

TT No.139: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 7th January 2012; **Corby Town** v FC Halifax Town; Conference North; Res: 2-4; Att: 739; Admission: £11; Programme: £2.50 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Unsurprisingly, there is little to excite the eye at Steel Park, new home this season of Corby Town. In terms of architectural merit and imaginative construction, most modern British stadia leave a lot to be desired. We can all name the exceptions to this depressing rule, so few in number are they. Sad to relate, for every Dartford and Dorchester Town, there are tens - presumably will be hundreds eventually - of Colchester United's and Chester City's. Future generations of fans (not just football followers, either) may come to see our particular era as an opportunity missed. When a football ground, so often the physical and emotional centrepiece of a community, is as bland and uninviting as an industrial unit, something is badly wrong. Frankly, it looks as though the present custodians of the nation's sporting heritage don't take the burden of legacy too seriously. Then again, perhaps I'm being a bit hard on them. In today's Britain, absolutely everything seems to be done as cheaply as possible, and no-one can create a champagne stadium on a beer budget.

Steel Park is not entirely bereft of interesting features. For me, the most singular is its location adjacent to the Rockingham Triangle athletics stadium, Corby's previous home since 1985. The club use the same dressing rooms as before, with the players now emerging from a back door in the athletics stadium's sole stand, trotting down a retractable tunnel and through a gate to reach the pitch. It is a curious (possibly unique) 'twinning' arrangement. And that, for the seeker of the offbeat, really is about your lot. It must be said, however, that Steel Park - capacity 3,893 - is a far superior venue for football than the athletics stadium, whose jumping pits and track left the spectator divorced from the action. Corby residents seem to agree because gates have trebled (give or take) since the club moved 'over the fence'. We were told 500 is now the break-even attendance here.

Owing to its hilltop site and open nature close to the thatched cottages of Cotswolds lite Rockingham, the ground is terribly exposed to the elements. This, clearly, was also a problem at the athletics stadium because that is ringed by tall evergreens. These serve the dual purpose of providing a windbreak and lending the arena a sensation of intimacy - aspects sorely lacking at Steel Park. The pitch, whose 109 x 70 dimensions are less than generous, also needs attention. It is bumpy and (bizarrely, given this is a new ground) slopes slightly from end to end. On the positive side, there is loads of free on-site parking and a location on the northern edge of this unremittingly grim town renders access simplicity itself. A large chunk of the local population is of Scots origin (they headed here to forge steel in the halcyon days before Thatcher began her systematic destruction of Britain's industrial base), and the housing estate immediately to the south of the

ground reflects this. Street names include Katrine Close, Lomond Way and Stornoway Road. It definitely ain't Scotland, though!

Focal point of Steel Park is the main stand, which has a single tier of 577 seats and glazed boxes at the back. The seats are mostly black, with white ones used to spell out the word Corby. The roof is a form-over-function arc and so spare that I doubt it offers much shelter on a wet day to those in the front rows. To the rear is the ground (nothing more than a pitch) of Corby RUFC. The only other cover is behind the goal at the west end; this a utilitarian roof over a few steps of terracing. The south side and east end are flat tracts of tarmac. At least there is space to build more stands if required. A line of portable buildings on the east side, up against the athletics stadium's perimeter fence, includes one structure housing the club's souvenir shop, from where team sheets were available for 20p. Perspex dug-outs flank the halfway line on this side. The ground is enclosed with a fawn panelled fence, echoing the colour of the bricks used in the main stand and in the turnstile block in the north-east corner. There is a smaller (unused for this game) turnstile block in the north-west corner. Corby's rather patchy floodlights are mounted on corner masts.

In ordinary circumstances, I wouldn't have been in any hurry to 'tick' Steel Park (my latest hopping policy dictates that dull new grounds can wait), but it seemed daft not to go there when my team were the visitors. The trek also allowed a 'double' with Elite League ice hockey at Nottingham Panthers in the evening. FC Halifax occupied the final play-off position at kick-off - and retained it when the final whistle sounded. The Shaymen were comfortable winners, despite one or two anxious moments in the second half when Corby, without a win at Steel Park in six weeks and fading from the promotion picture, decided belatedly to show some interest in the proceedings.

The strong wind and bobbly pitch kept flowing football to a minimum. Playing into the wind in the first half, FC Halifax, apparently coping well with the shock loss of out-going loanees James Walshaw and James Rainford, were methodical and full of good intentions. Corby hardly got a kick. The visitors led 2-0 at half-time, with the dodgy-kneed Danny Holland scoring both goals. The opener, in the 18th minute, followed a rare flash of innovation amid the general scrappiness. Liam Needham, oft maligned by FC Halifax fans, had an impressive game in midfield and his pass freed Lee Gregory on the right. Gregory's cross was met at the near post by Holland, who jabbed into the net from close range. Three minutes before the break, Holland jumped in front of Corby keeper Chris McKenzie and his header looped into an unguarded net, despite backtracking defender Aynsley McDonald's attempt to clear.

The Steelmen, boosted by the introduction of three lively substitutes, at least had a go in the second half. Visiting keeper Simon Eastwood was called upon to make two fine saves. Sub Lee Beeson's cross-cum-shot finally made it 2-1 in the 74th minute, but FC Halifax went straight down the other end and, in the 76th minute, James Dean nodded in Tom Baker's cross following a well-worked free-kick. Again, McKenzie was stranded in no man's land. With five minutes left, Shaymen sub

Jason St Juste showcased his pace to sprint away from the halfway line and in a one-on-one shoot beneath Mackenzie, whom I felt was at fault with three of FC Halifax's goals. In the 89th minute, Corby added a second - albeit mere consolation - when Jordan Smith, another sub, poked home a right-wing cross to the near post.

Corby's lethargic display was a poor tribute to former chairman Peter Mallinger, who joined the club in 2007 and died of leukaemia in January last year. This fixture marked the inaugural Peter Mallinger Foundation Day, according to the programme a celebration of his life. The laying of a wreath in the centre circle and a minute's applause preceded kick-off, while the home players wore black armbands. Mallinger, formerly chairman at Corby's hated local rivals Kettering Town and once a director at Newcastle United, picked the Steelmen up by their bootstraps on arrival, at a time when gates were down to double figures. He was the driving force behind Steel Park, which was paid for largely by grant money and whose main stand is dedicated to his memory. The home supporters around us felt things simply hadn't been the same at the club since Mallinger's death at the age of 74. We spotted several Rushden & Diamonds scarves in the crowd, which included about 250 visiting fans. Indeed, the Wellingborough-based elderly couple sitting in front of us sporting Corby colours turned out to be Nene Park refugees. They were very friendly, as indeed everyone else was, which made Steel Park a more memorable hop than it would have been otherwise. Top marks also to Corby for resisting the temptation to segregate away supporters. Again, this common sense approach only enhanced our afternoon.

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