

TT No.50: Andy Gallon - Thu 26th December 2013; **Basingstoke Town v Farnborough; Conference South; Res: 4-0; Att: 447; Admission: £12; Programme: £2.50 (52pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.**

THE HOP: Remember when referees had (or were allowed to exercise) some common sense? I'm beginning to forget - it seems so long ago. Southern League Fleet Town was my intended Boxing Day sporting destination to enliven a Christmas with the in-laws. The Calthorpe Park pitch was passed fit at 10am but, mindful nothing is certain until the match referee has set foot upon it, we departed in good time. On arrival, we discovered the pitch well grassed and, save for a muddy patch in one penalty area, in decent condition. Fleet officials were well into their preparations by the time the match referee rolled up. The moment he daintily prodded a stud in the offending penalty area, I could tell he didn't fancy playing. He tried a few penalty kicks which, if nothing else, suggested he (like so many young refs these days) had never actually played football. His decision, 45 minutes before kick-off, to postpone was met with disbelief by both managers. I felt sorry for the groundsman, who had been working on the pitch since first light. At least when referees like this are done with killing non-league football, they can return full-time to their banal - and in no way dangerous - employment of dotting Is and crossing Ts as accountants, sundry administrators and schoolteachers. Fortunately, I had a back-up option and an 80mph dash along the M3 saw us arrive at Basingstoke Town 20 minutes ahead of their Hampshire derby with Farnborough. This truly was a visit from the Ghost of Christmas Past. The recent past. As recent as 2012. I went through the same process last Boxing Day thanks to another farcically late postponement at Northern League Marske United. Crazy. I say this to referees: you are being paid to attend so, if there is any doubt about a game going ahead, have the decency to get early to the ground and make a quick decision. Then, if the match is postponed, everyone can get on with something else, not necessarily groundhopping, as expeditiously as possible.

THE PLACE: From what little we saw, Basingstoke is a typical New Town: dual carriageways, roundabouts, retail parks and half-hearted landscaping. Probably offers easy parking and badminton, too. A home to the living dead.

THE CLUB: Basingstoke Town were formed in 1896 following a merger of Aldworth United and Basingstoke Albion. Hants Ironworks joined the party in 1909. Via the Hampshire League (1901), Southern League (1971) and Isthmian League (1987), Town became founder members in 2004 of Conference South, where they have remained. Put as succinctly as that, their history is pretty uneventful, isn't it?

THE GROUND: Disappointing. The Camrose is dowdy, dilapidated and characterless. I'd read somewhere that Basingstoke had revealed an intention to relocate but the lad in the souvenir shop said talk of a move to a 5,000-seat stadium had all but ceased. Another victim of the economic downturn, no doubt. Town (or 'Stoke) have played here since 1946. The land was gifted to them by William Ewart Berry,

Viscount Camrose of Hackwood Park. He made his money in national and local newspapers having grown up in Merthyr Tydfil. His generosity is reflected in the ground's name. The Camrose sounds pleasant but is not. Tucked behind Brighton Hill Retail Park (Toys R Us, a monument to the crappiness of modern Christmas, towers over the main stand), it is a purely functional set-up. The main stand, tall and boxy with a raised seating tier, reminded me of the one at Hull Kingston Rovers RLFC. The comparison speaks volumes. There are simple covers behind one goal, at the rear of the popular side and next to the main stand. All terracing - should it merit the flattering description - is shallow. The Camrose is unsatisfactory for the standing spectator; one is either too low down or too far back. There is barely a crush barrier in the place. The record attendance, 5,085, was set in 1997 for an FA Cup first-round replay against Wycombe Wanderers. How many present, were able to see any of the action, I wouldn't like to speculate.

THE WEATHER: Despite a lack of wind, it got decidedly chilly once the sun set. At least it was dry, a hugely welcome meteorological development after pre-Christmas tempests had blitzed the fragile Home Counties.

THE PEOPLE: Lifeless. Not sure whether it was the effects of Christmas (and all the unwelcome nonsense it brings) or a symptom of living in a place as dull as Basingstoke. Farnborough, just 15 minutes down the M3, brought virtually no fans with them. Atmosphere-wise, this was the deadest Boxing Day derby I've witnessed. My wife got talking to the bloke next to her in the half-time queue for tea. He turned out to be a voluble member of the God Squad. My wife is a committed atheist, and told him so. At least the resulting debate passed the time during an interminable wait for refreshment.

THE GAME: Uninteresting. The outcome was decided by the 34th minute, when Basingstoke led 3-0. Farnborough were hopeless, especially at the back. The visitors did create three good chances just before half-time but failed to take any. Basingstoke hit the woodwork three times after the break and had to wait until the last minute for new signing Louie Soares (sounds like a skin complaint) to complete the scoring. Pick of the goals was the second, netted in the 14th minute by official man of the match Manny Williams. He drilled a low shot across diminutive keeper Sam Freeman and the ball found the net off the inside of a post. Freeman looked vulnerable throughout but did make a couple of good saves near the end. With better finishing, Basingstoke could have had 10.

THE PROGRAMME: Lousy cover, muddled content, careless editing and poor design. Images without captions, of which there were several, I find particularly irksome. At £2.50, very over-priced. Sold to me, oddly enough, by a teenage girl who revealed she had an aunt living in the Pennine village, Greetland, in which I grew up. It's a small world.

THE VERDICT: Better than nothing but not by much.