

TT No. 119: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 2nd March 2013; **Walsall Wood** v Guernsey; FA Vase Quarter-Final; Res: 0-0 (AET); Attendance: 676; Admission: £5; Programme: £2 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

A great Vase occasion but not, in all honesty, much of a game. Guernsey fans travelled in numbers and were determined to enjoy themselves in the sort of balmy weather encountered more often in the Channel Islands than the West Midlands. Despite hearing one or two organisational criticisms, I felt Walsall Wood did a decent job of their big day. I gather they were expecting about 400 to turn up, so they'll have been delighted with an attendance well above that figure.

Just as well the sun shone, mind, because parts of Oak Park resembled a building site. The triangular space behind the main stand - a delightfully creaking wooden structure - is being levelled and turned into a training/warm-up area. It will spare the fragile pitch, a major concern this season, further punishment but the work has been delayed by the wet winter, leaving the ground a bit of a mess. The flat sections flanking the stand and the sizeable area behind the west end goal were an ankle-twisting mixture of aggregate (lumpy broken bricks) and turned sods of turf. Hardly ideal.

Oak Park is a hundred yards west of the A461 Lichfield-Walsall road. The ground is hidden behind a KFC and the horribly dated Oak Park Leisure Centre. Can't do much about ghastly fast food outlets but Walsall Council has announced plans to bring the leisure centre into the 21st century with a £14m revamp. This includes updating the first-generation artificial pitches whose floodlights vie for one's attention with the football clubs on the north side of Oak Park. These grubby elements apart, the partially wooded parkland setting has some appeal. A bowling green (resolutely padlocked) and tennis courts (covered in broken glass) occupy the space beyond the football club's eastern boundary. There is plenty of grass (haven of dog walkers) on the south side and at the west end. Plentiful parking, albeit shared with leisure centre users, is available.

The most eye-catching structure is outside the ground: a 55ft winding gear memorial to Walsall Wood Colliery, which was sunk in 1874 and closed in 1964 upon exhaustion of its coal. This rusty sculpture, designed by Black Country artist Luke Perry and erected in 2010, gives Oak Park a powerful sense of place and a welcome link with the village's industrial past. The pit, as in so many places, prompted the development and expansion of Walsall Wood. It boosted the village's economy and led to the establishment of its first public services.

The main stand is dedicated to the late Geoff Woodward. A community activist and great supporter of the football club, Geoff was known affectionately as the Laird of Walsall Wood. The stand is a real museum piece. The club claim it to be one of just two of its type surviving in Britain. You'll find the other (apparently) at Arbroath. If that's Gayfield, I cannot recall the twin. Painted a dazzling white, the

stand has wooden bench seats and six columns supporting a pitched roof. One of the columns has been daubed with the words The Wood. Though timeworn, the stand is far easier on the eye than the ugly collection of flat top structures opposite. Adding an extension to something that's been extended already never works. These buildings, too, are painted the brightest of whites but the ploy fails miserably to transform a sow's ear into a silk purse. The social club, small, low ceilinged and rather dingy, was rammed from first kick to last: a nice little earner. The dressing rooms, doubtless similarly cramped, are adjacent. Oak Park's floodlights are the traditional non-league variety, seen everywhere at one time.

Written evidence is hazy (or AWOL) but it seems Walsall Wood - Latin motto translation: For the good of the Wood - were established some time during or shortly after 1911. The club's best days spanned the Twenties, Thirties and Forties, when they were spoken of in the same breath as the Villa (to use the local vernacular), Birmingham City, Walsall, West Brom and Wolves. Oak Park's record attendance was in April 1952 when 3,500 turned up to see the team all but clinch the Worcester (later Midland) Combination championship with a 4-1 victory over Smethwick Highfield. At present, Wood, whose recent improved fortunes owe much to personnel changes in the boardroom, run six teams - three of which are open age. This season's headlong charge into the last eight of the Vase should come as no surprise: Wood have a fine pedigree in cup competition. They lifted the Walsall & District FA Senior Cup on nine occasions between 1932 and 1962.

Neither Wood nor Guernsey, both of whom suffered rare defeats in midweek league games, deserved to win this Vase tie. Understandably, perhaps, the teams appeared terrified of losing. Nobody was prepared to take a risk. There were chances, if not many, but a lack of composure and/or excellent goalkeeping ensured a blank scoresheet. Wood had an effort cleared off the line during the first half, whilst Guernsey fluffed two golden opportunities towards the end of extra time. Oddly, given the two clubs face potentially overwhelming fixture backlogs in the Midland Combination and Combined Counties League, the option of a penalty shoot-out was rejected, which means a replay next weekend at Footes Lane, effectively Guernsey's national stadium, near the island's capital, St Peter Port. All three match officials, I ought to say, had very good games: efficient and unostentatious.

The pitch, soft, bumpy and sandy, did little to promote thoughtful football, but criticism would be churlish. Chatting with one of the ground-staff before the game, I learned he'd spent three hours every day over the preceding week rolling the surface. That's (unpaid) dedication! I'm sure Oak Park will look much better once the pitch has recovered and the building work is complete.

It was very pleasing to discover Wood had marked this special occasion with an excellent souvenir programme. A glossy issue featured numerous photographs of past teams and bygone glories. This splendid archive material dovetailed very neatly with the invited presence at the game of twelve club legends from the Fifties and Sixties. To the dismay of this Luddite (or, let's be generous, child of his generation), all printed matter is destined for extinction. But, amid plummeting

newspaper and magazine sales, at least there was a strong demand for this programme: it sold out twenty-five minutes before kick-off. And if that ain't 'for the good of the Wood', I don't know what is!

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