

TT No.269: Andrew Gallon - Fri, 25th May 2007; **Birtley Town** v Teesside Athletic; Wearside League; Res: 1-2; Att: 325 (est.); Admission: £2; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Nice to finish the season with a tale of the unexpected. Birtley Town have dominated the Wearside League in 2006-07 - much as the 65-foot high neighbouring Angel of the North sculpture towers over the Team Valley landscape - and went into this Challenge Cup final, their sixth on the trot, confident of retaining the trophy. Opponents Teesside Athletic, comparative Wearside League rookies from Redcar, had finished just above mid-table, while Birtley won the title by eight points in clinching promotion to the Northern League and had been handed home advantage for this showpiece match.

So, the perfect opportunity for the hosts to bid farewell to the Wearside League by completing the double and showing off their shiny new facilities to a bumper crowd and the league's out-in-force blazer brigade. Thing is, the underdogs, hammered 6-1 by Whitehaven Amateurs in the Monkwearmouth Charity Cup final on May 12, weren't content to be fall guys. Against the odds, Teesside won - and deservedly so.

The visitors capitalised on the tonic of taking a 24th-minute lead after a goalkeeping howler and dug in to defend heroically. They had a stroke of luck just before half-time when a Birtley header came back off the inside of a post and bounced along the line into their keeper's arms. Teesside always posed a threat on the break and doubled their advantage 10 minutes into the second half after the home keeper again failed to distinguish himself. The game was up and, sadly, Birtley, with just one defeat all season in the league, proved bad losers, littering the final half-hour with spiteful challenges and off-the-ball shenanigans. Their goal in stoppage time came too late to affect the outcome, to the delight of neutrals who were horrified by Birtley's lack of sportsmanship. Sour-faced Birtley did, however, get to lift a trophy on the night because the championship silverware was presented after jubilant Teesside had raised the Challenge Cup.

On this evidence, Birtley's team may not be ready for the step up to the Northern League. The posse of North East football sages around me certainly didn't think so. But the club's ground definitely is after a season of hard work off the field. Birtley, located in a shallow valley south of Gateshead, is one of a string of nondescript towns bypassed by the A1 and served by the meandering A167. The grandly titled Sports Complex is on the south side of a straggling, linear community, with its entrance opposite (appropriately, for this is a Bank Holiday weekend) a caravan showroom. The highlight of my drive north up the A1 was the discovery that a smashed caravan had been the cause of the 20-minute delay I suffered near Darlington. The driver (usual thing: white, middle class, middle aged; forlornly pondering the implications for his no claims bonus) had got himself into such a

pickle, he'd ended up in a splintered pile of wreckage on the hard shoulder, facing the oncoming traffic. Motorists were grinning at each other.

The premises of a steel stockholder and a pallet manufacturer flank the narrow lane leading up to the ground's entrance gates, through which the sudden sense of space is almost overwhelming. The football pitch is away across a large expanse of grass looking ideal for cricket but which is, in fact, marked out for athletics. A bumpy lane heads left to a neat, though small, gravel car park and on to the new dressing rooms and offices, a single-storey brick building in the south-east corner opened just this season. All it lacks is a bar, to the chagrin of the groups of fashion-conscious young lads in short sleeves, desperately trying to pretend a breezy evening was still as warm as the balmy afternoon preceding it. They were watching the game before taking part in whatever high jinks Birtley offers on a Friday night. The air was thick with the miasma of a hundred after-shaves.

A post and rail fence, along with a strip of concrete hardstanding, surrounds the pitch. The main spectator accommodation is on the west touchline, with a kit-built all-seater cantilever stand and a tin-roofed cover either side of breeze block dugouts. All are painted in the club's green and white colours. Very smart. Beyond is a water-filled ditch and the tall embankment of the Newcastle-Durham main East Coast railway line, which meant the match was played out to a background roar of clanking, growling trains. Trees, at this time of year in full leaf, give the ground a semi-rural feel and help mask the presence of industry at each end. It's amusing, I find, to speculate just what a factory produces from the way it looks. The gun metal sheds to the south give little away. There are ventilators, tanks, cylinders, the tinkle of running water and the hiss of escaping steam. Tantalisingly, an open door doesn't quite allow the eye to penetrate the gloomy interior. Empty wooden bobbins are piled up everywhere. Turns out the place makes electrical cable. The factory at the north end, surely the biggest employer in town, is, in contrast, a dead giveaway. Gaudy yellow plant equipment stands about awaiting delivery to eager customers.

Birtley's floodlights have gone up in the last two months and comprise three masts on either side. The club have one or two minor grading matters to attend to before embarking on their exciting new adventure. Though the Northern League may not be terribly highly regarded by most of the rest of the country, in this neck of the woods it remains a major target for the aspirational. For Birtley's players and officials, next season clearly cannot come soon enough. As I contemplate a football-free summer, I know just how they feel!

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