

**TT No.30: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 19th October 2013; **Harborough Town** v Cleethorpes Town; FA Vase First Round; Res: 0-5; Att: 67; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (28pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

**THE HOP:** Hobson's choice. We were visiting Hinckley-based friends for a couple of days therefore potential sporting targets were limited by range and time. I did most of the worthwhile Leicestershire football grounds during the three (unspeakably long) years I lived in neighbouring Lincolnshire, further reducing my options. This was a Vase tie, a favourite competition, but it didn't promise much. Harborough, bottom of the United Counties League Premier Division, had won just once all season; Cleethorpes, second in the Northern Counties East League First Division, had chalked up nine consecutive victories in all competitions. The outcome appeared inevitable - and I wasn't wrong.

**THE PLACE:** Years ago, I drove through Market Harborough a couple of times en route to Halifax Town games at Kettering therefore knew it to be an attractive place. My wife was so taken by its appearance, and so unenthused by that of the football ground, she backheeled the match and resolved instead upon an afternoon's shopping. She liked what she saw (and bought). Ideally, I'd have preferred an earlier arrival to do some sightseeing of my own but an unavoidably late departure knocked that on the head. In a nutshell, the town is affluent, boasts several historic buildings and is a bustling regional centre. Market Harborough is in foxhunting's heartland and its location on the Midland Main Line enables a fair proportion of well-heeled residents to commute into London.

**THE CLUB:** Pretty young, formed as a junior club in 1975, and a shining example of community involvement. It incorporates Harborough Minis, established in 2000. The first team, graduates of the Northants Combination, sits atop a broad-bottomed pyramid of sides going all the way down to under-fives. Veterans, girls and women are catered for. Harborough have been an FA Charter Standard Club since 2004. Martin Johnson, the former Leicester, England and British Lions rugby union forward, used to play football here.

Things have gone pear-shaped for the senior XI this season, their second in the United Counties League Premier Division, and there was a change of management team early in October. Gordon Kyle and Rob Dunion, former Corby Town, Rothwell Corinthians and Desborough Town bosses, are now jointly at the helm. In his programme notes, Kyle thanked everyone at Bowdens Park for their "fantastic welcome" but warned "a whole lot of joined-up thinking" needs to be done to "move the club forward". He purred over an "excellent youth infrastructure" and pledged he and Dunion were "here for the long haul". Their aim, he concluded, is to make Harborough "a force in the United Counties League and above". All the right noises, then. Or, more accurately, all the right clichés.

**THE GROUND:** The sort, I'm afraid, that if used as a blueprint for small clubs across Britain, will kill hopping stone dead. Harborough Town, based at this site off the A508 Northampton road since the early Nineties, are understandably very proud of Bowdens Park and its facilities, which in the main were funded by a £1m Football Foundation grant. Genial Trevor Brooking came along for the official opening. The large clubhouse is tidy, modern and undoubtedly impressive but for the grounds enthusiast there's very little to see that isn't dull, dull, dull.

Bowdens Park is a fenced-off section of a multi-sport complex about a mile south of the town centre. It is industrial estate and dreary new-build estate territory. There are two all-seat kit stands on the north side. The sole eccentricity is in the north-west corner: a wastefully-positioned area of cover. The clubhouse dominates the near (east) end. Spectators enter down its left-hand side. There are plastic dug-outs on the narrow south touchline, behind which is the floodlit ground of Market Harborough RUFC. The kick-and-clappers also have an enormous clubhouse - and little else. Their first XV was at home. The usual rugby union exhortations could be heard. Visitors Tamworth (I later discovered) were beaten 22-20 in a Midlands Two East (South) fixture. Bowden Parks, the football ground, has hardstanding at the east end and along its north side. Floodlights, too. For me, the best aspect of the ground was the view of low hills to the east and south. Certainly not, however, somewhere I'd wish to come every week.

**THE WEATHER:** For autumn, extremely mild. Thick cloud parted occasionally to reveal bright sunshine. Thankfully, forecast torrential rain did not strike until we'd got to Husbands Bosworth - a delightful village - on the drive back to Hinckley, over which arched a double rainbow.

**THE PEOPLE:** The two guys manning the spectator entrance could not have been friendlier. "Hello, thanks for visiting us today, admission is £5 and programmes are £1. Oh, team-sheets are free. Groundhoppers like to know who's playing." Take a breath! Once inside the ground, visiting officials from Cleethorpes were happy to chat - and told of plans (unknown to me) of returning within a couple of years to their previous HQ, the Linden Homes Ground. They expect planners to OK a new stadium. There were a few other hoppers in attendance, including a guy who had come all the way from Shotton (near Chester) on the train and a couple hailing from Solihull. I took pity on the former and gave him a lift to the railway station after the game, sparing him a mile's walk.

**THE GAME:** Never, from the opening minutes, a doubt that Cleethorpes would win but they took some time to secure their passage into the second round. The visitors created what few chances there were in the first half. Harborough, not helped by an erratic young goalkeeper, were all over the place at the back. Somehow, the hosts kept it goalless until half-time. After that, the traffic was of the one-way variety. Marc Cooper (47mins), Nathan Emson (50mins), top scorer Jonathan Oglesby (66mins), Reece Newell (87mins) and Lee Stevenson (88mins) all found the net. Steadier finishing would have produced an even bigger margin of victory. Home keeper Giles Glen redeemed himself at the death with a brilliant reflex save to deny Oglesby a second. Harborough, painfully restricted but game

nonetheless, never looked like scoring. Cleethorpes, by contrast, played some lovely stuff. Once their rapid pass-and-move strategy clicked, the Owls looked dangerous every time they got near the home penalty area. I was bemused by the official attendance of 67. Near full time, I counted getting on for 120!

**THE PROGRAMME:** Flattered to deceive: a glossy, full-colour shell, including a generic cover and static contents, with a photocopied, game-specific insert. The outer casing ran to 20 pages, the bland (in every respect) innards to eight. An issue very much in the style of lower league rugby union club programmes.

**THE VERDICT:** A tick. That's it.

04/20