

**TT No.50: *Andy Gallon*** - Wed 21st September 2011; **Holywell Town v Llandudno Junction**; Welsh Alliance Division One; Res: 4-3; Att: 100; Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (68pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*\*.

Holywell Town have been on my 'to do' list for about 15 years now. I was all set to visit Halkyn Road in 1998 for a League of Wales fixture against Barry Town. But, the day before, I invited along a woman I was in the process of getting back together with. Fearing the lights of Holywell might not be sufficiently bright, I suggested a trip to Bangor; the city and the football ground at Farrar Road. Let it never be said I don't know how to show a girl a good time! In the event, Holywell recorded a shock 3-2 win, Bangor coasted to a dull 4-0 victory over Carmarthen Town, and my travelling companion was getting on my nerves as early as the long drive home from a curry in Caernarfon, the climax of our little outing.

Since that forgettable day, I've kept an eye on Holywell's fortunes. The club suffered a catastrophic decline that almost ended in closure. That heady spell among Welsh non-league's elite is a very distant memory. Ironically, the demise of another club kick-started the Holywell revival. Frustrated by a local authority's intransigence towards necessary ground improvements, Mynydd Isa, then in the Cymru Alliance, called it a day. Some of their officials, who knew a great deal about working miracles at a village club operating on a tiny budget, were invited to get involved with Holywell. The invitation was accepted, and the Wellmen haven't looked back. They are making progress again. This victory propelled them to the top of the Welsh Alliance First Division, and with their ground given the thumbs-up by Cymru Alliance inspectors, they are hopeful of securing promotion at the end of the season. The esprit de corps at the club must be good because Holywell aren't paying their players, and yet the squad remains intact, despite the lure of remuneration elsewhere in the close-knit world that is the North Wales football scene.

Halkyn Road, I'm happy to say, was worth the wait. It's an instantly likeable enclosure hidden away behind Holywell Community Hospital, with a view over the Dee Estuary to the Wirral Peninsula. Holywell itself is an interesting town. The name derives from its status as the so-called Lourdes of Wales. For well over 1,300 years, pilgrims have come here to view St Winefride's Well, a sacred spring first recorded by the Romans, who used its waters to relieve rheumatism and gout. Legend tells us that, about 660, Winefride was miraculously revived by the water having been decapitated for resisting the amorous advances of a short-tempered prince. It was enough to excite the attention of Catholics the world over. Best not, I guess, get into a discussion about the correlation between religion and gullibility.

Back to the football ground. Halkyn Road, almost entirely surrounded by trees and cut into the valley side, has a deceptively remote appearance. All the facilities are on the south touchline. A wonderful stand, rescued from decrepitude with lots of TLC, contains a mixture of bench seats and terracing. It is so appealing, I can

forgive the huge amount of roof columns which make obstruction-free viewing nigh-on impossible. The dressing rooms, a throwback to the 1970s, are housed in a brick structure huddled against the rear wall of the stand. A well-patronised kitchen, the Wellmen's Retreat, is positioned centrally, near what I will loosely describe as the players' tunnel. Each element on this side gives the impression of having a unique construction date, but liberal use of red and white paint unifies them very neatly. It's a simple trick many clubs still haven't got their heads round.

The rest of Halkyn Road is fairly basic. A bumpy lane provides access through the (clearly quite new) hospital complex and leads past a pay hut to unmade parking areas behind the west end and on the south side. Hardstanding has been laid round the pitch, which slopes appreciably towards the sea (that is, south to north) and has a solid barrier. There isn't any other cover. The rather patchy floodlights are mounted on masts, and the dug-outs, as traditional in design as everything else in the ground, are positioned either side of the players' tunnel. The sole jarring note is struck by a gloomy row of scruffy metal containers between the main stand and the south-west corner. But let's not be picky. This is a smashing set-up. In a right-thinking world, the brown tourist signs indicating the direction of the holy well would also announce Historic Football Ground.

If that lot wasn't enough, the game, outcome in doubt to the last kick, was a stormer. Another glut of goals took our North Wales holiday tally to 39 in just seven matches. Astonishing. A word, before going any further, about referee Martin Trigg, who maintained control with an admirable air of calmness and authority. This was our third encounter with the Rhuddlan whistler, having seen him earlier in the fortnight at Penycae and Rhyl, and on each occasion his handling of the players has been impeccable. Among his many strengths is sensible use of the advantage option, which, in this case, helped to maintain the upbeat tempo of a free-flowing contest.

Holywell went ahead in the fourth minute with the first goal of an eventual hat-trick from Wayne Edwards. Sam Jones's low cross from the right, skidding on turf made slippery by a heavy pre-match shower, evaded everyone bar Edwards, who side footed home at the back post. Junction levelled from the spot in the eighth minute, Nathan Jones converting after Mr Trigg had seen a handball. In the 14th minute, Sam Jones picked out Johnny Haseldin with a free-kick, and the Wellmen skipper guided a header into the net. Sam Jones also contributed to the hosts' third goal in the 26th minute. A neat move ended with Edwards, unpoliced again, side footing a copycat strike. Near the end of the half, a punch-up involving several players had most of the crowd on their feet. Mr Trigg really should have sent off Junction keeper Kevin Coleville, whose goalie gloves came in handy for boxing, but restricted himself to a quiet lecture to the two captains.

We neutrals needed Junction to score first after the resumption, and the visitors obliged in the 47th minute. Speedy winger Jamie Jones leapt upon a misplaced pass in midfield and surged through to prod a shot past keeper Paul Turner. In the 67th minute, Holywell made it 4-2. Sam Jones was the provider once more, again finding Edwards unmarked, and the striker slammed his third into the top corner.

With nine minutes left, Mr Trigg awarded Junction another penalty for handball. Nathan Jones's tame effort was saved by Turner, but a linesman flagged to indicate the keeper had infringed. A nervy Jones somehow shinned in the retake. Holywell's Tony Hogan was so incensed, the referee felt obliged to dismiss him for a second bookable offence. Buoyed by the extra man, Junction poured forward and Turner had to make three excellent saves to keep Holywell ahead.

This really was what hopping is all about. A memorable ground, a great game, friendly people and, I might add, a superb programme. Holywell issued a splendid 68-pager on whose cover it was revealed with pride that they had won the Soccer Club Swap Shop Welsh Alliance Programme of the Year award in 2009, 2010 and 2011. I wouldn't bet against them retaining the trophy at the end of this season - and securing promotion to the Cymru Alliance. Onwards and upwards!

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