

TT No.201: Andrew Gallon - Sat 23rd February 2008; **Ashton Athletic** v Kirkham & Wesham; Vodkat Trophy S-F 1st leg; Res: 0-0; Att: 60; Admission: £3.50; Programme: £1.50 (28pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

There aren't many attractive grounds in the North West Counties League. The most appealing, in my book, enjoy high Pennine settings - Colne, Glossop North End, Bacup Borough and New Mills spring readily to mind. Sadly, Ashton Athletic's Brocstedes Park is down there with the grimmest. I really shouldn't have been disappointed. Only those attached by birth to the miserable segment of south-east Lancashire encompassing Wigan and St Helens can have anything particularly favourable to say about the area. Despite their name, Athletic do not play in Ashton-in-Makerfield but on the edge of neighbouring Bryn, a tired-looking community (more a set of traffic lights, actually) comprised largely of the county's hallmark red-brick terraces.

Bleak Brocstedes Park is in a semi-rural location next to the M6 motorway and equidistant from the better-known sporting venues of Haydock Park racecourse and the Three Sisters motorsport circuit. Access is down a potholed track off a minor road which narrows to a single car's width as soon as the last house disappears in the rear-view mirror. Pause before dropping into the confines of the ground because the view from here is as good as it's going to get. Beyond a heavily populated, industrialised plain, the West Pennine Moors rise broodingly, with Winter Hill and its battalion of telecommunications masts dominating the scene. The far horizon is filled by what could fancifully be dubbed the Pennine Massif, bringing to mind the gritty darkness of Blackstone Edge.

Through a disproportionately substantial gateway, you enter an unmade car park with the ground immediately ahead. The turnstile and clubhouse are over to the left, the timeworn rear wall of the tatty terrace cover in front and a second pitch, outside the perimeter fence, to the right. This really is in a sorry state. Moles have made a mess of the playing surface; the post and rail fence, falling to pieces; the dugouts vandalised and the stand no more than a rusty frame. Walking across it, I got dog poo all over my footwear. Brocstedes Park, though rather less than delightful, is at least better than this.

Ashton Athletic, set up in 1968 by Tommy Aspinall (hence their unusual Aspey's Aces nickname), were founder members of the NWCL but dropped out a couple of decades ago. They clambered up from the Manchester League at the end of last season to retake their place in the higher-ranked competition. The single turnstile leads to an area of flat concrete. To the left, a grey building with a pitched roof and the scars of several extensions sits on a plinth at an angle to the pitch behind a railing-fringed patio which provides the best view of the action. The near section is the small but tidy social club, whose walls are decorated with team photographs from previous seasons. Two TV screens were showing the Birmingham-Arsenal game, so there was plenty of ammunition for pre-match conversation. Amidships

are toilets and a hatch serving refreshments and souvenirs. The far end is taken up by the dressing rooms, with the players trotting down steps and through a black metal 'cage' tunnel to reach the patchy pitch, which slopes down slightly towards the motorway. Beyond, in the north-western corner, is a tiny kit stand offering four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats. In an idle moment, I counted 53. Again, this is built on a raised portion of concrete, with ramps giving access for the disabled. To the right of the entrance is a covered terrace running from the halfway line to the south-western corner. Close inspection reveals it to be rusty scaffolding topped with metal and what seems to be asbestos sheets. The far third is fenced off, weed-choked, out of use and forlorn. The near third shelters five steps, painted yellow on their outward edges. The home dugout, a metal sheeting-topped breeze block structure, is on the halfway line on this side.

A hardstanding path provides the rest of the spectator accommodation. There are broad strips of grass behind the north goal and the east side. Both are used for warm-ups and training. The away dugout is opposite the home version and of a completely different design, being fashioned from white boards. To the north-west, a tussocky field, used neither for grazing nor crops, rises to a cottage in the process of a Grand Designs-style renovation and a couple of lonely farms. The grass to the east runs up to a barred wooden fence and a line of trees, behind which traffic on the M6 roars angrily and incessantly by. The south end is extremely narrow, with the hardstanding squeezed in between the white painted post and rail pitch barrier and the concrete panel perimeter fence. Netting suspended from metal poles is designed to waylay wayward shots. Beyond is the second pitch and then grassy waste ground leads up to red-brick terraces and the splendid Catholic Church of Our Lady Immaculate, built from an interesting salmon-hued stone. It's size and position bring to mind the one close to the rugby league and speedway stadium at Workington. The floodlights are masts. There are three per side, with five lamps mounted on the middle ones and three on each of the others. Happily, they were not switched on at any point. Spring is clearly coming!

On paper, this game looked like being a cracker. The chap on the turnstile thought so, too, telling me cheerily: "It'll be a good one today." Kirkham & Wesham, West Lancashire League graduates and, like Ashton, newcomers this season to the NWCL, have been in tremendous form. A run of 13 straight wins had catapulted them up to second position in Division Two and into the last eight of the FA Vase. Ashton, though not quite so hot of late, had done enough to stand a place below their opponents in the table. And yet what a stinker these two teams served up. Granted, a stiff breeze didn't help but this really was extremely poor stuff.

Just four incidents to note in a first half as dull as the weather. Home keeper Joe Clayton saved well when an Allan Jackson cross found the energetic Mike Horsfall unmarked at the back post and then Mark Wane raced on to a long ball from Kirkham & Wesham skipper Dougie Shaw but shot weakly after rounding Clayton, allowing Paul Bohannon to clear off the goal-line. Ashton stopper Chris Lawton saw a close-range header nodded off the line by Jackson and 18-year-old winger Dave Sherlock, described in the excellent, full-colour programme as "in-form", fired

wastefully wide after a characteristically elusive run. Apart from these isolated moments of excitement, most of the interest centred on the away fans moaning incessantly about the lack of meat pies and the nonsense being spouted from the home bench. Example: "Squeeze and drop. We're too square". Where do they get this guff? Maybe football coaching courses are like a lot of others in different areas of working life - you learn a lot of meaningless jargon and not much else.

If anything, the second half was even more tedious, though Kirkham & Wesham did look sharper up front with the half-time introduction of pacey substitute Matt Walwyn, who would have had more impact if not left in splendid isolation. Still, hammering high balls to a couple of towering centre-backs is never going to leave you with much change, is it? The ball did hit the back of the net a couple of minutes short of the hour but Walwyn, who slipped a low shot past the advancing Clayton in a one-on-one, was deemed offside as he latched on to a lovely pass from Paul Eastwood in midfield. Ashton finished the stronger but couldn't find the decisive touch. The impressive Sherlock blazed a 12-yard volley over the crossbar and then saw visiting keeper Peter Summerfield get everything behind his well-struck 18-yarder. In stoppage time, Steve Wallace crossed deep but substitute Paul Townshend, having lost his marker cleverly, headed wide from eight yards. I suppose at least I could say the second leg of this semi-final on March 8 is left evenly poised. Kirkham & Wesham, however, will need to raise their game considerably if they are to dispose of Coventry Sphinx at Kellamergh Park this weekend in the FA Vase quarter-finals.

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