

TT No.133: *Andy Gallon* - Sun 1st January 2012; **Stockport County** v Barrow; Conference National; Res: 3-2; Att: 3,301 (341 away); Admission: £16; Programme: £3 (68pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

It is a crying shame that Edgeley Park never having looked so good coincides with impoverished Stockport County being at their lowest ebb. Yet another Northern club to lose Football League status, the unhappy Hatters, their century-plus membership of the elite curtailed abruptly last May, are enduring an utterly miserable debut season in Conference National. This victory, barely deserved, was only their fourth in 27 league games. No wonder County's long-suffering fans, several of whom around us had clearly become embittered by the struggles and disappointments of recent seasons, were so overjoyed to hear the final whistle. Terminal decline cannot be much fun.

The tip-top upkeep of Edgeley Park owes at least as much to the presence of Sale Sharks rugby union club as the efforts of County, who are now very much the junior partner in a long-standing sharing arrangement. Rugby union, certainly at the top level, appears to be awash with cash, and Edgeley Park, all-seated these days, has benefited accordingly. County might have begun the transformation, but Sale ensure the good work does not go to waste. The well-heeled types who tend to watch rugby union will not (on the whole) tolerate the inadequate facilities found so frequently away from the apex of football's pyramid. Everywhere you look at Edgeley Park is spick and span. Acres of blue paint and ranks of blue seats tie together very neatly the ground's four disparate stands. The place oozes an affluence and a buoyancy greatly at odds with hard-up County's position in Conference National's relegation zone.

In many respects, it is a vastly different ground to the one I first visited on May 6th 1985 (knew those programme binders would come in handy!). The main stand, dating from the mid-1930s, has been modernised without losing any of its character, though use of a sponsors' logo is tastelessly overdone. This utilitarian structure, a child of its generation, is embellished by a superb Art Deco-style 'Stockport County AFC' frontage above the entrance in residential Hardcastle Road. Be sure not to miss it. The new Cheadle End, a towering, two-tier cantilever stand opened in 1995, dominates both ground and district. As a description, 'out of scale with its surroundings' understates the case. Its 4,800 seats represent the lion's share of the ground's 10,841 capacity. For those who knew Edgeley Park as it was before the revamp, this is somewhat disorienting because the old Cheadle End stand, small and narrow with wooden benches, used to be the ground's least significant element. Beneath the new stand can be found a tiny club shop and a functional ticket office, with, to the rear, a small car park, welcome in such a cramped location, but off limits to the hoi-polloi.

The Railway End terrace opposite has been reduced in height by two-thirds and seated, though it remains uncovered and a favourite vantage point only with

masochists. A fairly useless electronic scoreboard, relating nothing other than County 2 Barrow 0 (or similar), is positioned at the back. The Popular Side (or Barlow Stand), a basic cover over terracing reprofiled in 1993 when seats were installed, is as neat and tidy as it always was. However, its clean lines and viewing arrangements have been ruined by a ridiculously bulky scaffolding TV gantry suspended from the rafters. A necessity, no doubt, for coverage of rugby union matches. Behind the stand, anglers, hunkered down amid foliage and a detritus of bait tins and tackle boxes, cast their lines into a large, rectangular reservoir, a surprising sight in such a built-up area.

Going into the Christmas festivities, this fixture was not on my radar. I had intended to see my own team, FC Halifax Town, host Gainsborough Trinity in a crucial Conference North fixture. But the Shay's dodgy drains put paid to that one. Please, Calderdale Council, get them sorted! Given that rain was sheeting down at home in York, and the forecast for the Manchester area suggested worse in the west, before setting out I rang the County secretary to check the game was on. He sounded puzzled by my query, insisting the match was "100 per cent certain" to take place. Only when we (I picked up my brother en route) got inside the ground, having aquaplanned round the M60 and dashed through torrential rain from our parking spot, did I appreciate his confidence. The pitch was in superb condition. With Sale's hunt, punt and grunTERS rolling all over it at regular intervals, I'd feared the worst. But a bowls match could have been contested on the surface. Perhaps, Galpharm Stadium-fashion, some plastic fibre has been woven twixt and between the natural grass to produce a supremely durable pitch. Or maybe Edgeley Park's groundsman is simply a genius.

The atmosphere, I have to say, was excellent. County's crowds, despite the club's travails, have held up well, and with visitors Barrow bringing almost 350 noisy fans with them, it was easy to forget Edgeley Park was only a third full. The game was a cracker, too. Indeed, my brother described it as the best he'd seen this season.

From the off, Barrow looked the better side. Only to be expected, I suppose, seeing as the Bluebirds, unusually for them, are in the top half of the table. And yet Stockport led 2-0 at half-time. Ten minutes had elapsed when Sam Sheridan seized upon a weak headed clearance and slammed a stunning 25-yarder into the top corner of the Cumbrians' net. It was County's first goal in more than eight hours. In the 32nd minute, Stockport broke quickly down the left through Aaron Cole, and when the lanky striker's angled shot was pushed aside feebly by keeper Danny Hurst, Joe Connor, following up, found a gap between three defenders on the line. As neutrals, we hoped for a quick Barrow response, and so were dismayed when, five minutes before the break, an Andy Cook snap shot from 18 yards cannoned off an upright.

Early in the second half, a couple of good chances passed the visitors by, and we began to fear the game would peter out. Not a bit of it! With 57 minutes gone, Richie Baker nodded in from close range after Adam Boyes had headed a Paul Rutherford cross into the six-yard box. We were all square 10 minutes later. Skipper Daniel O'Donnell handled as Cook surged through, and Baker rammed

home the penalty with real confidence. By now, it was all Barrow, and I would have put my most treasured possession on an away win. County, in full panic mode, had everyone behind the ball. Their defence, not least left-back Euan Holden, embarrassed time and again by the pace of Bluebirds right-winger Jack Mackreth, creaked and groaned like an ageing schooner in a gale. But, somehow, the hosts stood fast. Then, with six minutes left, County scampered upfield. Holden, unaccountably an improved player after collapsing with cramp, saw his fierce shot strike the hand of Danny Hone, and Sheridan slid home the resulting penalty. Six minutes of added time was agonising for the Hatters faithful.

It is to be hoped this win, Stockport's first in 13 outings, can galvanise Jim Gannon's team. Three points were enough to lift County as many positions away from the relegation slots. Though this does not, in any way, feel like a non-league club, I fear dropping into Conference North could spell the end of the Hatters. And that would turn Edgeley Park's clock right back to 1902, when the ground's sole occupant was a rugby (league) club.

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