

**TT No. 108: Andrew Gallon** - Fri 5th January 2007; **Darlington RA** v West Auckland Town; Northern League Division One; Res: 0-0; Att: 200 (est.); Admission: £3.50; Programme: £1 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

Hurrah! A happy juxtaposition at last: one of my irregular Fridays off coincides with one of the Northern League's occasional Friday night fixtures - at one of the few venues I've still to visit. Five years spent working on Teesside in the 1990s gave me the opportunity to become a regular supporter of this famous old competition, travelling the length and breadth of Harry Pearson's 'Far Corner', where football is indisputably the main preoccupation of the population. To outsiders, referring to the game in the North East as a religion may seem glib. But, having lived there, I can confirm it really is so. Other sports - and little else in life - don't really get a look-in.

Darlington Railway Athletic, whose history is almost as chequered as the industry which spawned them, are relative newcomers to the Northern League, though the original club were members between 1919-25. The present club were formed in 1993-4 and have come a long way in a short time. Improvements on the pitch have been matched by the pace of work on their smart Brinkburn Road ground, enabling them to climb into the top division of the Northern League via the Darlington & District and Wearside Leagues. Located in the pleasant Cockerton district of north-west Darlington, it is a tidy set-up. The ground is part of a sports complex - common in the region - which also hosts cricket, rugby union, bowls and unusually) shooting. Through the turnstiles, the social club - of a rather spartan design - is a mixture of single and two-storey buildings in the near right-hand corner. To the left is the Paul Adamson Memorial Stand, dedicated to a former first-team striker and reserve-team manager. The sturdy steel construction covers four rows of red tip-up seats but has seven roof supports, making viewing a problem. The side to the right is open and flagged, with the cricket pitch beyond a low wooden fence. The flags continue round to the far end, with portable building dressing rooms in the bottom right-hand corner and a rather fragile-looking stand behind the goal. It shelters a few steps of wooden terracing and an area of hard standing. The left side features a venerable gem of a stand, fashioned from wood and corrugated iron. It is very small and low, and rendered all but redundant by the siting of bulky dug-outs almost in front of it. To the rear of this side looms a red-brick retirement home, with many of the residents' windows enjoying a marvellous view of the pitch. There are four slim floodlight pylons on each side, topped by large bulbs which, when in use, leave some rather large areas of shadow.

The visitors are RA's near-neighbours West Auckland Town, whose claim to fame is being the winners of the Sir Thomas Lipton Trophy - aka the 'First World Cup'. RA have struggled all season and won just twice in the last 18 games, whereas West are up near the top. However, they have six players out and claim to be down to the proverbial bare bones for this derby. Friday games appear to be a big hit with

members of the Northern League's tight-knit community and a crowd of about 200 - including a good number of travellers - is well above the hosts' average. Unfortunately, it is not the most distinguished of contests on a sticky surface. There is much to enjoy that characterises the Northern League - robust challenges, wholehearted enthusiasm, salty banter between the players and dry comments from a knowledgeable crowd - but no goals, though both teams have chances to win. West generally have the better of things. Darren Kokes sees a weak effort cleared off the line by Nick Harrison, Leigh Grant forces a diving save from Nicholas Farrell, Dale Jardine wastes a couple of one-on-ones and Brian Fairhurst volleys wide near the end when it looks easier to score. RA, too, have their moments. Michael Chiu goes close with both head and boot, while James Chapman and Michael Carter blaze over from promising positions. But the ultimate thrill of a goal is not forthcoming and the final whistle on a perfect evening for football prompts a collective sigh from the chilled crowd. Still, RA won't be too disappointed. It's a good point against opposition who trimmed them 5-1 in August and the size of the gate pleases secretary Martyn Jackson, who revealed his phone hadn't stopped ringing all afternoon with people seeking confirmation the match was going to beat the recent soggy weather.

Northern League programmes seem to improve year on year, and RA's is a good one, with plenty of reading and all the required statistics. Access to the ground is also straightforward. Take the A68 turn (junction 58) off the A1 and head into Darlington on West Auckland Road. Just before the Brown Trout pub on the right, turn left down Brinkburn Road and the ground is 400 yards on the left. It's street parking for all but there's plenty of it and, being a nice neighbourhood, your car will be fine.

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