

TT No.53: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 24th September 2011; **Glan Conwy** v Holywell Town; Cookson Cup 1st round; Res: 3-3 (AET, 5-4 on pens); Att: 60 (h/c); Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Those marketing Wales to tourists love to extol the virtues of the Principality's Great Little Trains. Perhaps they ought to think about doing a similar job on behalf of its Great Little Football Grounds. Glan Conwy's Cae Ffwrt would surely have no problems making a list of 'must see' venues. The River Conwy, broad and mature as it nears its estuary, is a graceful presence along the ground's western border. To the north-west, Conwy's road, rail and pedestrian bridges, and imposing castle, part of Edward Longshanks' so-called Ring of Steel, are visible. Over to the south-west, the formidable mountains of the Snowdonia National Park form a seemingly impenetrable barrier. With views this stunning to soak up, football is merely a bonus!

Glan Conwy - the full name of the village is Llansanffraid Glan Conwy - have played at Cae Ffwrt since 1998, when a hitherto nomadic existence finally came to an end. 'Ffwrt', we were told, is not a proper Welsh word. 'Pel droid' is the Welsh term for football, and 'Ffwrt' a hybrid concoction, coined in a district where there is a large population of English incomers. The club rent Cae Ffwrt from the local authority, and admit they have now outgrown its facilities. Of particular concern is the pitch. Its dimensions are dictated by the space allowed by, at the west end, the Llandudno Junction-Blaenau Ffestiniog railway line, and, to the east, the main A470 road up the Conwy Valley. Put simply, the pitch is narrow and short. I played on bigger pitches in schools' football. The surface, hard and bumpy, is also very poor - a drawback of the ground not being fully enclosed, and therefore open to all and sundry on non-matchdays. The only cover is provided by a verandah in a single-storey structure in the south-west corner. Smart enough, it houses the dressing rooms, kitchen, hospitality area and toilets. Only part of the pitch is railed off and there aren't any floodlights. Space is at such a premium, Pendraw'r Llan, the curving access road to the Cae Ffwrt Business Park, abuts the touchline on the south side. In a delightful quirk, its raised pavement provides the only other bit of hardstanding other than that beneath the clubhouse verandah. Glan Conwy block off this road when they're at home, thereby creating what must be the widest turnstile in football.

A steep grassy bank, a perfect place to sit on a sunny day, rises behind the goal at the east end, beyond which is the A470. Commercial properties hem in the ground to the north and south. Traffic is so light on the branch railway line, which runs beyond a tall wire fence designed to prevent the loss of footballs, one forgets it is there until a train rumbles past. We saw just one in more than two hours. This end is open, permitting the aforementioned fine views, but much of the rest of Cae Ffwrt is fringed by trees. At this time of year, their autumn shades were beginning to show. As I've said before, and doubtless will again, hulking great stands and

acres of terracing are not required to create a ground worth visiting. Miss this one at your peril!

Having seen 42 goals in the previous eight games during our two-week North Wales holiday, we hardly dared hope for many more from this Cookson Cup tie. The competition, as I understand it, is effectively a League Cup for Welsh Alliance First Division clubs. Amazingly, we were treated to another six goals - and a penalty shoot-out - to send us back to Yorkshire with big smiles on our faces. Oh, and the weather! The most glorious afternoon showed off Cae Ffwyt, and all that scenery, at its very best. As if all this wasn't enough, the Glan Conwy people were the friendliest (amid stiff competition) football enthusiasts we encountered during the fortnight. It was especially heart-warming to see so many families in attendance, and also parents happy to let their kids play, without fear that something unspeakably ghastly would befall them between dinner and tea (as we say in t'North).

Holywell arrived at Cae Ffwyt as league leaders, but were sent packing by mid-table Glan Conwy, who battled from first whistle to last. It was a tight game (as, indeed, every match must be here, given the claustrophobic restrictions of the pitch), but the hosts eased into a comfortable 2-0 lead by half-time. Mez Knight prodded home from eight yards in the 26th minute when the Wellmen failed to clear, and a couple of minutes later no-one picked up Gavin Roberts' late run at a long throw, the defender nodding in from close range. Shortly before the break, Holywell's Steve Thomas (as noticeable for his speed and energy as his fiery red hair) was through on goal twice, but on both occasions home keeper Arron Peel made important saves.

The Flintshire men were not to be denied, however, and seven minutes after the restart, free-scoring striker Wayne Edwards ('Rooney', to the travelling Holywell fans) slid an angled shot wide of Peel's left hand. As the sun beat down, the teams struggled to put together a telling sequence of passes. But, with the clock showing 90 minutes, the visitors equalised. A free-kick to the left side of the box was turned back into the six-yard area, and poacher Tony Roebuck was on hand to stab the ball into the net.

Limbs looked decidedly weary during extra-time, and the physios had to come on to deal with several cases of cramp. Surely one goal would be enough to win the match? Two minutes before the end of the first period of extra-time, Holywell went ahead. Brad Jones rounded off a determined run down the inside-left channel with a shot almost from the dead ball line, his effort somehow evading Peel, who was beaten on his near post. Before the referee could signal the half was over, Glan Conwy levelled. Andy Booker tried his luck with a left-foot drive on the turn from the edge of the penalty area. The ball struck the inside of the far post, trickled along the line and bobbed into the net. More twists than an Ian Rankin novel!

After a brief breather, the players upped the tempo as they went in search of a decisive fourth goal. In an astonishing two-minute spell, Glan Conwy hit the

crossbar three times, through Knight (twice) and Mally Tidswell. Holywell thought they had broken the deadlock with seven minutes to go when Brad Jones ran on to a long ball and lofted a shot over the advancing Peel. But Jones's celebrations were cut short by a linesman flagging for offside. This decision was greeted with fury (and I don't exaggerate) by the Wellmen players and supporters. For a moment, things threatened to get out of hand. Jones played a key role in the penalty shoot-out. He was the only player from either side to miss as Glan Conwy took the honours 5-4. Jones, more frustrated than a Labour voter in a Tory heartland, saw his kick saved splendidly by Peel - and promptly booted the ball over the fence and into the river. The home team's success was greeted by the sight of Ben Thomas, converter of the 10th penalty, vanishing beneath a pile of bodies as his team-mates sprinted up to congratulate him.

All in all, it was a great way to end to a smashing holiday in which football (naturally) played a starring role. We're already looking forward to our next trip to Wales!

07/20