

TT No.69: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 8th December 2012; **Thackley** v Wisbech Town; FA Vase Third Round; Res: 2-4; Att: 162; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

I like the Vase. In my view, it's the best of the FA's senior knockout competitions. The FA Cup has been ruined because the bigger Premier League clubs no longer take it seriously. Similarly, the FA Trophy is devalued owing to lack of interest from the top half of Conference National. So, it's good to follow the Vase every season and catch a match in as many rounds as possible. Trouble is, the more 'ticks' one amasses, the smaller becomes the choice of games, at least within sensible driving distance. I had my sights on the tie at Walsall Wood, the nearest new ground to home, but a week of lousy weather put paid to any ideas of trailing down to the Midlands. If a question mark hangs over a fixture, there's no point travelling. Even if the host club, and a local referee, believes a pitch to be fit at, say, ten o'clock, the match referee is always likely to roll up at half-past-one and decide it's unplayable. Sorry, fellas, all you can do is turn round and go home. I speak, fairly bitterly, from experience. I still shudder at the mention of Stevenage (who wouldn't?), Stafford and Bamber Bridge: three eleventh hour postponements suffered a decade or so ago in the space of a few weeks!

Staying local it was, then. I hadn't been to Thackley since April 1994 and the Northern Counties East League club faced an attractive third round tie against Wisbech Town, a powerhouse of the flatlands. When the Thackley website updated shortly after nine o'clock with news of a successful pitch inspection it sealed the deal. I'm not one for the drudgery (or embarrassment) of ringing round club secretaries on a Saturday morning, scraping the barrel in an attempt to find something on. When it comes to the 'Frost Lottery', I never buy a ticket.

With the sun shining and the sky a glorious blue, I aimed for an early arrival. Most grounds (not least the main stands) look their best when the sun is in the east and at this time of year that's well before lunch. It was encouraging, on reaching Thackley, a semi-rural hilltop village between Leeds and Bradford, to discover numerous posters advertising the match. At the ground, Dennyfield, a couple of club stalwarts were making the sort of on-the-day preparations most players probably take for granted. A tent, sheltering a hot air blower, was pitched over the goalmouth at the south end: the only bit of the pitch bitten by overnight frost. Little conversation was required to establish this was a big day in Thackley's history: we're all up for this, they assured me. Shots secured, including a couple in the home dressing room (always great to be allowed a peek behind the scenes), I set about exploring the surroundings.

Most hoppers (if some of the forums I read are to be believed) head straight to the nearest Good Beer Guide-listed pub for their pre-match entertainment. Not for me. I used to like a pint or two, but I've grown out of boozing, to be honest. It was OK in my student days, but alcohol has interested me less and less during the

intervening years to the point now where I barely touch the stuff. Not even sure I could tackle a whole pint anymore! No, I pulled on my walking boots and headed for the footpaths embroidering Buck Wood. The wood is the other side of Ainsbury Avenue to Dennyfield and adorns the Bradford flank of the Aire Valley. Wandering aimlessly amid the sweet aroma of rotting leaves was a delight. Robins hopped about, crows barked in the boughs and grey squirrels (vermin, I know) circumnavigated tree trunks. Got to be better than the Golden Fleece et al!

Buck Wood has a unique place in the history of Bradford. It was the location of the famous Thackley Open Air School. Between 1908 and 1939, sickly children were given a break from the inner-city living conditions that produced so many ghastly ailments. In all but the worst weather, the kids had lessons outside. A couple of months later, refreshed and recovered, they'd go back to their slums. Poor mites. The buildings burned down in 1966 and the site has returned to nature. An information board charts the school's history and features fascinating archive photographs. A little further into the trees, I stumbled across the remains of a prehistoric settlement, subject of an archaeological dig. Reluctantly, I hauled myself away and went back to the car to listen to Radio Four's Any Questions? - a pre-match ritual. Where would we humans be without rails to run along?

