

**TT No. 204: Andrew Gallon** - Tue 4th March 2008; **Kirkham & Wesham** v Blackpool Mechanics; Vodkat League Division Two; Res: 1-0; Att: 131; Admission: £5 (incl. 32pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

After the Lord Mayor's Show. Well, this game certainly felt like it. Three days earlier, Kirkham & Wesham had lured a record 1,093 crowd to Kellamergh Park for a thrilling FA Vase quarter-final against Midland Alliance club Coventry Sphinx. It finished 3-3 after extra-time. How does a bread-and-butter North West Counties League Division Two match, albeit a derby between two in-form teams harbouring promotion hopes, compete with that? It couldn't. This fixture did, however, produce a few noteworthy statistics. The crowd was a league record for Kirkham & Wesham, by winning the hosts extended to eight their sequence of consecutive league victories and defeat was Mechs' first on the road since September.

The story of a rather humdrum match is quickly told. The home side dominated the early stages but a couple of goal-line clearances to deny Phil Blackwell and new-boy Ritchie Allen and some impressive saves from visiting keeper Jamie Cook kept the contest scoreless. Blackwell broke the deadlock six minutes into the second half, nodding high into the net at the back post after Michael Horsfall's cross from the right had been inadvertently flicked on by Mechs defender Paul Carroll. Much of the rest was typical derby stuff. Energetic but uninspiring. Mechs, despite describing some pretty patterns with the ball, offered little threat going forward and had to wait until the 80th minute to force a serious save out of big Pete Summerfield, who moved smartly to his left to clutch a header from Joel Cowell. Kirkham & Wesham's understandable jubilation at hearing title rivals New Mills had lost 2-0 at Bootle was tempered by the blow of an injury to new recruit Allen's right ankle. Allen, a Preston lad just arrived from Kendal Town via a shedload of goals at Fleetwood Town, limped off just before the break having shown some deft touches and intelligent running up front. He spent the second half with the joint packed in ice. Ouch.

Kellamergh Park is a relatively new ground, developed only since 2005 after a move from Coronation Road in Kirkham, but is destined for a brief lifespan. Kirkham & Wesham's ambitious owners have earmarked another site and expect to up sticks again in the not-too-distant future. The club's name will change to AFC Fylde next season in an attempt to broaden its appeal. It's not a bad idea because the club, a merger of Kirkham Town and Wesham FC, plays in neither place. The ground is on the edge of Warton, a short distance from the sea on the southern edge of the Fylde peninsula. There's nothing remarkable about Warton (unless you're a plane-spotter with an interest in the BAE Systems factory) and little to excite at Kellamergh Park. Access, rather oddly, is through the car park of the Burley Arms pub. An unmade, chalky track leads past fields, used for parking, to the ground. It's a rural spot, very much in the middle of nowhere. The landscape is typical of the area - low, undulating fields scattered with sheep. There's the odd

cluster of trees and the air is thick with the scent of the countryside. The club website reckons it's an "idyllic" spot. But that's definitely overegging the pudding. A small car park at the end of the track is out of bounds to all but club and match officials. Ahead is a gate giving access to the dressing rooms and to the left a large turnstile block topped with a huge sign advertising Kirkham & Wesham and the North West Counties League.

Through the turnstile and you're into the bottom left-hand corner of a basic but tidy ground, which has a concrete panel perimeter fence. A flagged path provides the bulk of the spectator accommodation. The sole stand, a solid-looking kit structure of khaki metal sheeting with four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats and Perspex glazing at each end, straddles the halfway line on the left side. Foundations have been laid either side in the event of extensions being required. The pitch, at a slightly higher level than the hardstanding, is surrounded by a metal post and rail fence painted white. The dugouts, modern Perspex affairs, are either side of the halfway line to the right. Right on halfway is a curious little wooden dugout. This is 'Woody's Warehouse' - presumably a perch for assistant manager Paul Eastwood. The dressing rooms, two wooden huts roofed with felt, are positioned outside the perimeter fence behind the near goal. A flagged path, covered by a concertina canvas tunnel, leads to the pitch. In the bottom right corner, an identical wooden hut houses the toilets and refreshment hatch, where souvenirs can also be bought. A small portable building lies beyond and provides a cheek-by-jowl hospitality experience for the executive element. Photographs of regular recent trophy triumphs adorn its walls. You'll note Kirkham & Wesham are playing in an all-blue strip. The club colours, for whatever reason, were changed to all-white for their Vodkat League debut. It can't have been because they wanted to play like Leeds United, can it? The floodlights are masts, which seem appropriate in such spartan surroundings. There are three masts on each side, with the middle pair carrying, at three, an extra lamp. Yards of spare turf beyond the hardstanding leaves room to expand - if the planned move doesn't come off. Trees fringe the bottom end and right-hand side but, otherwise, it's pretty featureless.

If the ground isn't really worth the trouble of navigating one's way to such an off-the-beaten-track place, the Kirkham & Wesham programme certainly compensates. Howard Jones, the club's press officer, produces it and, on this evidence, does a great job. He told me he'd spent most of the previous day putting the Blackpool Mechanics issue together, which meant it was smack up to date. There were plenty of photos from and reflections on last Saturday's history-making FA Vase tie. Howard is an old hand at this sort of thing, so the cover was bright and appealing, the content lively and the design attractive, though I did hear a complaint about some of the type being too small. The programme is chucked in with the admission price, which also entitles you to a cup of tea or coffee at half-time. Howard goes to the trouble of tacking the line-ups to the refreshment hatch wall and the rear of the three-seat press box in the main stand. Every little, helps.

Kirkham & Wesham are a go-ahead club in a hurry to clamber up the pyramid. After seven Premier Division championship successes in eight years, they had

clearly outgrown the West Lancs League and look good to clinch promotion on their debut at Vodkat level. Apparently, the chairman dreams of going all the way to the Football League and, while that may be rather far-fetched, there is no shortage of potential here and the UniBond or Blue Square North could be within the club's compass. But it is the possibility of a trip to Wembley which is uppermost in everybody's mind. If they can negotiate the replay at Coventry Sphinx on Saturday, only Needham Market will stand between Kirkham & Wesham and the biggest day in their history. This is a club with a track record of making things happen, so fantasy football really could become reality.

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