

TT No.18: Keith Aslan - Sat 4th October 2014; **Earlswood Town** v Knowle; Midland Combination League Division 2; Kick-Off: 15.00; Result: 3-2; Admission: £3; Programme: £1; Attendance: 24 (23 home, 0 away & 1 neutral).

If it's possible to fall in love with an inanimate object (and Andy Carrolls fiancé would probably say it is) then I have fallen head over heels for Earlswood Towns ground. What can you say, fully enclosed, surrounded by glorious countryside (the word picturesque appears at regular intervals in the programme) with an attractive wooden building straddling the halfway line containing the changing rooms and spacious tea bar, with an overhang that would comfortably accommodate the entire attendance if the weather turned naughty. It is in the proverbial "middle of nowhere" and yet is just a five-minute walk from a station. The Lakes is the one you want, (not Earlswood) on the Birmingham to Stratford railway, precociously called the Shakespeare line, although I doubt he ever travelled on it, The Lakes is a request stop, so you have to inform the guard (train manager/senior conductor?) that you wish to get off otherwise the train will go sailing through without stopping.

The Lakes station is so called because, and this won't come as a surprise, it's close to a group of large man-made lakes which is a popular haunt for day trippers from Birmingham. Set in woodland it is a tranquil spot for a pre. match stroll, spoilt only by loads of people fishing (Is the collective noun - an angle of fishermen?) I've never quite seen the point of spending all day seeing how many fish you can murder, but I suppose anglers would have a job getting their heads round what I do. Left out of the station takes you to the lakes, right to the ground. Having previously spoken to the secretary, he volunteered to save me a programme, and on announcing myself at the gate, ignoring the pile of programmes on the table, the gateman delved into the back of his hut and produced one with a colour cover for me. All the rest were black and white. I felt like royalty. Indeed, everybody connected with the club took time out to chat with me, they are very hopper orientated here, and I signed the visitors guest book, noting the many well-known names that had gone before me.

I had a long chat about the club's bizarre decision to groundshare for the past 5 seasons. They had played their home games at Pilkington XXX, Studley and latterly Bromsgrove Sporting, everywhere but Earlswood and I just don't get it. Why when you have such a wonderful ground to play on would you want to spend vast amounts of money hiring out alternative grounds because of the floodlight requirement of the top division. It makes no sense to me, Premier of First division, what's the difference? Who cares? I was told that when they won the first division, the players said if the team didn't take promotion, most of them would leave. If it was my club, I would have given them a two -ord response, the second one being "off" Anyway, all's well that ends well (another Shakespeare reference for you) and last season Earlswood belatedly took voluntary demotion and are back home where

they belong. Due to a reorganization, technically they have gone down two divisions, a small price to pay in my opinion. One question I wish I'd asked is why they are called Earlswood Town. Earlswood isn't a town, it's barely a village!

The match was an action packed 95 minutes, plenty of goals, the obligatory fracas and sending's off, with the home side twice taking the lead and twice being pulled back before getting the winner. With time being tight for my train home it was good to see both sides lined up and ready to kick off the second half at precisely 4 o'clock. Not quite so good was the referee who kept everybody waiting for four and a half minutes so we kicked off at almost 5 past 4. Why did he need a 17-minute half time? What was he doing? If one of the teams had refused to come out for 5 minutes would he have reported them? Anyway, just about got my train, indeed the only downside to the day was the barbecue which ran out of burgers during the first half just as I was going for my seconds.

A truly delightful club that stands out even among the friendliness of non-league football. If you only ever go to one Midland Combination ground, make it this one.

04/20