

TT No.46: *Andy Gallon* - Fri 16th September 2011; **Rhyl** v Llangefni Town; Cymru Alliance; Res: 6-1; Att: 406; Admission: £6; Programme: £2 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

An awful lot has happened to Rhyl and their ground since our paths crossed at Belle Vue about 20 years ago. The Lilywhites were kicked out of the Welsh Premier League owing to financial problems - but not before European standards had been applied to the club's facilities. Belle Vue, where Rhyl have played since 1900, is enveloped by the semis of one of this grim resort's smarter residential districts. It is now one of the best non-league stadia in Wales. The ground is all-seated, and boasts near-full length cover on both sides and at one end. The pitch is superb, and for this game was on a par with those seen in the Football League, whilst the floodlights, mounted on the original spindly pylons, are television quality.

For me, Belle Vue's biggest fault is the inordinate and surely unnecessary number of columns used to support the roofs of their three stands, all of which are low in height and basic in design. Unless you sit in the open (Grange Road) end, obstruction-free viewing is simply impossible and a feeling of claustrophobia in the murk hard to shake off. The seats, culled second hand from various sources, are an unappealing mixture of random colours. Cymru Alliance fixtures don't come anywhere near to attracting full houses, therefore even during matches, the seats are an exposed eyesore. Also, with the coastal strip at this point being so flat, there isn't a single landmark visible from the ground indicating one is in Rhyl.

Belle Vue's impressive main entrance is on Grange Road, with a large car park in front of the offices and turnstiles. Oddly, the souvenir shop is located in the car park, outside the ground. Inside, Belle Vue retains several ancient elements, not least a cavernous, malodorous gents, which prompted memories of watching football in the 1970s. The near end goal is dominated by the Lilywhites Legends Lounge, with a couple of rows of uncovered seats laid out below this uninspiring structure. A large refreshment hatch is adjacent.

The main stand is on the right-hand side as you enter the ground. To all but the most careful observer, it is identical to the other two stands. Dug-outs (providing a whopping, presumably UEFA-compliant 17 seats) are positioned either side of the halfway line. The players' tunnel is off-centre. All four floodlight pylons intrude through the roof, adding to the visibility difficulties. The stand opposite is shorter, but similar, has a camera gantry mounted on its roof, and suffers from two intrusive floodlight pylons. At the south-west end, the stand is from the same mould. Each stand carries a weighty number of advertising hoardings, which suggests the community is firmly behind the club. However, I can't help feeling I preferred Belle Vue in its previous condition, with smaller stands, plenty of terracing and a less professional ambience. It is too grand a stage for Cymru Alliance football, though that could change because Rhyl have applied for a

Football Association of Wales licence, which they need to re-join the Welsh Premier League.

The game itself was men against boys. Llangefni came to defend, and spent most of the match on the back foot. Without numerous magnificent saves from keeper Kyle Williams, the Anglesey club would have sunk without trace. Rhyl, whose passing game is perfect for such a lush pitch, were quickly into their stride, and went ahead in the 11th minute courtesy of a Ryan Williams penalty after visiting skipper Dylan Jones had handled needlessly. Llangefni, from a rare attack, came up with a shock equaliser in the 26th minute. Rhyl did not clear a corner, and Sean Davies's mis-hit cross was whacked in confidently by John Owen. Three minutes later, the hosts regained the lead when skipper Russ Courtney, making a late run towards the near post, was given the time and room to head in a corner. More poor defending from Llangefni enabled Rhyl to make it 3-1 five minutes before the break. Town's fragile back line allowed sub Tom Rowlands to run across the penalty area before sliding a low shot past keeper Williams.

The second half was one-way traffic in the direction of the Llangefni goal, though the visitors never threw in the towel. Had Rhyl been more direct, rather than trying to walk the ball into the net, they could have scored a sack-full. As it was, they had to be content with Rowlands' 63rd-minute drive, a downward header off a post by Scott Beckett 10 minutes from time, and a stoppage time strike from sub Chris Melia. The only consolation for Llangefni was that several other Cymru Alliance teams have been battered by Rhyl already this season. And yet the chap next to us, a North Wales football watcher from Denbigh, felt the Lilywhites did not have the quality to match title rivals Cefn Druids and Connah's Quay Nomads.

The evening began with a minute's silence for the Gleision Colliery tragedy victims, whose deaths had been confirmed earlier in the day. Wales is a much closer-knit nation than England. Can you imagine fatalities in the Yorkshire coalfield prompting such a response in Surrey? Unfortunately, Rhyl's fans seemed determined to maintain this decibel level for much of the game. We heard hardly a peep from them. Perhaps winning at this level is too easy, and therefore not sufficiently engaging. It can't be good for such a young team, either. The Rhyl players will only improve by being extended. The return of the Lilywhites to the Welsh elite cannot come too soon.

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