

TT No.82: *Mike Latham* - Sat 2 Dec 2006: Northern League Division One.
Billingham Synthonia 3-2 Ashington. Admission: £4; 40pp programme: £1; FGIF
Match Rating: 3*.

The town of Billingham, nestling north of Middlesbrough and just off the A19, is linked with the chemical industry and fittingly one of its two Northern League teams takes the name of an agricultural fertiliser.

Billingham Synthonia derives its appendage from a shortened name from Synthetic Ammonia, one of ICI's main products, and have been playing in the Northern League since 1945. Their name is frequently shortened to 'Synners' and there is a 'Synners Bar' at the ground. They were connected with ICI Billingham until 1994 when the ground was sold to new owners.

Located just off Central Drive, the main road into town from the A19, the stadium is to be found opposite a disused office block just after the third roundabout. Parking is easy on the road outside. If you take a left at the same roundabout and two lefts after the railway bridge you find your way to the ground of Billingham Town, also at home on the same afternoon in the same league, to Dunston Federation Brewery. It seemed strange that the footballing public of Billingham should be subjected to having to make a choice unless they only watch one team or the other and never the twain shall meet.

An impressive ornate main gate and cheerful welcome at the turnstile, with an informative 40-page programme, with excellent statistical content, on sale for only £1, made for initial reactions being extremely favourable. On entering the ground, the magnificent cantilevered stand is the main feature. When Synners moved to the ground in 1958 after leaving their Belasis Lane ground, the stand was the longest in the country at that time.

Though there is a running track around the perimeter, the stand's excellent sight-lines makes this less of a distraction than elsewhere. With ten terraced steps the view of the pitch is very good. It is standing room only apart from the seated area, located straddling the half-way line, with many green-painted stanchions to lean on. On a bitterly cold afternoon with a chill wind the stand was a welcome refuge.

Underneath the stand is the Synners Bar while a tea bar and the dressing rooms are also housed there. The other three sides of the oval-shaped ground are cordoned off so all the spectators gathered on the main stand side.

The playing pitch was immaculate, flat and well grassed, not surprising considering the ground also stages Middlesbrough reserve games. Although both teams were in the lower half of the table the action was fluent and fast flowing. Synners' leading scorer, Colin Iley, struck twice from close range just before half time and the impressive young striker Ben Hutchinson, on loan from 'Boro, added a classy third. But Ashington, who had opened the scoring, pulled a goal back with 15 minutes

left to set up an exciting finish to a game easy on the eye. A thoroughly enjoyable afternoon out.

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