

TT No.90: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 19th January 2013; **Hibernian** v Dundee (Scottish Premier League); Res: 1-1; Att: 10,386 (509 away); Admission: £22; Programme: £2.50 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

I may be alone (though hope fervently for some company) in believing football clubs should employ a little thought and imagination when considering the design of new stands and stadia. Hibernian are a good example. The possessor of a famous name, fine heritage and impressive pedigree, they are located amid one of the world's most beautiful cities, replete with stunning architecture. Is it too much to ask that such a club rebuild in a manner reflecting their heritage and the community in which they find themselves? In this instance, it would appear yes, it is, because in revamping every aspect of Easter Road since 1995, Hibs have thrown up structures that would not look out of place on the seediest industrial estate. At best, they are bland: at worst, spectacularly ugly. The products of such a lazy (nay, uncaring) strategy contrast vividly with, say, the splendour of the Georgian townhouses lining the north side of London Road, the route through the edge of Leith that Hibeas fans approaching the stadium on foot tend to take from the direction of Edinburgh Waverley station and Princes Street.

Just how out of kilter (if you'll excuse the tartan pun) the new Easter Road is with its surroundings becomes even more apparent when viewed from the breezy heights of Calton Hill. The stadium, rising above Leith's chimney pots like a liner from the stocks, is a carbuncle. Up close, it's no better, though it's heartening that the stadium's traditional inner-city setting survives. Given more helpful circumstances, the club could have ended up at an out-of-town site. The nearer you get to the football ground the further away Easter Road appears to become as its stands are lost from sight behind classic Edinburgh tenements. Don't be fooled by the floodlights: they belong to neighbouring Meadowbank Stadium, a former Scottish Football League venue. The final reveal is disappointing. Dazzling green steelwork and acres of cream cladding fail to enhance architectural mediocrity. Even more puzzling is a lack of signing. There is very little. The main entrance, at the rear of the west stand, is wholly unheralded. It is crying out for an application of Hibs' attractive crest: a blank canvas awaiting a masterpiece.

My only previous visit to Easter Road was in February 1990. The ground was no oil painting, but at least it had character: a wooden main stand, erected in the mid-Twenties and cranked for optimum viewing, distinctive drench-lights and an open, uncovered south end terrace beyond which the unmistakable profile of Arthur's Seat could be seen in all its considerable glory. Much of this life-expired infrastructure had to go. I accept that. But, surely, Hibs could have come up with a more inspiring blueprint? Let's face it: if the likes of non-league Dorchester Town and Dartford can build new stadia that add something to their environment then so, too, can much bigger clubs such as Hibernian. Though I very much liked the idea of a ticket office in a tenement block, with business conducted through open

ground floor windows, in essence the new Easter Road detracts from Leith. That is a great shame, partly because Hibs, formed in 1870, have been a fixture in the district since 1880. Cheesily-worded green wall plaques referring to The Hibernian Family notwithstanding, an opportunity has been spurned. I cannot help feeling this depressing legacy is yet another example of clubs trading on the blind loyalty of fans: any old crap will do; they'll keep coming whatever. Then again, maybe such drab sheds (I use the noun advisedly) are all the average fan wants. In that case, they deserve what they get.

Thank goodness, however, for Hibernian's underfloor heating, Scotland's first when installed in 1980. It rescued the sporting element of our first-class train expedition to Edinburgh, a freebie courtesy of my partner's abundant East Coast loyalty points. The tickets were booked weeks ago and Plan A was Musselburgh Athletic's Scottish Junior Cup fourth-round tie with Pumpherstoun. But this, and every other option, including Edinburgh University, Preston Athletic, Tynecastle and Whitehill Welfare, fell victim to the week's ill-timed wintry weather. Easter Road, for what the 'hopperati' deem a bracketed tick, was very much the last (as it turned out Hobson's) choice because the visitors were bottom-of-the-table Dundee, in the Scottish Premier League this season owing only to shamed Rangers' enforced demotion and, from the season's first kick, cast in the role of relegation certainties.

If nothing else, Easter Road has a uniform appearance - and looks better inside than out. The four stands are virtually identical. All but the east stand offers two seating tiers. Every seat in the stadium is green. The one I occupied provided minimal legroom. The lanky lad to my left (among a group of young Norwegians: no idea what they were doing there) spent the entire 90 minutes with his knees under his nose. I gather Arthur's Seat (the hill, not the perch of a long-time regular) is still visible - though only from the upper deck of the north stand. The distinctive drench-lights have been replaced with lamps mounted on the roofing-fascia's, of the east, and west stands. One touch I really enjoyed was the playing, just before the players came out, of Sunshine on Leith, a hit anthem penned by the Hibs-supporting Proclaimers. Everyone joined in the chorus with great enthusiasm. A wonderful shared moment of communal singing.

In the event, the match far exceeded my low expectations. Dundee were a great side. Knowing one has nothing to lose tends to free one of inhibitions. The visitors played with real spirit and had they taken their chances could have won 5-1. Goalkeeper Ben Williams was the home team sponsors' man of the match, which says it all. Hibs were abysmal, frankly. I'd been warned in advance what to expect by an elderly bloke a couple of seats away. He was right, too. Having been enticed to support the club during the late Forties by the joyous football of the so-called Famous Five, he must despair of this modern tripe. Hibs didn't have anyone capable of beating a man or taking responsibility for playing the killer pass. Their midfield was non-existent. The home players looked scared to death and for much of the game were happy to play it safe with sideways and backwards distribution. And that ain't worth £22 of anyone's money.

No wonder frustrated Hibs manager Pat Fenlon (a man with the broadest southern Irish accent I've ever clapped ears on) went through his full range of physical tics in the technical area: hands in pockets, arms folded, rub chin, adjust spectacles, retreat to and emerge from the dug-out, as if doing the 'hokey-cokey'. Repeat ad nauseam. Poor fella. His contribution (Pat's Column) to the somewhat slim match programme was as hard to fathom as his speech. Here are a few examples of Fenlon's meaningless prose: "There are unwritten rules: our players accept the club comes first and that the result on the day means everything." Or how about: "The connection between this group of players and the Easter Road crowd has visibly grown since August." Where do they get this guff? Is it part of the Football Association's coaching badges?

Slick, one-touch interplay set up John Baird for a superb finish that gave Dundee a seventh-minute lead. Williams denied Steven Milne in a one-on-one and Mark Stewart blazed over the Hibs goalkeeper's crossbar when unmarked 10 yards out. All Hibs could manage in response was a looping back-header from right winger David Wotherspoon, their most incisive player. His tame effort dropped the wrong side of the crossbar. No wonder the hosts were booed off at half-time. Hibs clearly got a rollicking from Fenlon because they picked up the tempo immediately on the resumption and in the 48th minute on-loan Leigh Griffiths equalised with a 20-yard free-kick. I sensed Hibs would go on to win the game, but Dundee flung themselves into every challenge with commendable gusto. Williams distinguished himself twice more by making saves to push aside goal-bound efforts from Colin Nish and Milne. The relief of the home fans at the final whistle was palpable. We were lucky, those around me conceded.

Many things have changed at Easter Road during the last 20 years. Thankfully, Hibs' classic strip of green shirts and white sleeves has not been tampered with. Possibly of a slightly darker shade of green than in years gone by, it looks, if that were possible, better than ever. If only that could be said of the club's new home.

04/20