

TT No.44: *Andy Gallon* - Wed 14th September 2011; **Holyhead Hotspur** v Nefyn United; Welsh Alliance Div. One; Res: 1-0; Att: 150; Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Twelve hours is a long time to kill. In Holyhead, it's an eternity. My only other visit (during the 1990 World Cup) to Anglesey's modern capital was supposed to be mercifully brief. Clamber off the boat train with a pannier-laden push bike, wheel it down the station platform and board the sea cat for Dun Laoghaire. But the train arrived 15 minutes late, and they'd allowed the boat to leave. That was the 4pm sailing. The next was 4am. In common with most ports, Holyhead is a lifeless place, and finding something to fill that yawning void was a Herculean task. A film at the local flea pit, an indifferent curry and a couple of equally forgettable pints took care of the pre-midnight hours. Sightseeing by street light, dodging the Friday night drunks, advanced the clock to 2am. Then, moments of shivery slumber on an uncomfortable station bench before ferry terminal jobsworths finally allowed us to join the Ireland-bound sea cat. Never have I been so glad to go aboard a ferry.

Imagine, then, my delight at discovering a visit to the Holyhead Hotspur ground can be accomplished without going anywhere near the miserable town centre. Mind you, Holyhead Stadium, opened in October 2008, is almost as uninteresting. It was built, at a cost of £300,000, back to back with the rather more characterful old ground, which still exists and is used by the club's numerous youth teams. Holyhead's commitment to inclusivity enabled them to tap into grants offered by the Football Trust, the Welsh Office and the Urban Aid Programme. Part of a complex also featuring a sports centre, it is a soulless venue, though eminently adequate for a club of Holyhead's status.

The ground is dominated by a large cantilever stand in the central portion of the east side. Offering nine rows of seats (albeit the cheapest backless variety), it provides a perfect view of a well grassed, carefully tended pitch. Not much else, though. After the scenic delights of the mainland's stunning coast and mountains, Anglesey's gently undulating scenery is a huge anti-climax. From your seat, you must be content with sheep-filled fields, a disused (and sail-less) windmill and the chimney of a nearby aluminium smelter. The clean lines of this stand are spoiled by the structures either side. Portable buildings (as scruffy as only these can be) and a tumbledown cover (narrow, set back from the pitch and unfit for purpose) add nothing in an aesthetic sense. The former contains the social club and bar.

The solitary turnstile and souvenir shop are in the north-east corner, adjacent to the drab structure which houses the dressing rooms and kitchen, and takes up a sizeable chunk of the north end. Uncovered, flagged hardstanding comprises the rest of the spectator accommodation, with three dug-outs (including a bijou version for the fourth official) positioned along the west touchline. The floodlights, mounted on masts, are excellent. Exposed and largely open, this must be a bleak spot in bad weather. There is, however, plenty of room for expansion, should

Holyhead achieve their long-term ambition of a place among the elite in the Welsh Premier League.

For us, this was a bonus match. It was scheduled for the previous Saturday, but a bereavement in the Nefyn camp saw the game rearranged. I wasn't expecting much of a contest because the teams were separated by most of the Welsh Alliance's First Division table. In the event, Nefyn, who packed the midfield, defended heroically and relied upon the occasional attacking break, were unlucky not to get a point. Their keeper, Meilir Ellis, was superb. A number of impressive saves kept his team in the game. Given that, it was a shame the decisive goal was such a soft one. A minute after the restart, Nefyn failed to clear a corner, and an unmarked Asa Thomas was able to ram a low, 10-yard shot past the indefatigable Ellis. Thomas, young and speedy, was a useful summer addition to the Holyhead squad after scoring a club record 112 goals for Gwynedd League neighbours Trearddur Bay United last season.

Despite the limitations (from a hopping perspective) of Holyhead Stadium, this is clearly a friendly club. Our welcome could not have been warmer, with both chairman and secretary eager to relate the story of a club formed as recently as 1990. Within seven years, the town's other four senior clubs were happy to amalgamate under the Hotspur banner. The result is a unity of focus and resources; a necessity if a geographically isolated club such as this are to become a force in Welsh football. The immediate target is to win back a place in the Cymru Alliance, in which they were runners-up in 2008-09. This status was lost from 2010 owing to the restructuring (nay, shrinkage) of the Welsh Premier League. More support from the town wouldn't go amiss. My headcount suggested the official attendance for this game of 150 was about a third too high. What, apart from watching the local football club, can there be to do in this most dreary of ports? If only there'd been a match to watch 21 years ago, our 12-hour sentence might not have seemed so interminable.

07/20