

TT No.189: Andrew Gallon - Sat 9th February 2008; **Beeston St Anthony's** v Whitkirk Wanderers; West Yorkshire League Prem Division; Res: 3-1; Att: 45 (h/c); Admission: Free; Prog: 80p (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

Football has lost its soul. We've been told this repeatedly from the moment last week the loathsome Premier League finally revealed the full, nauseating extent of its greed and selfishness by announcing a proposal to play a round of fixtures in foreign cities from 2011. Money, money, money. The big clubs want - have always wanted - to cream off the lot and stuff everyone else. It's no surprise that since the Premier League came along, the lesser lights have struggled increasingly to make ends meet. Luton Town and AFC Bournemouth are the latest examples. Thankfully, there's much more to the Beautiful Game than the grasping ugliness of the fat cats and I'm happy to report after today's excursion to the grassroots - from the ridiculous to the sublime - that football's soul is alive and well. Hold off the undertaker. There isn't a corpse to be removed. Yet.

West Yorkshire League Premier Division club Beeston St Anthony's are a world away from the Premier League. Founded in 1921 as a church team, they run two open-age sides from their council-owned Beggars Hill ground which, ironically, is in the shadow of Leeds United's Elland Road stadium, a monument, if ever there was one, to over-ambition and financial mismanagement. The players pay for the privilege of turning out for Saints, who are kept going by a hardworking committee. A number of these gentlemen, many elderly persons who toil behind the scenes in their spare time are former Beeston players. The club is in their blood. It's a cliché and one easily said - but that's simply how it is.

Saints, like the Premier League, have big plans. Beggars Hill, located in an undeniably rough part of south Leeds where vandals think nothing of destroying in a moment what others have spent years building, is, even club officials admit, past its sell-by date. The site is isolated, there's no clubhouse, and parking, is non-existent. In the last round of grading, the ground propped up the Premier Division table. But the club hope in 18 months to move to a new home, also council owned, at Kings Fields in a grant-aided project costing in the region of £100,000. There will be state-of-the-art dressing rooms, three pitches (one full size, two for juniors) and possibly even floodlights, with facilities looking to meet Northern Counties (East) League standards. But that's all in the future. Beggars Hill's useful existence is not over yet and, in some respects, it will be a shame when it is. For this is a ground with a wonderful sense of place. Squeezed on to a shelf in the steeply rising land between Elland Road and Beeston Town Street, it commands a remarkable vantage point. Make sure you approach from a tarmac footpath to the side of a builder's yard on Sunnyview Gardens. Turn a corner and spread out below is a 180-degree cityscape. Now I know how Moses felt on Mount Sinai. Elland Road, a brooding, grey beast, is a couple of hundred yards to the left and the futuristic towers of expensive high-rise waterside apartments in the city centre to the right.

In its way, the view is as breath-taking as any in the West Yorkshire conurbation. And there's some stiff competition.

Delightfully, given this urban setting, access to the pitch is obtained either through a five-bar gate or over a stile. Behind, a grassy bank (the one you've just descended) climbs precipitously to row upon row of red-brick back-to-backs. We are Leeds, they shout. The pitch, a little undulating, is surrounded by a metal post and rail fence painted white. Around that is a barred wooden fence and a hedge. Spectator accommodation is the narrow grassy strip separating the two. There aren't any dugouts - they fell prey to wreckers several years ago. Trees edging the bottom touchline help give an enclosed feel to a largely open ground, though they do mask some of the magnificent vista, seen at its best on this sunny, clear afternoon. The main facilities are behind the near goal, beyond which is more grass and the semis of Wesley Street. The football provisions consist of green-painted oblong metal containers, all but one surrounded by a high steel fence, painted black, to deter undesirables. The first container is home to the groundsman's equipment and gives easy access to the aforementioned rustic gate. The others contain home and away dressing rooms, a toilet (singular!), a cubby hole for the match officials (who must get on very intimate terms when it comes to the post-match shower) and, at the bottom end, a sort of club room. This is a smashing place to linger. The walls are covered with photographs of teams from yesteryear and there is a montage depicting how the ground has developed. There are trophy cabinets, shelves of old programmes and books, a banner commemorating the club's 80th anniversary and a counter where you can buy non-alcoholic drinks. You're guaranteed a warm welcome. When I arrived, the chairman was stapling together the pages of the programme. Imagine that happening in the Premier League? Beeston St Anthony's are one of the few regular issuers in this league - and a commendable effort from editor and committee member Terry Rowe it is, too. Judging by the number of adverts, the community values the club. A veranda, of sorts, by the home dressing room provides the only cover, though the sturdy fence obscures the pitch.

There's always some comic element at this level of the game and the cabaret before today's derby with cross-city rivals Whitkirk Wanderers was provided by a stray dog. It delayed the kick-off and managed to puncture four balls with its fangs. Two of the balls belonged to the visitors, whose manager muttered darkly that this sort of nonsense is only to be expected in a place like Beeston. When the action began, onlookers were treated to a cracking contest. It was full blooded but free of spite, mostly sporting and generally well refereed by Martin Saville. Who needs the Premier League? Saints claimed the points because they knew how to finish. Whitkirk found home goalkeeper Brendan Wood an immovable object.

Fifteen minutes in and Beeston took the lead. Skipper Lee McGuire's cross-field pass picked out big Tony Garth (boasting black eye and beer gut, a target-man in every sense) and his angled volley was too hot for Liam Sutcliffe to handle, giving the alert Ryan Boden a tap-in. The Kirk equalised two minutes later when a loose ball dropped to Dale Dodsworth 20 yards out and, without hesitating, he drilled a

low shot into the bottom corner. The rest of the half belonged to the visitors. Dodsworth netted from a position one of the assistant referees deemed offside and Wood made three one-on-one saves to deny Dodsworth, Joe Fella and Graham Bingley. Whitkirk were to regret this wastefulness when Saints dominated the last half-hour. An unmarked Martin Fannon (63) was picked out at the back post by a Jason Bradley free-kick and headed a simple second. Sutcliffe made a great point-blank block to thwart new signing Matthew Newall. Danny Turner headed a firm Bradley prod off the goal-line and the Kirk keeper was there again to foil Richard Longfellow. In stoppage time, with Whitkirk committing men forward, Bradley broke down the right wing and crossed low for top scorer Lee Parker to side-foot the clincher high into the net. The visitors' bench had difficulty taking it in, though their synopsis of a match they claimed to have bossed didn't accord with my (neutral) assessment. Victory for Saints avenged a recent 7-1 home drubbing for a depleted XI by the same opposition in the county cup. No doubt it made less onerous the chore of taking the nets down.

This game, too, would have been the ideal tonic for anyone beginning to despair of professional football's less justifiable excesses. I've heard it said that the lower down the pyramid you go, the more fun you have. And the West Yorkshire League is so far down, I used to play in it. This was the perfect pick-me-up. Passion, commitment, loyalty, comradeship - it was all there. And not so much as a fiver to be seen. Beeston's officials told me they don't get many travellers visiting them these days. But this club are worth checking out, and with Beggars Hill on the condemned list, it's yet another trip which shouldn't be put off too much longer.

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