

**TT No. 131: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 31st December 2011; **Bradford City** v Shrewsbury Town; League Two; Res: 3-1; Att: 10,567 (412 away); Admission: £20; Programme: £3 (68pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

No-one in their right mind would today build a stadium on the site occupied by Valley Parade. The ground, providing ample proof that necessity really is the mother of invention, is wedged into a narrow shelf on a steep hillside, hemmed in by rows of Victorian terraced houses and so close to the busy city centre that there's no proper parking for 95 per cent of the crowd. And yet Bradford City have spurned numerous opportunities to quit the ground, most recently after the tragic 1985 fire which consumed the ramshackle main stand dating from the early years of the twentieth century.

The size, shape and appearance of Valley Parade, in its various guises, have always been dictated by topography, going back to the days when Manningham Football Club played there. In 1895, the club became the first champions of the breakaway Northern Union, now the Rugby Football League. Even more famously, Manningham sensationally 'switched codes' in 1903, transformed themselves into Bradford City FC and joined the Football League without having kicked a ball. The present stadium, with its all-seater capacity of 25,136 (astonishing, given the space constraints), is even uglier than its predecessors. At least these, by hook or by crook, managed somehow to blend into the Manningham landscape. Valley Parade's hulking modern stands, especially seen from afar, are a claret and amber carbuncle on the skyline of a city already seriously lacking in things bright and beautiful.

This frankly bizarre outcome, perhaps the best of a bad job, is the result of the club's intransigence in the face of logic. The sensible thing would have been to decamp to Park Avenue, a far superior venue in a more accessible part of the city, when their local rivals were liquidated in 1974. But the Bantams declined twice in that decade. After the 1985 fire, City really should have moved permanently into cavernous Odsal, the superbly located (almost adjacent to the M606) and ripe-for-redevelopment home of Bradford's professional rugby league club, Northern (now Bulls). Despite their strong (understandably so) emotional attachment to Valley Parade, the Bantams might not be able to afford to stay at the ground. The rent they pay is cripplingly high (a reported £370,000 a year) and the cash-strapped Fourth Division (let's call a spade a spade, eh?) club are apparently desperate to renegotiate terms with landlord Gordon Gibb, their former chairman, whose family pension fund owns the stadium.

But, guess what, I'm thrilled City are still at Valley Parade because it is the sort of characterful, off-trend ground fast disappearing from the British football scene. Those idiosyncrasies which many might see as irksome are a delight to the ground's enthusiast. The recent rebuild, which amid promotion-to-the-Premier-League hysteria followed the post-1985 fire revamp, has produced a stadium of eye-

rubbing individuality. Soak up a baffling juxtaposition of clashing angles, awkward roof lines and mismatched stands! Valley Parade may be a white elephant (many of its seats haven't seen a backside in a month of Sundays), but it is a joy to behold. The towering height of the main stand and kop, both double tier and linked neatly by a block of seats in the north-east corner, is amazing - particularly for those who knew the ground in its original state. The way the main stand stops abruptly, Raith Rovers fashion, near the Bradford End penalty area, is so arresting visually, an onlooker might expect to be handcuffed by the sight police and carted off in a black Maria.

The remainder is far smaller in scale, but no less fascinating. The stand on the Midland Road side used to be tiny, teetered on the edge of a sheer drop and offered standing room for fewer than 900 spectators. Now, thanks to the latest engineering ingenuity, its vastly bigger replacement contains almost 7,500 seats. Climb to Row Z (honestly, that's what the top row is called) for an appreciation of this most unusual stadium. At the Bradford End there is a cosy double-decker stand with just 1,800 seats. It reminds me of the old 'Penny Rush' stand behind the sticks at Oldham RLFC's long-demolished Watersheddings ground. Beyond this cute stand is an alley so mean and narrow, it is scarcely wide enough for a single vehicle. A further indication, if any were needed, that space in Manningham is at a premium. The area between the Bradford End stand and main stand is occupied by a vile red-brick block housing a clubhouse and the dressing rooms. This means the players gain the pitch via the south-west corner. You'll search in vain for a central tunnel. Another oddity.

If visiting Valley Parade, be sure to gaze upon Patricia McAllister's sculpted memorial on the main stand exterior honouring those who died so horrifically in the 1985 fire. Also, check out the excellent club museum, packed with priceless artefacts, located on the first floor of an otherwise hideous modern block in the north-east corner of the site. Along with the museum, this houses the ticket office, a tat-filled souvenir shop and (interestingly) a community café. The club's only car park (all 400 spaces of it) is nearby, to the rear of the kop, once an uncovered terrace. Curry lovers (and I'm certainly one of those) will enjoy Valley Parade because it is located in the heart of a district populated by Asians. The air is filled with spices! From the Midland Road stand, more mosques are visible than mill chimneys. How times change.

Once I'd decided to attend this fixture, I found myself really looking forward to it. A Bradford Bulls rugby league game notwithstanding, I hadn't been to Valley Parade since the final (surely there won't be another?) rebuild, and the match, between teams separated by most of the League Two table, promised much. The prospect of being part of a five-figure crowd, a rare experience for me these days, was also alluring. As it turned out, the underdog had its day. Struggling City, who were full of running and slick football on a heavy, uneven pitch, made fourth-top Shrewsbury look very ordinary indeed. The hosts were 3-0 up, and coasting, by the 49th minute after goals from James Hanson (close-range header), Nahki Wells (cool finish in a one-on-one) and Craig Fagan (blistering volley).

But the referee, a Mr Mohareb, intervened to ensure the contest did not die there and then, which was great for the neutrals. With 70 minutes gone, he sent off - straight red - Bantams midfielder David Syers for a lunging, two-footed tackle. The City fans, who really got behind their team, howled in protest. It looked a harsh decision to me, but Nicky Wroe, the Shrews player on the wrong end of the challenge, received, it later transpired, two broken bones in a foot, so I guess the ref was right. It then became a different match. Bradford, chasing a third straight victory, pulled everyone back and Shrewsbury set up shop in the hosts' half, passing the ball about with a zeal and accuracy hitherto unimaginable. With 12 minutes left, the visitors pulled a goal back through a close-range volley from Marvin Morgan, who appeared to handle in bringing the ball down. More stick for the poor referee. Shrewsbury squandered a couple of very good chances before the final whistle. If they had put one of them away, the finale would have been even more rousing than it was.

Long may City continue to defy common sense and remain within the claustrophobia-inducing confines of Valley Parade. What a shame it would be if an inability to pay the exorbitant rent forced the club to leave this oddball set-up. Not, I hasten to add, that I'd be happy to shell out £20 every fortnight to watch this standard of football.

07/20