Enough of this preamble - or pre-ramble. Dennyfield is only half a mile from the busy A657 Leeds-Bradford road that noisily bisects Thackley, but feels a world away. Ainsbury Avenue, lined by trees, is a delightful approach to a country venue. En route, Thackley's wacky cricket ground (with its steeply sloping pitch) and a stables-cum-livery are encountered. The football club own the seven-and-a-half-acre Dennyfield site having bought it a few years ago from Bradford Council, their former landlord, for a bargain £13,000. The biggest change in the facilities since the Nineties is the disappearance of the cute wooden main stand on the west touchline: about all I could remember from my previous visit. It was destroyed by arsonists and has been replaced by a much larger, if far less interesting, propped cantilever structure. This has four rows of bench seats, a central glazed press box and, at the rear, a raised platform for standing spectators. A thoughtful addition: not everyone wants to sit down! With khaki and red cladding, and the club's title on the fascia, it's a very smart stand.

There's a tiny cover alongside. The building to which it is attached houses the dressing rooms, which, I can reveal, are bigger than Queen of the South's! A paved area, with picnic tables, refreshment hatch and loos, is adjacent, next to the turnstile block in the south-west corner. The turnstile itself is a Victorian gem. Wonder where Thackley acquired it? From Valley Parade or Park Avenue, maybe. Beyond the perimeter fence can be found a single-storey social club and an all-weather pitch. The spacious Dennyfield site also boasts a large car park. On the east touchline, there are a few steps of uncovered terracing, with open hardstanding at both ends. Four floodlight masts are strung out on each side. Buck Wood embraces Dennyfield to the west and north, fields rise away to the east and the view to the south-east is dominated by one of the brick ventilation shafts of

the 1,496-yard Thackley Tunnel, which enables the Leeds-Shipley railway line, far below on the floor of the Aire Valley, to burrow beneath the ground.

This isn't, I'm afraid, proving a vintage season. I haven't seen many decent games, and this was another poor one. Don't be fooled by the score. It wasn't a thriller. Wisbech led 4-0 after 51 minutes and the hosts' goals came in the 87th and 90+1 minutes, too late to have any effect on the outcome. For the neutral, it was thoroughly uninvolved. The visitors looked a decent side, mind. Thackley had won their last four games, scoring 15 goals, but were toothless against this opposition. It might have been different had Matt Mathers taken an early chance or Nicky Matthews (hat-trick hero at Staveley Miners' Welfare the previous Saturday) not been lost to injury in the opening quarter. Star of the show was Wisbech winger Dubi Ogbonna. OK, he was granted the freedom of the left flank (anyone looks good given time and space), but his direct running was a constant concern to Thackley and illuminated otherwise gloomy proceedings.

Home keeper Mark Bower had a nightmare. He was at fault for three of the Wisbech goals. In the 11th minute, he allowed a Steven Reid shot to squirm from his grasp and just before the break was outwitted in a one-on-one by Chris Bacon. Two minutes after the restart, Bower could only palm up a Bacon header and Adam Millson scrambled the loose ball over the line. In the 51st minute, Ogbonna displayed real quality by tricking his way past two defenders and shooting beneath Bower, who really should have done better. What remained promised to be tedious in the extreme. And so, it was. Referee Nick Gibbons took pity on Thackley by awarding them a soft penalty with three minutes left. No-one around me in the crowd could shed any light on the infringement. Chris Davey converted confidently and as the game entered stoppage time fellow substitute Dempsey Smith raced clear to ram a super shot past Fenmen keeper Lea Jordan. For his temerity, Smith got a nasty rap on an ankle from Wisbech skipper Paul Cousins: the sole spiteful moment in the contest.

To summarise: Pleasant ground, lovely surroundings, friendly people, decent programme. Not for the first time, however, the actual match was a complete let-down. Still, arriving home in York to discover the Walsall Wood-Wigan Robin Park Vase tie had fallen victim to a waterlogged pitch cheered me up no end! As the hopping mantra goes: there's always next week...

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