

TT No. 159: Mike Latham - Saturday 24 February 2007: Northern League Division One: **Consett** 2-1 Bedlington Terriers. Attendance: 160 (headcount); Admission: £4; 44pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

It may not be part of the pyramid but the Arngrove Northern League certainly knocks spots off many of its competitors when it comes to promotion and professionalism.

Take a rainy Saturday in February for example. With games intermittently falling foul of the weather the Northern League's postponement hot line comes into its own and though four fixtures have succumbed the name of Consett is not among them. Just to make sure a 'phone call on reaching Barnard Castle elicits a cheery response from the ground- "The game's definitely on, there are no problems." So, it is all systems go to Consett.

The only problem is finding the ground on reaching the town. The first three people randomly selected share blank faces, but happily the fourth is going to the game himself once his shopping is done and his directions are impeccable- turn right by the council buildings and then left into the leisure centre car park and the Belle Vue ground is facing you.

It's a distinctive ground with a red brick stand, festooned in advertising boards, the main feature. The rest of the ground reminds me of Salford City- vast, open spaces backed by a breezeblock fence behind the grassy banks. Talk about potential- there is the room here to build a 60,000-capacity stadium and still have some space for a bijou apartment block or a supermarket.

Consett are a go-ahead club with a thriving junior set-up that encompasses no less than 25 teams. And, with the backing of a major sponsor, they are seemingly intent on forging a pathway through the pyramid, joining fellow Northern League clubs Durham City and Newcastle Blue Star in the Unibond First Division next year.

To do so would leave behind the Northern League and this clash against Bedlington Terriers, the fallen giants of the league, may be the last league game between the clubs. The Terriers, perennially FA Vase go-getters and who have made a place in the top three of the League, a permanent fixture almost folded in the close season when their financial backer departed. Happily, they survived but at a price- they are rooted to the bottom and face a demotion to the second division (the Northern League, and more power to their elbow, still operate a first and second division instead of the ludicrous Premier Division adopted by other leagues and with an even more ludicrous example provided by the Supreme and Premier Divisions of the Central Midlands League. Anyone who watches any CML football would do well to find anything fit to justify the label of 'supreme' in my experience.)

Consett, a town of around 27,000 people built high on the edge of the Pennines, was once the cradle of the British iron and steel industry in the 17th and 18th

centuries. The reputation lives on in the club's nickname of the Steelmen, formerly the Ironworkers. Nowadays the town is more famous for its vibrant night-life.

The Belle Vue Park ground, home since 1948, is an atmospheric venue, especially under the leaden grey skies of a February afternoon. The imposing main stand, which also houses the dressing rooms and a small social club, has around 400 seats, more than enough to accommodate the attendance this afternoon, a good few having travelled with the Terriers. With an impressive terrace in front this side of the ground affords the best view of the game though elsewhere there is plenty of room to lounge back and enjoy a committed and interesting game. On the far side is the skeleton of a disused stand and the refreshment bar is situated at one corner and does a roaring trade, though its mince beef pies, heated up in a microwave, are unlikely to win any awards for their culinary excellence.

The programme though is an excellent production, especially as it is supplemented by a free four-page newsletter. Club secretary Ian Hamilton pens a fine piece and offers a free text and telephone service to supporters advising of postponements- what a service!

Bedlington belied their lowly league position and could have easily been three or four-up at the break but for the fine goal-keeping of Craig Turns. And after the half-time interval was extended by ten minutes to allow for a replacement official after the referee pulled a hamstring, Consett made them pay. Striker Andy Appleby scored twice, the first after a goalkeeping blunder to help show that departed prolific striker Micky Mackay (who has joined Hartlepool) may not be as badly missed as first thought.

Bedlington fight back, eventually converting good approach play but ironically their scorer, as well as Appleby are both red-carded in separate incidents by the replacement referee, who had run the line in the first half, who is kept busy to the end.

Fourth-placed Consett shaded it 2-1 but the Terriers were the best side for much of a fluent and interesting contest on a soft but well grassed pitch.

At half-time I bump into the man who gave me directions in the coffee queue. He is looking forward to Consett facing the sides in the Unibond First but fears that the club will incur substantial extra costs, particularly in travelling, for no extra financial return and he will be sad to leave behind the camaraderie of the Northern League. He also thinks that many new players will have to be recruited for Consett to survive in their new surroundings. He cites the problems faced by Bishop Auckland and Spennymoor in trying to make the transition.

Long term Consett have designs on a new ground but their Belle Vue home is certainly capable of making the step-up to Unibond football given a few amendments along the way. Whether that will be the right step for the club is another matter.

