

TT No. 111: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 23rd February 2013; **Alresford Town** v Downton; Wessex Premier; Res: 4-2; Att: 70 (h/c); Admission: £6; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

In common (I suspect) with many hoppers, I've always had an eye on exploiting life's social occasions to visit new grounds. Over the years, this has involved selecting holiday destinations to coincide with certain fixtures, planning weekends away around ninety minutes of football on the Saturday afternoon and being drawn irresistibly to stadia whilst sightseeing in unfamiliar towns and cities. At university, I was noted amongst student mates for my uncanny ability to pick out, from trains, planes and automobiles, distant floodlights hidden to mere mortals amid a maze of rooftops, high-rise blocks and chimneys. I'm relieved to say, in the main, partners and pals, past and present have indulged this slightly crazy obsession with a mixture of humour and resignation.

From a hopping perspective, it's therefore quite handy that my fiancée's family lives on the Surrey-Hampshire border. Since 1986, work has taken me to most points of the compass, but this part of the country, in a hopping sense, was almost virgin territory. In the four and a half years since we met, my GF's family appears to have become accustomed to our periodic visits being punctuated by me scooting off to watch what to them are bafflingly obscure football matches.

Slowly but surely, I'm ticking off the clubs in a thirty-mile radius of Farnham. It's become a 'project within a project' - and there's plenty to do before enjoying the champagne moment of completion. This last weekend, we again embarked on the punishing 500-mile round trip (these ticks are certainly earned the hard way) from York. Hopping destination for the latest visit, marking my fiancée's not quite 50th birthday, was Alresford (pronounced Allsford) Town, Wessex League members twenty miles from Farnham. For once, the Fixture Gods smiled upon me: Alresford (top) were hosting Downton (second) in a Premier League match described as a summit meeting by the Farnham Herald newspaper purchased with religious devotion every Friday by my future father-in-law.

To be strictly accurate, the town of Alresford is actually New Alresford. Old Alresford is a village about a mile away. The former is an attractive place on the edge of the South Downs, since April 2011 a National Park. Substantial Georgian buildings line many of Alresford's streets. The structures replaced medieval predecessors destroyed by fires in 1689, 1710 and 1736. Did the locals learn nothing from the first (or even second) catastrophe? It's all a bit twee and Tory (ludicrously expensive antique shops abound), but undeniably pleasant. The town centre is a Conservation Area, affording protection from avaricious developers. Most trippers arrive aboard trains on the Mid-Hants Railway, a heritage operation dubbed the Watercress Line. It links Alton, Four Marks (the highest point in Hampshire), Ropley and Alresford. Before Dr Beeching swung his axe (his controversial plans were published fifty years ago next month), the track

continued to Winchester. Alresford is England's most important centre for the production of watercress, a peppery species of salad leaf that thrives in the alkaline water prevalent amid the chalky strata of the South Downs. In a more civilised era, before juggernauts thundered through the area's rural hamlets, shaking the foundations of thatched cottages, the railway was used to transport the crops to London, hence the line's unusual nickname.

Uncharacteristically, I'd taken a preliminary peek at Google images to check out the facilities at Arlebury Park, half a mile west of the centre and home to Alresford Town, formed in 1898. As a result, I wasn't expecting much. It came as no surprise to hear from the friendly guys in the wooden pay hut-cum-kitchen that the Magpies have not applied for promotion to the Southern League. Their three-sided ground does not meet the standards required. More importantly, perhaps, they don't fancy the extra travelling or risking the club's future by paying the players. At present, according to the captain's father (The Bloke Next To Me), Alresford Town's squad doesn't even get expenses. Though the players, if eligible for promotion at the season's end, will be denied the opportunity of testing themselves at a higher level, it's an eminently sensible strategy. The same thought process, closer to home, can be seen at work in the Northern League.

Council-owned Arlebury Park is not a terribly impressive ground. The only structure of note occupies its south-west corner. This, the Alresford Recreation Centre, is modern, smartly turned out in cream cladding and has two floors beneath a pitched roof. Steps on the side nearest the pitch lead to a balcony offering the best view of the action. You can either stand or occupy a single row of black plastic tip-up seats. The bar at the far end is shared with Alresford RUFC, whose ground is nearby. The inevitable presence of braying toffs, immersed inexplicably in rugby yawn-ion's annual Six Nations kick-and-clap-fest, ensured my visit was purely fleeting: more rugby (including a shirt from the club's first season) than football memorabilia on show. The dressing rooms, and entry point to the pitch, are at the building's west end. There is also space to stand, and a few bench seats, beneath the columns supporting the balcony. Perfect for seeking shelter on a raw day made even fresher by a bitter wind. Here, written on a white board, you can find the team line-ups, though the PA system is excellent. It's great when the effort is made to announce teams, scorers and substitutions.

The Alresford Recreation Centre apart, Arlebury Park (for which Town have a 25-year lease) is fairly underwhelming. I'm sure such sparse facilities would not secure Step Five status in the North! Hardstanding has been laid at each end and along the near touchline, where the pay hut-cum-kitchen and dug-outs are located. Three all-weather tennis courts lurk behind a hedge in the south-east corner. The pitch, which slopes down to the north touchline, is railed. Mature trees fringe both ends and provide some element of enclosure. The north side shares a common boundary with a cricket square, used by the footballers for pre-match warm-ups. A fence of green mesh - rather like goal netting - separates the two, and gives cheapskates the chance to watch for free. The same applies to the arrangements at the west end, where a footpath provides an excellent vantage

point for the unscrupulous. Arlebury Park's best feature, by some considerable distance, is its view of the South Downs. Dotted with coppices and grazing livestock, these low hills roll delightfully along the northern horizon.

The Magpies (as you might expect) made light work of the Robins. I was a bit disappointed with Downton. The visitors from the Salisbury area were very physical, but rather limited. Their form has been poor in the last month. Alresford, by contrast, looked a decent side. Having achieved little more than promotion from Division One since joining an expanded Wessex League from the merged Hampshire League in 2004, Town have clearly surprised themselves this season by topping the table. Signing three members of Liphook United's 2011-12 Hampshire League title-winning squad proved a catalyst.

Warren Bentley scored all four Alresford goals in a comfortable victory. His first two, in the 20th and 43rd minutes, were close-range tap-ins. The opener followed a comical defensive mix-up and the second owed everything to a superb Dominic Cope run and cross. Bentley's brace sandwiched a looping header on the half-hour from Ben Smith, who got on the end of a free-kick to draw Downton level. A dubious penalty, for a supposed Matt Scott foul on Zach Glasspool, enabled Bentley to complete his hat-trick from the spot after 57 minutes. Then, with 14 minutes remaining, Bentley rounded off a glorious, one-touch passing movement by side-footing in the Magpies' fourth from 12 yards. In the last minute of normal time, Smith headed a Downton consolation off the near post. This result, and a 1-1 home draw with Lymington Town for title rivals Moneyfields, left Alresford two points clear at the top of the table.

We don't have any more trips to Farnham planned before the season ends. My ageing Polo will be pleased, but at the rate of two or three ticks a season, there's no end in sight for this Surrey-Hampshire Project. The likes of Ash United, Badshot Lea, Basingstoke Town, Camberley Town, Frimley Green, Guildford City, Hartley Wintney, Knaphill, Sandhurst Town and Sheerwater are still winking away on the 'to do' radar. Christmas this year will be spent down in Farnham. Let's hope for mild weather - and, at the very least, a Boxing Day double!

04/20