

TT No.221: *Mike Latham* - Tues 18 Apr 06: Northern League Div. 1: **Newcastle Benfield Bay Plastics** 1-1 Chester-le-Street. Attendance: 80 est.; Admission: £4; 40pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Even veterans of the Northern League hops will not have ticked off Newcastle Benfield and will have to make a special journey to the north east to add it to their lists. Benfield have had a rapid rise to prominence since joining the league in 2003 and after earning promotion in double-quick time now play in the top division of the Northern League, sitting in mid table.

Benfield's Sam Smith's Sports Ground is situated off Benfield Road in Walkergate, about five minutes' drive from the A19 and the Tyne Tunnel to the north of the river. A nearby retail park can make for traffic chaos in the area on a Saturday, I was told, but the roads were quiet on a pleasant Tuesday evening and my navigator succeeded brilliantly in locating the ground at the first time of asking. There was a large car park by the entrance.

The sports ground is part of a wider complex with Wallsend Rugby Union club also located on the site and a prominent building named Benfield Centre for Sporting Excellence a few hundred yards away. There is a social club where an excellent pint of Guinness could be obtained.

The soccer ground is flat and well maintained, the pitch looking in superb condition and the floodlights excellent. At the entrance are a number of temporary buildings housing the club offices and tea bar where a tasty steak pie and coffee with fresh milk added to the enjoyment of the evening. And what a service- a club official goes around the crowd handing out complimentary team-sheets! What a contrast to the surly and uncooperative responses one can get when asking club officials for team details- one recently even famously quoting the Data Protection Act as the reason for not giving me any information.

A neat fence has been erected around the pitch and down one side is a small seated stand and a covered standing area. The dug-outs are located on the opposite side of the ground and the rest of the ground is flat uncovered standing with huge nets erected behind both goals.

The programme is a fantastic effort and one of the best around- 40 pages packed with information and interesting and relevant articles. The two-page manager's column from Paul Baker was outstandingly written as was a two-page article on player John Watson. With good pen pictures of both sides and plenty of comment pieces and reviews it is an absolute credit to programme editor Stan Gate. In addition, a new club fanzine, an exceptional product of its type was also on sale as was the brilliant monthly league magazine Northern Gains. It was a Utopia for collectors and provided enough reading material for several days.

Benfield are clearly a club on the up and have excellent communication lines with their fans. They played some good football, too, Adam Scope particularly impressing with some Beckham-like crosses from the right. But the visitors, victorious 1-0 in the first meeting between the sides just three days earlier, also impressed and a draw between these two well-matched and well-disciplined sides was a fair result from a thoroughly enjoyable evening in good company. Highly recommended.

04/20