

Saturday October 21st 2006 – League

Opposition : Harbury (Away)

The camaraderie in the Alcester changing room after the game summed up the feeling of all involved after a magnificent team effort brought the red and blacks a deserved first away win of the season in very wet and muddy conditions in the rural Warwickshire country side.

Injuries, work commitments and illness meant that the Kings Coughton men were forced into making six changes from the side that saw off Coventry Tech last week and they were dealt a further blow when one of the changes, Steve Lunn, was forced off with a recurrence of a recent knee injury after only a few minutes. He was replaced at tight head by Darren Stanton.

The game was still only a few minutes old when the heavens opened on an already damp pitch and any chance of real flowing rugby ended, which probably played in the visitors hands with ideal conditions for most of the old heads in the bigger Alcester front five.

Once the rain had died down to a drizzle, most of the assembled guests of the Harbury president, prized themselves away from the bar, to urge on the home side in a way that suggested that they had enjoyed the full hospitality at their annual lunch! The hardy few that had braved the conditions in the ten minute "monsoon" like period of the game, not surprisingly witnessed an error strewn, scrappy spell of the game, but as the rain slowed the game was actually very even for the opening half an hour with the home side just shading things territorially and having the best chances to score. Alcester full back Robbie Parker made two last man tackles to prevent a score, and one of the moments of the game saw Alcester lock Dave Marriott belie the conditions and his giant frame to hunt down the home fly half and make a try saving tackle as the Harbury "ten" headed towards the Alcester line.

As the visitors dithered following a tap ball back from a line out, they were penalised for handling in a ruck, which presented the first kickable penalty opportunity of the game for the home side, but whilst the fly half struck it well, the ball bounced off the right hand upright, and straight to Alcester player coach Steve Lea who set the ruck, allowing Matt Gwynn to kick the ball safely into touch to clear the danger. Gwynn, making his first start for two years, had an excellent game kicking from his hand, and he was helped by scrum half Dom Skinner, enjoying his best game in a red and black jersey, both in terms of service and with the number 9's intelligent clearances from the base of rucks and scrums.

Whilst Harbury had the benefit of a sizeable and vocal support, Alcester too had an excellent following and they witnessed the visiting pack, who were already on top, really start to turn the screw. The front row pinched a Harbury put in at a scrum, allowing Skinner to set his backs free just inside the home half. Some superb hands, well thought angles and clever interchanging of passes between a couple of the Alcester forwards and most of backs took the play near the Harbury line, and a move which completely belied the conditions was fittingly rounded off by skipper Scott Carmichael, playing today at outside centre. In the visitors changing rooms after the game, all involved agreed that this was one of the best team tries that Alcester had scored in recent times, particularly given the conditions not being conducive to intricate ball handling play. Carmichael's try was the only score of the half.

Turning around with the narrowest of leads, the visitors planned to keep play in the slight slope of a bottom left hand corner they were attacking, and thanks to some accurate kicking from a number of the back line, shown the way by Gwynn, that objective was achieved on numerous occasions. In addition, the red and blacks continued to be on top up front, and although they did have the better of the set phases, the conditions under foot meant that neither set of forwards could get any real purchase in the scrums, and the greasy ball resulted in mostly scrappy ball at the line out, but they were tidying well and were being used as battering rams in the loose by their half backs. Most of the pack took turns to good effect, to keep the play mostly in Harbury territory, however a further score eluded Alcester despite sustained pressure deep in their opponents territory.

In this second period, the home side struggled to put any passages of play together and to get out of their own half, and when they did get the ball in hand they were met by some fearless defence

by the Alcester men particularly in midfield where skipper Carmichael and his centre partner Brett Allard had much the better of their opposite numbers. This was underlined in the two scores that settled the contest. Carmichael made a determined break after his opposite number had spilled the ball, and when a series of drives took play near the line and created an overlap, the ball was moved to left wing Stuart Whitehead who had to wait what seemed like an age as the final pass appeared to hang in the air before it landed safely in his grasp for him to score.

As Harbury were forced to throw the ball around to chase the game, a further error in midfield in the closing stages allowed Allard to gather the loose ball inside the twenty two and race clear to the line. Kicking in the boggy conditions was extremely difficult and Gwynn couldn't match his kicking from hand, with his place kicking, as his third attempt was dragged wide.

The delight on the Alcester faces in the changing room at the end of the game said it all. An excellent win, in proper rugby conditions, to continue the buoyant mood that is emanating around the 1st XV.

They have a break from league rugby next week to turn their attention to the Powergen Vase, and a visit to little known Clee who operate at the same level as them.

Result : Harbury 0 – Alcester 15