

TT No.143: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 13th April 2013; **AFC Wimbledon** v Exeter City; League Two; Res: 2-2; Att: 4,749 (815 away); Admission: £15; Programme: £3 (68pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

We're all in it together. How many times in recent years have we heard the phrase used and abused by the shabby band of self-serving opportunists that comprises our political class? Well, I'm very happy to say, it fits AFC Wimbledon - created, run and sustained by fans - like a glove. What an enjoyable hop this was: friendly, welcoming people; a palpable, meaningful bond between players and supporters; a wonderful atmosphere generated by a sell-out crowd; two teams committed solely to winning; and an absolute humdinger of a match.

Many of us make the mistake of failing to appreciate the value of something until it's taken away. If, as some might claim, that was the case amongst Wimbledon fans, they've more than made up for it since. A decade ago, there was uproar in this otherwise anonymous stretch of Surrey's identikit commuter belt when the genetically obtuse Football Association sanctioned the club's hugely controversial relocation to Milton Keynes. The angst and anger generated led to the birth of 'the new Dons' - AFC Wimbledon. In fairy-tale fashion, the club climbed the football ladder, rung by rung, and in 2011 secured what even impartial observers regarded as its rightful place in the Football League.

It is a measure of the club's progress that it has outgrown the Kingsmeadow ground shared with Isthmian League Kingstonian. The 4,749 crowd for this crunch fixture was a record at the venue for AFC Wimbledon. Being crammed in, shoulder to shoulder, amongst so many committed supporters was a life-affirming experience. Amid the chanting, passion and ready humour, it was the fans' generosity towards those wearing the famous blue and yellow shirt that struck me most forcibly. Mistakes were forgiven, encouragement unswerving. When shouting to their players, the home supporters used first names and nicknames - never surnames: a telling aspect. Indeed, we were all in it together. How fine it felt.

There cannot be many Football League grounds at which a stranger is able to turn up three and a half hours before kick-off and receive a positive response to a request for access to take photographs. Not a problem for AFC Wimbledon. Help yourself, I was told, by the genial stadium supervisor, who escorted me through the corridors of power to pitch-side. Kingsmeadow, at noon, did not impress me much. It appeared to be what essentially it is: a depressingly functional new stadium built 25 years ago for a relatively small non-league club. Since pitching up here, AFC Wimbledon have extended the main stand, built an all-seat stand behind one goal, stuck a roof on the stand opposite and erected a control room in a corner. But, empty and silent, the ground still feels like a non-league enclosure. Kingsmeadow's shallow terracing and crinkly tin stands betray its original role as accommodator of tiny crowds. The ground's dual personality is revealed by a mixture of red and blue seats, and crush barriers, not to mention duplicate signs

advertising both occupants. I imagine watching Kingstonian here is a fairly humdrum experience. But unleash the sound and fury of AFC Wimbledon's fans, and the place positively rocks. The choice of punk band The Members' 1979 classic 'Sound of the Suburbs' as the tannoy track just before the teams ran out was inspired. Pump up the volume! Can you hear us in Milton Keynes? I haven't been as tightly squeezed onto noisy terracing since my early Eighties university days on the Kop at Anfield and in Goodison Park's Gwladys Street end. It really was something. This is an arena where I wouldn't mind getting my regular fix of football.

There was plenty at stake. Wimbledon, after three straight defeats, needed a win as they battle to avoid a return to Conference National whilst Exeter, one victory in seven and fading from the play-off picture, were equally desperate for three points. The rain lashed down throughout but the atmosphere crackled and fizzed from first kick to last, partly because Exeter fans had turned out in force for their session in the last chance saloon, but mostly owing to relentless excitement and tension on the pitch. Drama of this sort, as compelling as any stage or theatre can produce, is why football casts its spell over so many.

Home manager Neal Ardley, in charge at Kingsmeadow since October, set the scene in his programme notes. It is vital, he wrote, that we as a club - and I do mean all of us - pull in the right direction and turn any anxiety into positive energy. Together, we are a formidable force, and I know we can do it.

Wimbledon began at a hell of a lick. I feared Exeter (another club, incidentally, owned by a supporters' trust) would be overwhelmed. Hence the sense of disbelief (and resignation) around me when the Devonians broke the deadlock in the 36th minute. Jamie Reid was allowed to burst forward from the left side of midfield and keeper John Sullivan could only help a 20-yard shot into a corner of the net. Arron Davies should have made it 2-0 three minutes after the break but Pim Balkestein cleared off the line. In the 58th minute, Luke Moore equalised to unleash a tidal wave of noise and relief. His angled volley from the edge of the box bounced through a ruck of players and went in off the inside of a post. Three minutes later, Exeter were back in front. Wimbledon had obviously learnt nothing from the opening goal because Reid was given similar time and room on the right to fire a 25-yarder across a diving Sullivan, who was undone when the ball popped off a divot and flew over his outstretched right arm. Within 60 seconds, Moore hammered home decisively from 18 yards to make it 2-2. If all that were not enough, moments after Moore's second-strike Dons substitute Charlie Strutton found himself through on goal, only for keeper Artur Krysiak to make a vital block. Strutton (73min) steered a close-range free header inches wide and, at the other end, Jamie Cureton (80min) drew an excellent tip-over from Sullivan. Never was a draw a fairer result, though of little use to either team.

The Dons fans I spoke to were optimistic about a possible move back to Plough Lane. Not the old ground (it has been redeveloped) but the speedway, dog and stock car stadium of the same name, a couple of hundred yards from 'the real' Wimbledon's spiritual home. The plan is to raze the dog track (a hopper's delight but falling to pieces) and build a 12,000-capacity replacement on its footprint.

Owing to Plough Lane's brownfield-style location, Dons fans believe there won't be much competition from other potential purchasers and residents will raise few objections. Crucially, Merton Borough Council wants the club back in Wimbledon. Oh, the irony! I hope AFC Wimbledon retains Football League status: it is a club worth emulating and a significant asset to the elite. MK who?

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