

TT No.224: *Dean McClean* - Saturday 22nd April 2006. Northern League Division One: **Ashington** 1-0 West Auckland Town. Att: 240; Admission: £4; 50pp Programme; £1; FGIF Match Rating: 2*.

Mention Ashington to any football fan and chances are that they will mention it as being the birthplace of brothers Jackie and Bobby Charlton. Steven Harmison, England Test Cricketer, was also born in the town. Newcastle United legend Jackie Milburn also played for the town's team.

In 1921, after finishing 7th in the North Eastern League, Ashington were elected to the Third Division (N) with fellow NEL rivals Darlington, Durham City and Hartlepool United. To align itself with fellow FL grounds Portland Park was upgraded to a venue capable of holding 20,000 people. It has had its pitch re-laid, new pavilion, tea room and large press box added. Three professionals were acquired from Manchester United, Leeds and Sunderland respectively. The team was now ready for its first season as a professional Football Club. The Colliers made a dream league debut as Dickinson fired the only goal to defeat Grimsby in front of 10,000. The curtain was sadly lowered on Ashington's nine-year stint as a FL Club in 1929, when a disastrous season saw them finish rock bottom and become one of the first clubs to miss out on re-election. A struggling team and the miner's strike saw crowds drop dramatically to around 1,000 towards the end of the season.

As the curtain was lowered on Ashington's FL career, so too it will be lowered on their historic Potland Park home at the end of this season. Arriving at the ground around 1.30, after an easy 3-hour drive from beautiful Lancashire, there was little to suggest that the people of Ashington actually cared (or knew) about the impending demolition of this historic venue. Not wanting to risk the catering on offer inside, I made an executive decision to venture into the town centre. An excellent sandwich and half an hour later, I was inside the Portland Park Clubhouse for a pint of Guinness and a chat with two friendly West Auckland fans.

With both teams having nothing to play for, apart from pride, this was a game poor in quality, littered with poor passing and shooting. The only goal of the game was scored by the Colliers after 21 minutes, a long ball over the top was met by the home forward. As the goal-keeper rushed out, the ball was lifted over his head into the empty net. Chances were missed by both teams at regular intervals. A bumpy pitch and a strong cross wind were hardly conducive for good, flowing football.

As much as Ashington is famous for its World Cup winning brothers, West Auckland is arguably more so. The famous 'World Cup' exploits which saw 'West' win the Sir Thomas Lipton trophy outright after a second trip to Italy in 1911 also caused them to experience extreme financial problems. This resulted in the club being disbanded in 1912 and the 'World Cup' being sold to pay off debts. In 1998/1999 the club had its most exciting season for many a year, as 'West' reached the FA

Cup 1st Round. Conference team Yeovil were taken to a replay at West Auckland, with Yeovil winning through courtesy of a penalty shoot-out.

A very sombre, rather low-key affair was the impression I got. A mere 240 turning up for Portland Park's last ever game. When you consider crowds of around 10,000 were a regular occurrence once over, this attendance was rather pitiful. On the perimeter fence there were many messages of support for the Colliers. Possibly the most fitting was "We're mental, we used to dig for coal".

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