

TT No.81: Dean McClean - Sat 2nd December 2006; **Peterlee Town** v Newcastle University (Northern Alliance Prem Div.); **Billingham Town** v Dunston FB (Northern League Div. 1) and **Middlesbrough** v Manchester United (The Premiership).

Saturday 2 December 2006. **Peterlee Town** v Newcastle University; Northern Alliance Premier Division; Res: 0-2; Admission: £2; Att: 10; Programme; none; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

One of the many pleasures of being a Ground-hopper is the continual “stepping into the unknown”. What’s the ground like? What’s the programme like? What will the match be like? And so on...

Casually driving on the M62 on a truly glorious sunny winters day heading for our intended destination of Stamford, a cursory glance at this week’s TFT revealed that all games in the N.A. were to kick-off at 1-30pm today. After a brief consultation with my fellow traveller the decision was made to head North for Peterlee.

Another golden rule of ‘hopping would be not to judge a league before one has even visited a match in that particular league. After deciding to dip our toes into the possibly murky world of Northern Alliance League football, our expectations were admittedly quite low. How wrong we were!

Peterlee play their football at Eden Lane, a well-appointed ground in immaculate condition with stunning views of the North Sea. On entering the ground there is small covered stand painted dark blue, with Peterlee Newtown painted in white on the back wall in case the visitor forgets where he/she is. Further along the touchline is a block which incorporates the changing facilities and canteen, where hot and cold food was cheerily dispensed by the young tea lady, despite her suffering from a hang-over! The rest of the ground has hard standing with a small covered shelter in the far corner. The ground is in immaculate condition with no sign of vandalism or graffiti.

Arriving at the ground around 40 minutes prior to kick-off I decided to investigate the programme situation. A friendly club official informed me there was no programme today, but thankfully he had two recent editions on hand. Programmes are only produced for cup matches.

With the time at 1-20, 10 minutes before kick-off, and the entrance gate still firmly bolted, we were starting to fear a lock out. But thankfully the gate man came to our rescue and gratefully accepted our £2 admission fee. We were the first paying customers and the only two spectators on the ground FIVE minutes before kick-off!

Having had a dreadful season in the Northern League last, Peterlee finished rock bottom conceding a mammoth 155 goals along the way and were thus relegated to the N.A. The future looked bleak but a small band of dedicated volunteers helped

to stave off the threat of folding, and the decision was made to re-form and drop the “new” part of their name. It is a credit to Peterlee that they are still going at all, but once again they are struggling on the pitch. 2nd bottom with only 1 win and 6 goals all season. This game would provide them little respite as Newcastle Uni eased into a 1-0 lead at half-time.

At this point I will openly admit that I left at half-time. Shameful I know. A trip to this smart, well maintained ground comes highly recommended.

Northern League Division One: **Billingham Town** v Dunston Federation Brewery. Res: 1-1; Att: c75; Admission: £4; Programme: 32pp; £1; FGIF Match Rating: 2*.

With the two Billingham teams at home it was a tough choice as to which venue to visit. In the end I opted for the one which looked best on paper, 2nd v 7th. At half-time I was rather regretting my decision.

Billingham Town play at their well-appointed home off Bedford Terrace. The ground was easily reached in around twenty minutes from Peterlee. Time even allowing a brief visit to ex-Northern League club Shotton Comrades.

Billingham Town are a relatively young team as they were formed as late as 1967 by local men Tom Donnelley and Robbie Cushley. Tom, who played in Town's first match back in 1968, had been secretary for Billingham Town since its inception, until 200 when he gave up his post to become chairman of the club.

The club was originally known as Billingham Social Club but changed its name to Town in 1982 when it joined the newly formed Northern League 2nd Division.

Billingham Town is certainly an attractive ground of some substance. A large cantilever stand, built in 1981, provides excellent views of play and, more importantly, shelter from the bitter wind that was prevalent today. It also houses the dressing rooms underneath. The rest of the ground is well maintained, with hard standing all around the perimeter. A small covered terrace is situated opposite the main stand.

To the side of the main stand sits the tea-bar, where hot and cold food and drink was sold at very reasonable prices by the friendly catering staff.

On paper, this top-ish (2nd v 7th) of the table encounter looked a mouth-watering prospect, unfortunately is mostly anything but. A strong wind hardly ideal for good football granted but both teams gave the impression of going through the motions, as a dire first half ended goal-less. With goals flying in left right and centre over the road at Synthonia, I was beginning to rue my decision. Thankfully the game came to life in the 2nd half as Billingham took a deserved lead. This seemed to kick Dunston into gear as they virtually dominated the remainder of the match and grabbed a deserved equaliser late on.

A trip to Billingham Town's smart, well maintained ground comes recommended.

FA Premier League: **Middlesbrough** v Manchester United. Res 1-2; Att: 31238; Admission: £31; 64 pp programme; £3; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Growing up as a child I couldn't help but have a peek at the presents under the tree, and I'm sure that I'm not the only one. Going past the turn off for the Riverside Stadium and not having a peek in was just not an option.

Arriving at a Premier League match when Man United are in town only seven minutes before kick-off isn't usually the best option. After eventually finding a parking spot in a less than salubrious part of town, my traveller friend and I tested our fitness levels and jogged over to the stadium. Two tickets were easily purchased at £31 each and we were seated having missed only ten minutes. It certainly is an eerie feeling to be outside a stadium when a match is in progress.

As a footballing side, Manchester United are surely one of the best. With their fast, slick possession football very pleasing on the eye. Chelsea may have had it all their way recently but I doubt if they will ever be as pleasing on the eye as Man United and Arsenal have been over the last decade.

Despite Middlesbrough's equaliser and Abel Xavier's header which hit the post, Man United completely dominated the game. Vidic and Scholes as impressive as anybody.

Middlesbrough moved to their current Riverside home from Ayresome Park in 1995. The stadium has a capacity of 35000 and is totally enclosed giving it a good feel and atmosphere. This ground, like many other new grounds, simply lacks character. It does however look magnificent from afar when illuminated on a dark winter's evening. Outside the stadium entrance you will find statues of two former 'Boro greats; George Hardwick and Wilf Manion along with the old entrance gates from Ayresome Park, which is nice touch with the club's long history.

Compared to other PL venues Middlesbrough has always been a friendly and welcoming place for to visit.

A tiring but very rewarding day indeed.

06/20