

TT No.249: Mike Latham - Saturday 5 May 2007: Wearside League. **Birtley Town** 2-0 Whitehaven Amateurs. Admission: £2; 24pp programme: £1; Attendance: 180 (h/c); FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

The Wearside League has only 17 clubs in membership though generally finishes later than many other leagues, fixtures running towards the end of May. This has again been the case this season and the clash of the top two sides in a potential title decider made for a 'must see' game on a beautifully sunny Saturday afternoon in early May.

Birtley Town, who achieved the coveted FA Charter standard a few years ago, have recently been admitted into the Northern League for the 2007/08 season so this is an ideal chance for them to finish in style though the visit of Whitehaven provided a stiff test. Whitehaven started the game three points behind their hosts with each team having three games left to play.

The three Cumbrian members of the league, Whitehaven, Cleator Moor Celtic and Windscale traditionally finish their season playing a backlog of games though this time the fixtures seem to have been completed quicker than last when the final league game was played on 31 May.

With the Northern League having no fixtures the attractive nature of this game attracted a crowd far in excess of the norm to the impressive Birtley Sports Complex. A headcount midway through the first half revealed a total of around 180, including several seasoned travellers, four of them having made the rail journey northwards from London.

Birtley is a small town south of Gateshead and close to Chester-Le-Street, best known perhaps as the location of The Angel of the North statue that towers above the A1. Easily reached by road from J63 of the A1, located south of the town off the A167 road, opposite the swimming baths and next to a small industrial estate, the ground has undergone great changes as hard-working club officials have helped attain the necessary ground grading for promotion.

Though Birtley, the location for a number of engineering works and an ordnance factory, is heavily industrialised the ground is quite scenic, tree-lined on two sides with a small stand and covered standing area backing onto the main railway line at the far end of the spacious complex. The rest of the ground is open standing behind a post-and-rail fence and a heavily fortified social club, also housing the dressing rooms, stands behind the nearside goal. A well-stocked tea bar did brisk business.

A friendly club official manned the admission gate where the ridiculously cheap price of £2 gained admission. A decent 24-page programme was good value for a further £1. This contained some interesting statistics and was fully updated for Birtley's game against Wolviston held three days earlier- no mean feat for a

programme editor in the midst of a run of nine successive home games. A hard standing walkway has been constructed from the entrance by the side of the football pitches and grassed athletics track that lead the way towards the football ground a couple of hundred yards away but with the ground firm it was an easy task to walk across the grass and take up a ringside view.

Whitehaven began slowly, conceding two goals inside the opening eleven minutes- the first a looping header, the second a fine shot after a forward cut in from the right. Thereafter the visitors had perhaps more of the play and were denied by some fine goalkeeping on more than one occasion. A well contested game, played in a good spirit was marred by the sending-off of a visiting defender for an alleged head-butt in the second half.

Birtley's win made them firm favourites to lift the title, which they can clinch by taking a point from their home game against Cleator Moor on 9 May. Their final home game is the League Cup Final against Teesside Athletic on Friday 25 May, with a 7pm kick-off. With Whitehaven having ambitions to make ground improvements necessary for promotion these two sides could one day meet again in the Northern League. A visit to this friendly and well-appointed club comes highly recommended and their progress in the Northern League will be watched with interest.

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