has been stripped out and three sides rebuilt as part of a £3m revamp, it is no longer the homely (if antiquated) venue it was when I first went there in 1983. The distinctive floodlights, squat and bulky, have also gone. The 1924 vintage main stand, showing its age, is the sole survivor of the good old days. Being frisked and searched by its turnstiles was an early indication that FCUM are no ordinary non-league club. How my youngest brother got his metal flask past the jobsworth fondling the four of us in the name of security I don't know. Symptomatic of Bury's long-term penury, the main stand is seedy. My girlfriend reported the Ladies' loos were appalling; the Gents' cannot have been better. With half the ground off limits, the atmosphere suffered, despite the bewildering chants, of the FCUM 'fan's'. The seats, new cladding and stands (all three, in the main, blue) apply to Gigg Lane more of a corporate, uniform appearance than hitherto. But, given the appeal of the ground in its original state derived from its various disparate elements, this development must count as a minus rather than a plus. Still, what remains is far, far better than an off-the-peg new stadium on the edge of the ring road.

I'd be cheesed off this morning if I were an Ashton United supporter. FCUM, on the fringe of the play-off places, were distinctly ordinary (and laughably pedestrian in defence). A more adventurous approach from the lowly visitors, content to grind out a draw, might have produced a victory. In Chris Amadi, Aaron Burns and Mark Peers, they had the best three players on the pitch. As it was, Ashton were unfortunate to lose. The visitors fell behind in the third minute when Michael Norton drilled home a loose ball after a Matthew Wolfenden shot had come back off the bar. Ashton equalised 10 minutes later following a quick breakaway. A superb Peers pass put through Amadi, a big lad not without skill and a real handful. Amadi held off a backtracking defender and finished confidently in a one-on-one. FCUM ('United' to their 'fans') were denied an obvious penalty when Norton was pushed in the box as he climbed to head goal-wards, but regained the lead four minutes after the restart. A poor clearance fell to Lee Neville (Gary's brother;

ooh, the vicarious excitement) and he netted from eight yards. It finally dawned (far too late) on Ashton that FCUM were there for the taking. The nearest the Robins' considerable pressure went to producing a second equaliser was in the 73rd minute. Amadi, muscle and bustle, got to the dead ball line and pulled back a low cross which Burns met first time, only for home keeper James Spencer to turn the ball round the post with a stunning reflex save.

At the final whistle, everyone scurried back to their cars to discover how The Real United had got on. Hammered Wigan Athletic 5-0 at a packed OT. Highlights of which the FCUM 'faithful' would doubtless enjoy on the box later. As protest movements go, FCUM is puny. And, I imagine, will only shrink in size and commitment. While so many of their 'fans' are still linked umbilically with The Real United via their satellite TV subscriptions, how can any other outcome be possible?

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