

TT No:67: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 1st December 2012; **Alton Town** v Bournemouth; Wessex League Premier Division; Res: 1-4; Att: 67; Admission: £6; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

On the face of it, Alton Town are trapped in a depressingly familiar scenario of impersonal corporate monolith sweeping aside tiny community asset with neither a thought nor a care. Like cute 1983 Scots comedy drama *Local Hero*, but without the millions in compensation for villagers whose scenic coast was threatened by construction of an oil terminal. Landlords Molson Coors, a global company who own and operate a brewery in Alton, once a centre for the growing of hops and barley, have given the Wessex League club six months' notice to quit the Anstey Road Sports Ground, their home for almost 30 years. Football has been played on the site since 1928. It would seem the brewer's wearily predictable strategy is to sell this hugely valuable plot of land to a developer. With nowhere else to go, and the clock against them, Alton Town face extinction at the end of the season. A campaign to save the club has begun. The Brewers (how ironic is that nickname?) aim to drum up enough support to persuade Molson Coors to think again. To, say the club in their publicity material, urge the brewer to re-engage with town and district councils, and other interested parties, to allow Alton Town to remain at the Anstey Road Sports Ground while the issue is resolved. In plain English, the club would like more time - possibly another year - to make alternative arrangements. Is that too much to ask?

None of this, in any sense, sounds good, but it's fairly easy to see things from the brewer's perspective. Beer makers have suffered as badly as anyone during the apparently endless recession, and one cannot blame Molson Coors for wanting to make a fast buck. Several million of them, by all accounts. The football club pay a peppercorn rent and officials admit a sell-off has been on the cards for many years. Molson Coors have staged two previous attempts to cash in this prize asset. Both, I was told, came to nothing because planners rejected proposals firstly for 180 houses then a supermarket. Also, the town council wouldn't accede to Molson Coors' request to release nearby land so a new stadium could be built. Quite what the brewer is looking to do with the site this time, Alton Town officials don't appear to know. As ever, planning permission is key.

The site comes with a covenant dictating use for sport and recreation. Having taken legal advice, Town pointed this out to Molson Coors, but the brewer is confident the covenant can be sidestepped. Such obstacles have been cleared before by other parties in other places. Put simply, every covenant has its price. Shell out enough and suddenly it ain't worth the paper it's written on.

Some people in Alton care passionately about their football club. Those running Town clearly do. Trouble is, too few give a damn. I'm sure the local authority knows this. They are sympathetic to the club's plight, but say there is little they can do. Molson Coors are entirely within their rights, of course, though Town

supporters are miffed the council are unwilling (or unable) to offer the club a publicly owned site elsewhere. Molson Coors, I was told, are likely to give the council some cash to spend on improving sports and recreation provision in Alton, but the feeling is it won't be spent on a new football ground. And, let's be honest, why should it? Facing the biggest crisis in their history, Town (a 1990 merger of Alton Town and Bass Alton) mustered a gate of less than 70 for this game with Bournemouth. That paltry total is about the average gathering at the Anstey Road Sports Ground.

The club have established an online petition (feel free to sign it via altontownfc.com), and the day after this fixture were taking their case onto the streets, setting up a stall at Alton's Yuletide Festival. It will be fascinating (and, for club officials, possibly sobering) to see how many locals are sufficiently moved to put their names to an offline petition. The club are also talking to the Hampshire FA and their predicament has been discussed by the management committees of the Wessex and Wyvern Leagues. Wheels are in motion. I wish Alton Town, who on the day I visited proved an endearingly friendly, welcoming club, every success in their battle to secure a stay of execution, but fear they are hoping against hope: the die is cast; the outcome inevitable.

Irony abounds. The ground is the former sports facility of Courage and Bass, who owned the Alton brewery before Molson Coors. Molson Coors are supporters, through costly sponsorship deals, of football, albeit at a much higher level than the Wessex League. Alton Town's old ground is just 200 yards away, on the other side of Anstey Road, in a local authority park. It boasts two stands and, to my eyes, looks a decent set-up. Trouble is, it lacks floodlights (and, with houses close by, permission for those might be hard to secure), the pitch has a pronounced slope and its facilities are used already by 20 teams, many of them youth sides.

