

**TT No.220: *Andy Gallon*** - Mon 9th April 2012; **Guiseley** v Altrincham; Conference North; Res: 3-2; Att: 776; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*\*.

Guiseley, a village club, are on the brink of joining non-league football's elite. This thrilling comeback victory, clinched with a stoppage-time goal after trailing 2-0 at half-time, keeps the Lions (a fairly new nickname, I think) in a neck-and-neck battle with Hyde FC for automatic promotion to Conference National. The astonishing rise of a club which until fairly recently was down among the also rans of the Northern Counties East League (they were founder members in 1982) and playing in the FA Vase has been facilitated by the presence on the board of not one but four sugar daddies. One, I was told, is worth £40m and taken together the quartet are thought to be wealthier than the custodians of nearby big shots Leeds United. It's why Guiseley, on unremarkable average gates of about 500, have been able to build a squad capable of challenging at the top of Conference North. It's a strong group of players, too, featuring experienced former professionals such as Simon Baldry, Andy Holdsworth, Ciaran Toner and Danny Forrest, along with bright young talents like prolific striker James Walshaw, who earlier this season rejected a move to West Yorkshire rivals FC Halifax Town in favour of a return to Guiseley when a stint in the paid ranks at Darlington failed to work out as he'd hoped.

Nethermoor (or Nethermoor Park, as it prefers to be called these days) is a fundamentally tiny ground which has developed steadily in an attempt to keep pace with the club's on-field progress. Frantic construction work on a second grandstand was finished in time for this compact arena to meet the 500-seat minimum requirement of Conference National grading inspectors. It means Guiseley, unlike Eastwood Town last season, are clear to contest the end-of-term play-offs, should Hyde FC (now little more than a subsidiary of Manchester City) pip them to the championship. There is even talk of the Lions players going full-time if promotion is secured. It's quite a tale, although of course in football anything can be achieved when money is no object.

I'm not sure how Nethermoor will cope (or local residents might react) if and when much bigger clubs such as Luton Town, York City, Stockport County and Wrexham roll up here with their travelling armies of supporters. The ground, close to the defunct Harry Ramsden's fish & chip shop, is hemmed in on all four sides - by a main road, a railway line, houses and a cricket field - and there doesn't seem to be room for much more expansion. Capacity is said to be 3,000, but with just 776, including a couple of hundred Altrincham fans, inside for this match, free movement was a major problem. It's no fun facing a battle to reach the loo or a catering outlet! Once Nethermoor is confronted with relatively (I use the adjective advisedly) large attendances every week, and the necessity of segregating the home few from the many visiting fans, I suspect the place will rapidly lose the charm it undoubtedly retains, despite the changes of recent years.

The cricket ground side, with two small and basic areas of cover, is pretty much as I remember it from my last visit about a decade ago. Neither 'stand' is much bigger than the ugly new dug-outs which have sprouted between them. Opposite, arsonists put paid to the original wooden stand and in its place have risen two temporary looking, Meccano-style stands. Each has just six rows of plastic tip-up seats (spelling out GAFC and Lions, white on blue) with cruelly sparse leg room and precious little shelter from the elements for those at the front. Perhaps it's just as well Guiseley don't seem to have any young fans: everyone in my vicinity was well over retirement age and considerably under six feet tall. At least these old-timers were comfortable! To one side of the stands is a row of scruffy portable buildings, housing hospitality areas and the like. Both ends of the ground are exceptionally narrow (there's barely room for two rows of spectators) and lacking cover. At the railway end, netting suspended from posts keeps stray footballs off the Leeds/Bradford Forster Square to Ilkley line. All round the ground, tarmac has been put down, crush barriers erected and turnstile blocks installed, whilst the pitch got an extensive makeover. The barrier encompassing the playing surface is alarmingly low. Neat, tidy and lovingly maintained though this infrastructure all is, I wouldn't wish to be in Nethermoor when its capacity is put to the test. This is a village club's ground which tweaking and tinkering has somehow enabled to meet modern standards, but Guiseley's rise will surely grind to a halt in Conference National. If the Lions wish to go any further in the direction of the stars, they surely face relocation. There again, once the money men lose interest (as, inevitably, they will), the only way is down. And it's a long way to fall: all the way back to the Northern Counties East League.

As for the game, well, it was a superb advert for Conference North. For me, Altrincham were the better side for long spells. The Robins play a very tidy brand of passing football and looked very well organised. Their manager, Lee Sinnott, lives close to Nethermoor and his kids figure in Guiseley's junior teams. Judging by the way his team were set up, there isn't much the former Bradford City and Huddersfield Town defender doesn't know about the manner in which Guiseley go about their business.

With Hyde FC entertaining Solihull Moors, and therefore virtually guaranteed another three points, Guiseley fans felt a seventh consecutive league victory was a must. That didn't look very likely at half-time. Nicky Clee crashed Altrincham ahead in the 13th minute with a stunning volley from 18 yards and seconds before the interval Damian Reeves's 42nd goal of the season, fired into the roof of the net after a ghastly blunder by Lions left-back Dave Merris, gave the visitors a two-goal cushion. Walshaw, playing wide on the left and given the ball at every opportunity, was Guiseley's only real threat. 'Wally' (no, really, that's what the home fans called him) beat Robins keeper Stuart Coburn in the 37th minute, only to be flagged offside.

Guiseley needed a quick response in the second half - and came up with two. Skipper Simon Ainge, left unmarked at a 49th-minute corner, headed powerfully down and into the net, with the ball taking a final deflection of Altrincham's Clee.

Two minutes later, Walshaw's cross-cum-shot was sliced past Coburn by Robins centre-back Matt Flynn. A home victory now seemed inevitable. But a remarkably open game (superbly refereed by Alf Greenwood, who repeatedly applied the advantage rule to considerable effect) saw several near-misses at each end. Then, in the first minute of added time, the ball found its way to unmarked substitute Chris Senior (ex-Alty) and he had the time and space to pick his spot from 16 yards. Defeat was very hard on the visitors, who deserved at least a point and are now unable to make the play-offs.

So, the cash-fuelled Guiseley fairy-tale continues. What sort of content forthcoming chapters contain remains very much to be seen, however.

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