

TT No.51: *Andy Gallon* - Fri 23rd September 2011; **Cefn Druids** v gap Connah's Quay; Cymru Alliance; Res: 1-2; Att: 274; Admission: £5; Programme: £2 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

As with so many big games, this table-topper did not live up to its advance billing. The most memorable aspect of our visit to The Rock, a stadium opened almost exactly 12 months ago, was the curious incident of the referee in the night time. With the match 35 minutes old, John Swindley abruptly called a halt to the proceedings, jogged over to the home dug-out and asked for an escort across the pitch to the dressing rooms. As Swindley disappeared from view, a bemused silence descended upon the ground. Suddenly, the fella next to us in the main stand left his seat and made for the dressing rooms, shortly emerging in full kit (borrowed from Swindley) to take charge in the middle. The game resumed after a hiatus of about 10 minutes. It transpired that Swindley had lost a contact lens and felt dizzy. Without a visual aid, his eyesight was so bad, he needed help to find the dressing rooms! His replacement was Nick Pratt, a Welsh Premier League referee, who just happened to be attending the match with a friend.

In the main, I can take or leave new grounds, but quite liked The Rock. The name derives from the site's previous use as a quarry. Its unique selling point is the sheer rock face which runs the length of one side. There is barely room to squeeze a sliver of hardstanding between the pitch barrier and this aesthetically impressive legacy of quarrying. Otherwise, The Rock is unremarkable, though a vast improvement on the facilities at Plas Kynaston Lane, Cefn Druids' tumbledown former ground. Work has begun on turning this into a superstore. The retail giant concerned (I refuse to give the company any publicity) bought Plas Kynaston Lane and, as part of the deal, built The Rock, which was waste land, having fallen derelict after earlier use for football following cessation of quarrying operations. I was told the discovery of slow worms at the old ground had delayed construction of the superstore, but it is expected to be completed by January.

A plain Jane of a propped cantilever stand, opposite the rock face, provides the pick of the spectator accommodation, nine rows of black and white plastic tip-up seats. Alongside is a single-storey red-brick block housing the dressing rooms, social club, offices, kitchen and souvenir shop. The social club, as you'd expect for something so new, is very smart and its schedule of regular events must be a handy money spinner for the Druids. There is no other cover, though hardstanding has been laid round the pitch, and there is a television gantry amidships on the rock face touchline. The floodlights are mounted on masts.

A word about the pitch. Shocking is the first that springs to mind. In common with many new grounds, getting the pitch right here has been a problem. It has threadbare patches, ruts and diagonal tramlines where the turf appears to be sinking along the course taken by the drains. We were told it became a quagmire last season. I'd suggest another harsh winter is likely to produce the same scenario.

The Druids (or rather the firm that put the turf down) may have to relay the lot. At least parking at The Rock isn't a problem. The size of the quarry left plenty of room for a large car park once the dimensions of the ground had been determined.

The Cymru Alliance website dubbed this fixture one of the league's games of the season. With the winner guaranteed to leapfrog Rhyl into top spot, there was plenty at stake. Whether this knowledge had an effect on the players, I don't know, but the match was disappointingly scrappy and disjointed. Such a shame on a perfect early autumn evening, which was still, dry and mild. The pitch did not lend itself to decent football, and the contest was blighted by constant interruptions. Mr Swindley liked the sound of his whistle and enjoyed lecturing the players far too much for my liking, and his premature departure was a blessing, but throughout the match the physiotherapists were on and off to treat more injuries (real or imagined) than I've seen in the whole of the season so far. For some reason, the home team had two physios, one much slower across the ground than the other, and this only added further delays.

At least we got the right result in the end. Connah's Quay, league champions last season and unlucky to be denied a place in the Welsh Premier League on a licensing technicality, were much the better side in the first half. They failed, however, to take their chances. In the 45th minute (the last before a stack of stoppage time), Druids striker Paul Speed was put away on the right side of the penalty area and beat advancing keeper John Rushton with a low shot which seemed to take a deflection off a defender.

The second half was more even, with the Druids finally seen as an attacking force. Indeed, in the 56th minute, Quay's Alan Hooley cleared off the line a header from Adam Hesp. But the visitors were always a threat, and equalised with 12 minutes left. A corner wasn't cleared, and Mark McGregor, lucky to be on the pitch having earlier escaped with a booking over an off-the-ball incident, rammed a low shot into the net from 12 yards. To add insult to injury, the Druids had a man sent off five minutes later. Kierron Duckett, cautioned during the first half for careless use of an elbow, was shown a straight red for an identical indiscretion. It was all the encouragement Connah's Quay needed, and they scored the winner in the 87th minute. Druids keeper Chris Mullock had made a brilliant save to claw away Rob Jones's well-struck free-kick, but from the resulting corner, James McIntosh directed a downward header between a post and the defender on it.

A poor game left us feeling rather dissatisfied, especially given the quality of most of what had preceded it during our fortnight's holiday in North Wales. I wouldn't want to watch football on this pitch regularly. Perhaps the locals feel the same way because the gate, though the Druids' best this season, was well down on expectations, as the unsold pile of programmes at the turnstile testified.

07/20