

**TT No. 160: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 11th February 2012; **Baldock Town** v Standon & Puckeridge; Herts Senior Co League Prem; Res: 5-1; Att: 100 (est.); Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

My girlfriend must be among East Coast's best customers. She is summoned frequently to London from York in the name of work, and amasses loyalty points at the same rate a hopper piles up programmes. A couple of months ago she revealed her tally entitled us to a free rail trip in first class seats anywhere along the East Coast Main Line. Where to go? I haven't been to Broadhall Way since Stevenage secured Football League status, and an examination of Boro's fixtures suggested the February 11th visit of promotion rivals Carlisle United was the pick of the club's remaining home games. You can figure out the rest. February 11th proved to be one of the coldest days this winter: ten degrees below in York overnight and even chillier in Hertfordshire (or North London, as I tend to think of it). A week of frost and snow resulted in Stevenage calling off the Carlisle match as early as Friday lunchtime.

In the evening, I was about to shred our environmentally unfriendly wad of East Coast travel tickets and seat reservation documents in a nothing-ventured-nothing-gained display of its-cost-me-nowt nonchalance, when it came to my web-trawling attention that Baldock Town had a frost-defying 3G pitch, were at home the following day, issued a programme and with snow to be cleared were ultra-confident of beating the elements. I had a fair idea Baldock was pretty close to Stevenage, and a visit to Google Maps and the National Rail Enquiries website indicated the whole shebang was eminently do-able and could be completed for the sum of £4.20; add on ground admission and paper, and still less than a tenner. So, why not? Mind you, the prospect of a day-long outing, accompanied by brass monkeys, to watch a match of Herts Senior County League Premier Division standard did not appeal to my Other Half, who preferred to remain toastie warm at home and put the finishing touches to the excellent arrangements in her brand new kitchen. It is so shiny that shades are advisable for those planning to shoot it an admiring glance. Thankfully, she was happy to drop me at York station, but during my 20-minute wait for the 08.56 train to 'Pittaburra' (as the Scots guardsman described it) the shivers and chatters set in. It was freezing! Imagining (all too vividly) several hours in this sort of temperature, I came within an ace of ringing my girlfriend, admitting this was a bloomin' daft idea and requesting a hasty U-turn by the VW. However, showing Robert Falcon Scott-esque determination, I opted to stick with The Grand Plan. Objective? The Darn Sarf Pole.

Glad I did, too. I don't travel by train much now (who other than business travellers and railcard holders does at today's prices?), but found going first - rather than cattle - class an extremely civilised experience. Complimentary food and drink brought to one's seat by attentive trolley dollies (of both sexes), and a

free copy of The Independent to share reading time with the Graham Hurley novel I'd squeezed into my bulging camera bag. This is very definitely the life, I mused, munching a cheese & tomato croissant, sipping tea and admiring the snowbound winter wonderland beyond the carriage window. I knew, from previous experience of Broadhall Way, that gruesome Stevenage had nothing to offer the visitor, therefore chanced my arm on arrival in Baldock a mere three hours before kick-off. A record, even for me, though my late father, with a Halifax Town fixture at Keys Park, Hednesford (the ground opener, as I recall), in mind, might dispute that assertion. Drawing into the station, I looked down on the ground, the North Herts Arena, and a match was taking place. No doubts about the Baldock Town game, then!

A six-minute walk from platform to ground revealed (oh, the irony) that the match in progress was between supporters of Stevenage and Carlisle. They had switched the game to Baldock's 3G to avoid an inevitable postponement. Before wandering into Baldock, I chatted with a knot of spectators who turned out to be exiled Cumbrians and members of Carlisle United's London Supporters Club. My expectations of Baldock were nil. What a lovely surprise, then, to discover this is a historic former coaching town on the original Great North Road. This means plenty of grand buildings and a good deal of Georgian architecture, my favourite; very different from Stevenage and neighbouring Letchworth. Show stealer on the High Street was a row of almshouses dating from 1621. There were even half-timbered cottages next to the church, whose elegant tower was set against a sky of Mediterranean blue. To boot, by this hour, the sun was generating sufficient heat to revive my bone marrow.

I expected the Baldock game (an oasis of action amid a desert of postponements) to be a hopper fest, and was delighted to discover the crowd included FGIF's editor Martin Wray (sheltering beneath a Hull City woolly hat) and top photographer Gary Spooner. The North Herts Arena, Martin informed me, is the ground the old Baldock Town club used in the Southern League before going bust in 2001. The new club, formed two years later, run three senior teams and top the Senior County League table. Though the facilities have been passed by the Southern League, a Reds official told me they simply could not afford to accept promotion. Having once been bitten, I guess you'd twice be shy about taking chances financially. A modern stand runs virtually the length of the west touchline. It features two seated and two terraced sections. An area is set aside for the production of barbecue-style grub. The smart clubhouse, containing a super-heated bar, offices, changing rooms and loos, is immediately behind. A large car park fills the space between the clubhouse and Norton Road. Both south and north ends have a few steps of terracing and lines of crush barriers. A railway embankment (carrying trains on the Hitchin to Cambridge line) to the south and a line of mature firs to the north give the ground a pleasing sensation of enclosure. There is a grassy training area behind the firs. A small stand, with several rows of bench seats, straddles the halfway line on the east side. Low dugouts are positioned either side. Behind can be found Ivel Springs Local Nature Reserve. There are floodlights and, of course, the pitch is 3G. Other tenants include Hitchin

Town and Luton Town, whose youth teams play here. Hiring the full pitch will set you back £100 an hour. Not much shared between 22!

The only real bugbear at this otherwise tidy venue is the green mesh cage which separates player from spectator. Doubtless erected for the benefit of the ground's numerous community users, it is about 10 feet high and therefore obstructs the view. The only place at the North Herts Arena where clear vision can be obtained is from the east side stand. Trouble is, on a February day such as this, it entails squinting uncomfortably into the inexorably setting sun for the whole game. I found a solution by simply walking through the west side halfway line gate used by the players to access the pitch, and hunkering down with a couple of snap-happy newspaper photographers. No-one seemed to mind, and I wasn't alone in choosing this option!

The game was a lively contest. Standon & Puckeridge were far better value than a 5-1 defeat suggests. A final score of 4-2 would have been a more equitable reflection of the play. Footballers at this level appear to gain much from an artificial surface. The truer roll of the ball does not show up a poor first touch quite as glaringly as grass, and the action was of a high quality. Some superb goals, too!

Visiting keeper Nathan Ratcliff committed himself far too cheaply when beaten on his near post by Ryan Aldrin in the fourth and 24th minutes. On the stroke of half-time, Baldock went 3-0 up. S&P lost possession coming out of defence and Louis Taylor was able to draw keeper Ratcliff before squaring to give Kane Dougherty a tap-in. James Endacott fired into the top corner from 16 yards to pull a picture goal back nine minutes into the second half, but the hosts eased clear with a delicate Taylor finish (his 30th goal of the season) on the hour and a sublime chip from substitute Derek Newton with a minute left. All that remained (aside from sharing for 75 minutes a waiting room on Stevenage station with a bunch of rowdy teenagers and two girls discussing what tattoos they'd like and where) was wallowing in first class luxury on the train ride home, fortified by East Coast's free cheese & chutney sandwiches, crisps and tiffin. Do you know, I could get used to this!

07/20