

TT No.210: *Andy Gallon* - Fri 6th April 2012; **Stalybridge Celtic** v FC Halifax Town; Conference North; Res: 2-1; Att: 1,647; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

I'll hold my hands up and admit if the weather had been as gloriously sunny as it was the previous day, I'd have spent Good Friday enjoying one of my other hobbies. In the main, though, these require decent weather, therefore I opted to cross the snow-dusted Pennines for a revisit to Bower Fold, a favourite football ground. It was also an opportunity to catch up with my own team in what amounted to a crucial six-pointer between rivals eyeing a place in Conference North's end-of-season play-offs. More later of what turned out to be a very poor game indeed.

A quirk of English football is that Stalybridge, one of a handful of small towns clustered along the banks of the River Tame, were once members of the Football League; founder members, in 1922, of the Third Division (North), no less. So far back in the impenetrable mists of time that no-one has any first-hand knowledge of the club competing among the elite. The interest rate locally was low, and lack of support forced Celtic to resign from the Football League after just two seasons.

Bower Fold has seen a huge number of changes since that era, and I suspect nothing remains of the original ground. What has risen in its place is impressive enough. Not too long ago, Celtic were in the 'proper' Conference, and gradually improved Bower Fold to meet the requirements of grading zealots. It means there are far too many crush barriers and turnstiles for the club's modest requirements, but at least the terracing is neatly concreted and there is cover on all four sides. I hadn't attended a game here since 1997, and in that time the smartest stand, dedicated to Lord Tom Pendry, has been erected on the west touchline. It opened in 2003. Pendry was the Labour MP for Stalybridge & Hyde between 1970 and 2001. A tidy cantilever, with six rows of plastic seats spelling out 'Celtic' white on blue, it offers a superb view of the action. The main stand, opposite, is similar, but a rather less grand design, though it boasts eight rows of white plastic seats. It replaced a life-expired (and much loved) wooden structure a couple of decades ago. Simpler covers adorn each end. The newer, at the town end, is a cantilever. The lights are of the mast variety. Bower Fold's only real failing is the pitch. It has a pronounced end-to-end slope and, given the level at which the club are operating, should be levelled. The surface has never been anything to shout about, either, and wasn't great for this fixture. Outside the ground, near the main entrance, is a blue plaque, a lovely touch by Tameside Borough Council, commemorating the philanthropist William Herbert Rhodes, who founded the club in 1909. Generous benefactor Rhodes, a latter day Roman Abramovic, spent a chunk of his fortune developing Bower Fold. Celtic's strip, blue shirts with white sleeves, is based on the silks used by jockeys mounted on his racehorses. Since I

was here last, part of the car park has been swallowed up by a gym; as ugly as all these seem to be.

Nice infrastructure, then, but our old friend location (location, location) is the aspect of this property's particulars that seals the deal. Bower Fold, on the leafy road towards Longdendale, nestles in a steep-sided, wooded tributary valley. It's the sort of spot that's never completely dry, which is why the cotton spinning industry became so strongly established in this part of the world. To me, Stalybridge (and Tameside generally) always feels like Lancashire, and it comes as a surprise to many visitors to discover the town is, in fact, a Cheshire outlier. Could it possibly be any different to Wilmslow, Chester and Sandbach? Resolutely Pennine hills, brushed with snow after a pre-Easter return for winter, peer down on Bower Fold, their height and proximity lending an intimate atmosphere to any game in this fragrant, mossy ravine. Lovers of architecture will appreciate the splendid red-brick Victorian villas which line Mottram Road as it climbs away from a town centre dominated by the restored Huddersfield Narrow Canal. Halifax fans, if so inclined, could have travelled here by narrow boat.

Hard to believe these opponents were in the top six at kick-off. Conference North and South have numerous detractors, and on this evidence it's not hard to see why. Watching football at this level isn't cheap, but the limitations of the players were only too obvious. Given so much was at stake, it proved a strangely sterile contest, and took at least an hour (it felt longer) to warm up. I suspect both clubs are well aware they are not yet equipped to cope with the rigours of Conference National, and are hoping to evade the play-offs without making the manoeuvre appear too transparent. Not, of course, that either is saying as much publicly. It reminds of the time in the Seventies and Eighties when professional rugby league had two divisions, with four teams going up and four coming down. Failing to win promotion from Division Two was quite difficult, and finishing fifth, therefore doing pretty well but not lining oneself up to be cannon fodder the following season, was the neatest trick of all.

I digress, however. Stalybridge enlivened a humdrum first half by going ahead in the 27th minute after Halifax striker Lee Gregory had conceded an unnecessary free-kick wide on the left. When the ball came into the six-yard box, everyone missed it, leaving unmarked centre-half Chris Lynch with a tap-in at the back post. The visitors' equaliser six minutes later was very similar. A Celtic defender misjudged a ball into the right side of the penalty area, giving James Dean space to angle a low cross to the back post, where Sean Clancy got the jump on his marker and forced the ball over the line. This goal was scored in front of the 1,000 or so Halifax supporters, whose presence helped give Stalybridge their second biggest crowd of the season. Only the festive derby with neighbours Hyde United attracted a healthier attendance (1,806).

For long periods in the second half, Halifax looked the likelier winners. But Dean, heading powerfully down and wide from close range, spurned their best chance. The Shaymen's defence has been unconvincing for most of the campaign, and in the 84th minute obliged Celtic by backing off, allowing Greg Wilkinson to pick his

spot from 25 yards. Town keeper Simon Eastwood really should have saved Wilkinson's underpowered daisy-cutter. Worse still, Wilkinson had shot from almost the same blade of grass just a couple of minutes earlier, only to see the ball pass a yard wide of the post. Footballers never learn, do they? No wonder managers suffer so badly from hypertension!

I'll stick my neck out (none too boldly) and suggest these teams will be playing each other next season, again in Conference North. Hyde United and Guiseley (via the play-offs) to secure promotion.

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