

TT No. 125: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 12th March 2013; **York City** v Rochdale; League Two; Res: 0-0; Attendance: 2,929 (217 away); Admission: £17; Programme: £3 (52pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Out-of-town stadia are all the rage these days. And yet York City, surely one of the least likely trendsetters, had one eighty years ago. They played at a ground called Fulfordgate, which even now is on the southern extremity of the county capital. In 1922, when upon their formation City took up residence, Fulfordgate, part of the village of Fulford, must have seemed a particularly long way from the centre of York. The club's first decade was spent at Fulfordgate, a gargantuan walk from the railway station and served only by a limited tram service. In 1929, York were elected to the Football League, an elevation that prompted a rethink.

City's ambitious directors were presented with a dilemma when they heard of an opportunity to take over the ground, in Bootham, of Yorkshire County Cricket Club. Cricket had been played at the venue for half a century. Its central location was seen as advantageous. The Minster was a 10-minute stroll and there was a large working-class community on the doorstep. Despite a couple of dissenting voices, City's shareholders, doubtless dazzled by the prospect of bigger crowds, voted 115-37 to leave Fulfordgate, where crowds had slumped to 4,000. The club developed a football ground that became known as Bootham Crescent. An immediate decision to abandon the club's stylish colours of maroon and white and don hideous chocolate and cream stripes was soon reversed, happily. Ever curious about the past, I drove down to Fulfordgate a few weeks ago. And immediately felt rather foolish. There is, of course, no trace of City's presence. Eastward Avenue, an ordinary suburban road lined with Thirties semis, runs the length of what was said to be a very fine pitch.

This season, 2012-13, Bootham Crescent, an irredeemably bland enclosure, celebrates its eightieth anniversary. Ironically, its days are numbered because City are again looking to move out of town. This time, to a community stadium on the north-eastern fringe of York. It will occupy the site in Monks Cross of the doomed Huntington Stadium, a characterless, athletics track and home to York RLFC, who themselves quit the city centre in 1989 when, to clear crippling debts, they sold their Wigginton Road (or Clarence Street) ground to a housing developer. Crowd-wise, relocation has been a total disaster for the rugby league club, whose attendances have plummeted from 2,500 to 500. Some City fans fear a similar fate. The two clubs are to share the community stadium, which will have a capacity of 6,000 and be funded by the construction of a shopping complex. Final bids to design, build and operate the stadium are due in August this year. Two bidders will be shortlisted and a contract awarded in October. Construction, put back several times already, is scheduled to begin in June 2014.

Much depends, as far as future crowds are concerned, upon whether York are still in the Football League when the time, likely to be the start of the 2015-16

campaign, comes to leave Bootham Crescent. City, promoted via the Conference play-offs last season, are in freefall. This goalless draw with Rochdale extended to 13 games their run without a victory. They haven't won since my last visit to Bootham Crescent on New Year's Day, when Burton Albion were beaten 3-0. York's performance was somewhat less emphatic than the score suggests.

Manager Gary Mills, hero of two winning Wembley appearances this time last year, has been sacked and Northern Irishman Nigel Worthington appointed in his place. The softly-spoken Worthington began with a 3-2 defeat at fellow strugglers AFC Wimbledon and the Rochdale fixture was his home debut. I don't envy his task. Fifty points is regarded by most pundits as the minimum required to avoid relegation. After this sterile encounter, City therefore have eight games from which to secure nine points. Several matches are against teams around them in the table: Plymouth Argyle and Accrington Stanley have to visit Bootham Crescent, whilst the Minstermen face trips to Torquay United, Bristol Rovers and Dagenham & Redbridge. But can there, I wonder, possibly be two worse squads in League Two than York's? Put simply, the team is weak at the back, short of creativity in midfield and lightweight up front. Watching City toiling last night, I fancied they'd struggle to make the top half of Conference National.

Worthington, inevitably, is trying to be positive. His notes in City's excellent match programme told of a lovely, friendly club, and the players being nice lads. "There's plenty to work on but there's a good attitude around the place and that is something I am very, very pleased with," he wrote. "When you've got spirit, attitude and a willingness to learn then you've always got a chance."

York's many failings, however, were only too obvious against Rochdale. The fact City's first shot on target did not arrive until the 90th minute speaks volumes. John McGrath let fly from 25 yards and keeper Josh Lillis tipped the ball over the crossbar with one hand. The visitors, a surprisingly small side, were tidier and more skilful, if equally lacking in penetration. Dale also mustered just one effort on target. England U19 international Jack O'Connell's 17th-minute back pass fell woefully short but former Skelmersdale United striker George Donnelly's finish in a one-on-one was wholly unconvincing and Michael Ingham saved comfortably. Not the best £20 I've ever spent.

Bootham Crescent, hemmed in by houses and boasting a mere handful of parking spaces, lacks anything unusual to delight the hopper's eye. In a city brimming with quirky architecture, this must be a huge disappointment to first-time visitors. The Main Stand, swathed at its rear in a bizarre collection of extensions, dates from the ground's opening in 1932. The Popular Side and David Longhurst Stand covers are simple sheds over terracing. Seats in the former are bolted to the existing steps, which makes for extremely poor sightlines. One is too low down. The away end at Bootham Crescent is legendary: never forgotten by those who have got chilled and/or wet on its exposed, crumbling terraces.

It is high time City moved on. Bootham Crescent may be unsuited to the demands of the 21st century spectator but I will miss it because I have never lived this close

to a football ground. Door to turnstile is a brisk eight-minute walk. As an aside, the old rugby league ground on Wigginton Road would have been just two minutes away. Most City fans use Shanks's Pony to reach Bootham Crescent. Wending one's way through narrow streets, joining a steadily growing mass heading towards the beckoning floodlights, is a time-honoured York experience. Rugby league followers in the city can no longer do it. It's to be hoped football fans don't miss it so much they reject the notion of a three-mile expedition out to Monks Cross. Or should that be Fulfordgate II?

04/20