

**TT No.49: *Andy Gallon*** - Tue 20th September 2011; **Colwyn Bay** v Altrincham; Conference North; Res: 1-6; Att: 444; Admission: £9; Programme: £1.50 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

Two consecutive promotions via play-offs are starting to catch up with Colwyn Bay, who in 2009 were members of the Northern Premier League First Division North. Their Llanelian Road ground is very poor by Conference North standards. An inspector called recently and the match programme (nice cover, abysmal content) detailed what work needs to be done to secure a B grading. Capacity must be raised from its present 2,200 level to 3,000, and a strategy to reach 4,000 put in place. More seats and turnstiles are required, the patently inadequate floodlights (on alarmingly low pylons) have to be improved and, less problematically, the writing desk in the press box wants extending. The Seagulls concede that finding room for more spectators poses a potentially insoluble conundrum. The ground is small (its humble origins way down the pyramid are only too apparent), and the constraints of its location, a narrow shelf high above seafront and town, leave little room for manoeuvre. Put simply, unless the club move, Conference North could be the limit of their impressive rise up the pyramid. The sandy beach apart, stadium-friendly flat terrain in and around Colwyn Bay - not to mention inexpensive real estate - is not easily found.

The basic facilities apart, Llanelian Road boasts a lovely setting. Behind the two low stands (merely simple covers over seats offering lousy sight lines and obstructed views) on the south touchline, the land rears steeply. Sheep munch contentedly in grassy fields belonging to a farm which must have a superb view of proceedings on the pitch below. Mature trees surround the ground, giving it a cosy feel, despite the Llanelian Road side consisting of an uncovered terrace. Thankfully, this was a mild, still night - rather different to my gale-tossed previous visit here. The so-called Shed End has another basic cover over a few steps of terracing. Opposite, adjacent to the turnstiles, is an ugly collection of portable buildings which house the social club, sundry offices, announcer's lair and souvenir shop. The dressing rooms are in a more permanent - and doubtless older - structure to the rear. For the level at which Colwyn Bay were playing two seasons ago, the ground is perfectly adequate. Conference North, however, demands something rather more substantial.

Despite the goal rush, this was not the best of games. The hosts kicked off fifth in the table, but defending like a primary school team saw them punished by an unremarkable mid-table Altrincham team who did nothing more extraordinary than take their chances well. Once the visitors moved 2-0 up, the absence of suspense rather killed the match as a spectacle. Fortunately, I was able to provide my own entertainment by keeping up to date, via a brother's texts from Nethermoor, with FC Halifax Town's stunning fightback victory at West Yorkshire rivals Guiseley, also in Conference North. The Altrincham fans (about 50 of them) enjoyed themselves

immensely. Having watched their side lose to Solihull Moors at the weekend, I'm sure they'd travelled more in hope than expectation. Their medley of Seventies-inspired football chants was amusing, and compensated for the almost total silence from the home supporters. Most of these seemed to be either middle-aged or retired, thereby fitting the local demographic perfectly.

Let's whizz through the key moments. Damien Reeves put Alty ahead in the 21st minute with a downward header and Nicky Clee's splendid volley nine minutes later doubled the advantage. Rob Hopley (55min) rounded off a neat move with a low shot to get Bay back in the game, but within nine minutes Reeves ran onto a great pass to fire confidently past keeper Chris Sanna for 3-1. At this point, the Welsh club rather chucked in the towel. James Lawrie (68min) got free on the left side of the box and squeezed an acutely angled shot into the far bottom corner. Robbie Williams (74min) nodded into an empty net after a team-mate's header had been cleared off the line. Clee then wrapped up the drubbing with four minutes to go when he contributed the goal of the game. Spotting Sanna off his line, he launched an exquisite chip from just outside the box. Perfectly directed and weighted, it cleared defenders and keeper, and nestled in the top corner.

I like to see smaller clubs making progress, and it would be a shame if Colwyn Bay hit a glass ceiling because of their ground's deficiencies. Finding the space and cash to provide more and better spectator accommodation is sure to give club officials a few sleepless nights before the dreaded grading inspector calls again.

07/20