The Anstey Road Sports Ground, a quirky enclosure with a long and colourful history, will be a sad loss. Alton Cricket Club shared the site until the footballers' rise to prominence led to the demise of the summer game. What remains of the cricket square, located between the south touchline and the Farnham to Alton railway line, is now a training pitch for the football club. The cricket pavilion, a timeworn structure dating from the nineteenth century, remains intact. Positioned in the south-west corner, it serves as football changing rooms.

The bulk of the facilities are spread along the north touchline, beyond a small car park accessed through ornamental gates off Anstey Road. The main stand, with wooden bench seats, corrugated iron cladding, transparent end screens and lashings of black & white paint, is a gem. It straddles the halfway line and lends real distinction to the scene. Like so many of its ilk, however, it is nicer to look at than sit in. Getting a comfortable, column-free view is virtually impossible. There is a bowling green (another club facing the chop) behind the stand and, to the right, two unkempt tennis courts. To the left, a low-slung structure (marginally less ugly than Alton's unspeakably hideous magistrates' court) is home to the clubhouse and bar. As appealing inside as out, unfortunately, though there are interesting displays of memorabilia.

Ominously, new houses have encroached at the west end, nearest the town centre. These bland, red-brick edifices tower over a narrow strip of hardstanding laid in the yard or so between the dead ball line and the perimeter fence. The opposite end, which backs onto a line of fir trees and rather older houses, is scarcely much wider. Evidence of work done recently by the football club can be found on the south touchline. Tidy dug-outs have been constructed and a gate, providing access to the pitch from the pavilion, inserted in a new wall separating the technical areas. On the southern boundary, more mature firs partially mask passing trains, those sparking, humming third rail electrics that predominate in Greater London. The floodlights are of the mast variety, with four on each side of the ground. The pitch, broad and flat, got a £4,000 makeover during the summer. It's a pleasant ground, said to be amongst the best in the Wessex League. Surely, it deserves a more dignified swansong?

Inevitably, the team's performances are now somewhat academic. Alton were fourth-bottom at kick-off and finished well beaten by a Bournemouth side only a few places better off. Perhaps the fight has gone from players already wondering where they'll be next season. The visitors, whose line-up included the son (Ollie) of former Southampton, AFC Bournemouth and Plymouth Argyle centre-back Forbes Phillipson-Masters (the poshest name on any Seventies/Eighties team-sheet), had this contest won before half-time. There wasn't as much between the teams as the score suggests, mind. Alton had chances - plenty of them - but endured 'one of those days' in front of goal, whereas Bournemouth capitalised with impressive alacrity on arguably fewer openings.

The Poppies (so named to avoid confusion with the Cherries of Dean Court) were soon into their stride. Alton played a high line at the back and were susceptible to Bournemouth's cleverly angled passes from midfield. That vulnerability cost the Brewers two goals. The opener, in the 31st minute, was a different beast. Martin Warren climbed well at the back post to meet a cross with his head, glancing the ball past keeper Justin Courtnage. With Alton in disarray in defence, Bournemouth added two more between the 38th and 39th minutes. Warren got away on the right to lob Courtnage before Zouaoui Lammali, free on the left, rounded the Alton keeper to slide in the third from a tight angle. Alton were much improved in the second half, and forced a number of saves from Poppies keeper Kenny Vaughan. But, on the hour, the visitors broke away and Lammali slotted home a coolly-taken fourth. As the game entered stoppage time, and with the home fans despairing of seeing a goal, Alton skipper Scott Sanderson made a late run into the six-yard box and bundled an in-swinging corner into the net.

Bigger tests, on and off the pitch, lie ahead for Alton Town. Call me a cynic, but I'd be surprised if the Anstey Road Sports Ground is still hosting Wessex League football next season. Still, you never know. The villagers in Local Hero charmed Burt Lancaster's Big Bad Conglomerate into backing down. Maybe Town chairman Jim McKell and his small band of fellow enthusiasts can pull off a similar miracle with Molson Coors. Here's hoping!

