

23/12/05 TT No.141: Mike Latham - Barrow (Conference North) in FAT 1

Thurs 22 Dec 2005: FA Trophy First Round: Barrow 2-1 Clitheroe. Attendance: 897; Admission: £8; 36pp programme: £1.50; FGIF Rating: 3*.

The disappointment felt when this tie, scheduled for last Sunday, was postponed because of a frozen pitch gave way to keen anticipation when the re-arranged date became known. With apparently no coaches available in the Clitheroe area for either Tuesday or Wednesday because of Christmas bookings a Thursday date was agreed- a real bonus for the football traveller just before Christmas.

Holker Street is a real, traditional football ground and it is not difficult to think back to when they hosted Football League games, though you have to be aged 40 or over to remember. Since then the Bluebirds have encountered more than their fair share of ups and downs though the naming of the road leading to the ground, Wilkie Way, is a reminder of the halcyon days they enjoyed under the late manager Ray Wilkie over a decade ago.

With a smart new stand on one side, with neat blue and white plastic seats that spell out 'Barrow' and a covered terrace on the opposite side, here is a ground of some substance. Though both ends have fairly shallow terracing and are uncovered they do give good close-up views of play. Behind one goal, to the right of the main stand, is the social club and the supporters' club is a short walk away. The club shop, situated in a hut to the right of the main stand, is a cut above the norm. The modest ground of Furness Rovers, with its excellent playing surface, members of the West Lancashire League adjoins Holker Street and the green illuminated sign of the nearby Asda superstore dominates the local sky-line. Consistently well supported, Barrow attracted a crowd of just under-900 on a mild and dry evening for new manager Phil Wilson's first match in charge. The fans are passionate but very knowledgeable and standing on the covered terrace it is easy to feel that you are in a football hotbed with great potential if the well-respected Wilson can inspire the team to regain their Conference place and even a tilt at regaining the League status they lost in 1972.

Easily found off the main road that leads from Ulverston into Barrow, and close to the railway station, Holker Street reeks of atmosphere. The playing pitch looks in immaculate condition, the floodlights are bright and a 36-page programme, full of interesting articles by Phil Yelland in particular, is good value for £1.50. The PA system is an object lesson with the announcer taking time to go through the team changes which he enunciates clearly and precisely without a need for a shorthand expert- other clubs take note. The mobile catering van on the popular side did a roaring trade with a good selection of fare, and reasonable prices.

Clitheroe, two levels below their hosts, took an early lead after a defensive mix-up as Barrow lost one of their central defenders, who was stretchered off with a serious-looking leg injury. In an open game full of chances at both ends, Barrow

started the second half brightly and clinched the tie with two goals in a three-minute spell though the issue was in doubt until the final whistle. It was a terrific cup-tie, played in a good spirit, with some good football from both sides. For a visit to an historic and authentic football ground, a trip to Holker Street comes highly recommended and don't be put off by the town's apparent isolation- the journey from J36 off the M6 is easily negotiated in three-quarters-of-an-hour stress-free driving and the train links aren't bad either with the line across the top bit of Morecambe Bay simply stunning for the panoramic views.

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