

TT No.97: *Andy Gallon* - Wed 6th February 2013; **Dartford** v FC Halifax Town; FA Trophy Fourth Round Replay; Res: 3-2; Att: 805 (100 away); Admission: £15; Programme: £2.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

If only all councils were like Dartford, reads a pitch-side advertising hoarding at Princes Park. If only, I would suggest, all new stadia were like Princes Park, which shows what boldness, imagination and Greenwich-based architects Alexander Sedgley can produce. Dartford are a small club, punching well above their weight by playing in Conference National, and local authority-owned Princes Park is a modest enclosure - capacity just 4,097. But its unique - I don't think that's too strong an adjective - features ensure size isn't important.

The most impressive reflect environmental awareness. It's some list. To reduce noise and light pollution, the pitch was laid two metres below the terrain's natural level; precipitation run-off is collected and recycled for use in the loos; solar panels keep down the electricity bills; the roofs are supported by glued and laminated ('glulam') timber beams, which require less energy to create than the steel alternative. They are covered with vegetation - a sedum blanket - to provide insulation and blend with the surroundings. Internally, the stadium has underfloor heating, low energy lighting and ultra-efficient condensing boilers. Even the site landscapers recycled excavated material. Getting to the stadium via public transport is encouraged and a 'Fastrack' bus service, speeding along dedicated lanes, furnishes a handy link to the town centre. A giant 'Oak Man' sculpture on the north terrace symbolises this admirable concern for Planet Earth. Maybe Dartford should change their colours from black & white to green!

Princes Park is built on an elevated site (so exposed, it's a bit too breezy) between Junction 1B of the M25 and Dartford town centre. The site also features a floodlit 3G training pitch (for community use) and a nine-hole, par-three golf course. Approaching up an incline off the A225, one arrives in a free car park with 300 spaces. The stadium, low, unobtrusive and in appearance vaguely Scandinavian, is ahead. Inspector Wallander would be at home working here. What appears to be a weathered wood cladding dominates a stylishly understated exterior. Signage, in common with everything else, is from the minimalist school of design. The entrance forms part of the main (or south) stand. This structure boasts a contemporary first floor bar (whose walls carry famous sayings by well-known football personalities) and a ground floor café. A balcony with al fresco tables is a nice touch, though in chilly February favoured only by the masochistic. The 3G training pitch and golf course are close by to the right. Unusually, given its age, the stadium is hemmed in - to the north by the noisy A225 and to the east by a modern academy.

Inside, Princes Park is cosy. Some might say disappointingly meagre. When the stadium, built for about £7m, opened in November 2006, Dartford were in the Isthmian League and its limited capacity probably reflects their status at the time.

Two promotions followed in quick succession, and now the Darts could do with a stadium that meets Football League requirements. I cannot help feeling this should have been achieved at the start. Princes Park is lacking in other respects. There aren't enough seats (just 642, all in the main stand) and neither they nor the shallow terracing offer much chance to get above the action, despite the sunken pitch. Filling in the corners has given the stadium a pleasing aesthetic integrity, but the terracing here is unused and space wasted elsewhere. The concourses (or gangways) to the rear of the seats and terraces seem unnecessarily wide. Moreover, watching football at Princes Park is a distinctly draughty experience because the rear walls of all but the main stand do not rise as high as the roofs. The metal grill-covered gaps are no defence against a gale born in the Arctic! Owing presumably to budget restrictions, the roofs do not overhang very far and therefore provide less protection from the weather than they might. But they do have that sexy sedum blanket. Apparently, this 'living' cover provides natural air filtration. In dirty old London, I can't say my lungs noticed! Other facilities include, behind the goal at the east end, a souvenir shop and kitchen-cum-serving-area. I sampled only the former, which was extremely well stocked. The players' tunnel is positioned in the centre of the main stand, with matching dug-outs either side. The north-east corner houses a digital scoreboard, which was easier to understand than the throaty PA system.

Dartford are understandably proud of Princes Park and its attributes have not gone unnoticed in high places. The evening before this FA Trophy tie, the stadium had hosted an England C international against Turkey. Entry was free (by ticket obtained in advance) and around 3,000 fans saw the Turks win 1-0.

Here's a question: has the FA Trophy had its day? Few Conference National clubs, and their supporters, give a monkey's, about it. Many Halifax fans admitted they would start taking an interest this season only if the Shaymen reached the last four. There were about 100 visiting fans in the crowd for this quarter-final replay, which means only 700 Dartford supporters could be bothered. It's to be hoped Grimsby Town and Wrexham secure places in the final - at the expense of Dartford and Gainsborough Trinity, respectively - otherwise Wembley is going to look pretty empty on March 24. To me, the Trophy, like the FA Cup, is fatally devalued by the indifference of the bigger clubs. I'll take the FA Vase every time, thanks.

This was a decent enough contest but, with Princes Park less than a quarter full, the atmosphere was pretty low key. We (my brother and I) declined an 'invitation' to be segregated and stood on the north terrace halfway line. It's always amusing to listen to the drivel spouted by Londoners, who mistakenly believe the world begins and ends in the festering toilet that passes for our capital city. I particularly enjoyed the chap who kept referring to Halifax as 'Black Pudding Eaters'. In the end, we had to advise him said delicacy is a Lancashire phenomenon. He apologised for being ignorant of Northern culture before revealing his plans to eat a pie & mash supper whilst singing along with his old lady to a Chaz & Dave vinyl recording of Knees Up Mother Brown. Only joking.

Before detailing the events on the pitch, here's another thing. A sign on the south side of the M25's Dartford Crossing welcomes the motorist to Kent: The Garden of England. Maybe in the seventeenth century, but not anymore! I am an avid seeker of Crap Towns (God knows, in Nasty Party Britain one is spoilt for choice) and a pre-match wander allowed me to add Dartford to my growing collection. Its main drag featured a Wimpy - calling card of Crap Towns everywhere. Other chav-tastic Kentish dumps I've been appalled by during my hopping career include Chatham, Dover, Gillingham, Gravesend and Welling. If you equate 'garden' with congestion, pollution, overpopulation and inappropriate development in the Green Belt then - and only then - can Kent still be considered the Garden of England.

Halifax, who took a second-minute lead through Dan Gardner, shaded the first half, but Dartford deserved to progress after a strong display in the second 45 minutes. The tie turned on two goals in a minute, scored by Darts pair Lee Noble and Elliot Bradbrook. With 12 minutes left, Ryan Hayes' curler seemingly put the outcome beyond doubt, but Halifax set up a tense finish when Gardner crashed home the goal of the game, a 30-yard blockbuster, in the 88th minute. Dartford immediately went up the other end and won a penalty for a daft Danny Lowe foul on Hayes, only for skipper Bradbrook to smash his spot-kick against the bar. With the temperature well below freezing by now and a bitter wind howling round the ground, few in Princes Park could have been disappointed when the visitors failed to capitalise on a couple of good half-chances in stoppage time. An extra 30 minutes, and possibly penalties, would have been absolute purgatory!

Football clubs are not noted for having a sense of humour, making especially welcome a light (if saucy) decorative touch in the gents on the first floor of the main stand. Above each urinal was a picture of a blonde babe (apologies for the term, but it conjures the right image): mine held a magnifying glass and sported a pitying smile; the other, eyebrows raised, false eyelashes fluttering, had an expression indicating shock and awe. As I chuckled, the old guy using the adjacent pot glanced at me and smiled: "Well, it's bleedin' cold out there, innit?"

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