

02/10/05 TT No.59: Mike Latham - Pontefract Collieries (NCELP) in FAV 2Q.

Sat 1 Oct 2005, FA Vase 2Q Round, Pontefract Collieries 2-3 Darlington Railway Athletic (att-100).

First impressions are often the lasting ones, particularly upon visiting a new ground. Maybe at Pontefract they proved to be mistaken ones.

The football club, members of the Northern Counties East League Division One, is situated down Skinner Lane, a narrow, rutted track that leads off the dual carriageway leading up to the town from J32 of the M62, opposite Pontefract Racecourse.

The racecourse is one of the best in England, a magnificent sweeping oval with an excellent view from the ancient grandstand. But the soccer club is less salubrious- the entrance makes the heart sink and the distant power station with its chimneys churning out steam and the nearby grassed over slag heap and railway embankment are a reminder that this is the grimy part of industrial West Yorkshire.

Compensation is provided by the ample parking once the rutted lane has been safely negotiated and the two teams could be seen warming up on a disused cricket ground just before the football ground.

Any traveller arriving at 2-30pm for a 3pm kick-off would normally expect that programmes would still be on sale.

Sadly, this was not the case here. Though £3 secured admission a request for a programme was met with a "sold out" reply from the taciturn gateman. Further enquiries revealed a grand total of 32 had been printed- surely still enough as the ground appeared to be deserted. Alas no. "Someone bought four, another three, another three," was the reply. On asking if there were any available from elsewhere the answer was a firm "no."

A real downer, especially as no effort is made to display the team-sheet and the ground announcer gives out the teams just once and then in such a hurried fashion even the most talented shorthand typist would have been struggling to keep up.

To make matters worse, the tea hut, manned by a most pleasant lady, runs out of pie and peas by kick-off and is then restricted to purveying hot drinks only.

Travellers arriving later were met with the same unhelpful response from club officials regarding programmes. As one had travelled from London, another from Exeter and another from Norfolk this was a most unacceptable situation.

The attendance, swelled by a few travelling supporters from Darlington, was around the one hundred mark on a sunny but blustery afternoon.

The main grandstand is quite impressive for this level, seating around three hundred in neat blue plastic seats of six rows. Underneath the stand is a small club house. Behind the goal at the cricket ground end is a small lean-to cover and the rest of the ground is hard standing behind a post and rail fence. On the far side, opposite the club house, is the railway embankment, bordered by trees with several balls being booted out of the ground at this side during the course of the afternoon.

The pitch was in good condition despite recent heavy rain, well grassed with a slight slope.

Darlington RA, newcomers to the Northern League this season, currently top the table but they got off to a painfully slow start and conceded within the first minute.

Thereafter they then dominated and scored two well-worked goals in the first half they spurned several gilt-edged opportunities. They were almost made to pay when the home side equalised with fifteen minutes remaining only for the visiting striker, apparently a prolific scorer at this level, to grab a late winner in injury time as he rifled home a corner to save everyone from the demands of extra-time.

Despite poor first impressions Skinner Lane was a pleasant enough place to watch football though the lack of programmes and team information grated. The game was hard fought and increasingly niggly but the visitors fully deserved to progress through to the next round of the FA Vase. Match rating: 2*.

03/20