

**TT No.244: Andrew Gallon** - Sat May 3rd 2008; **Steeton** v Farnley; West Riding County Amateur League Division 1; Res: 5-0; Att: 53 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: £1 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

Think Keighley in a sporting context and, if any bells ring at all, rugby league invariably springs to mind. The old textile town - late local lad and bearded midfielder of the 60s and 70s Trevor Hockey aside - is not noted for its contribution to the association version of football. But Steeton, and its neighbour Silsden, is doing its bit to even up the balance sheet. Silsden FC, possibly crucially, got their foot on the lower rungs of the non-league ladder first. They clambered up the West Riding County Amateur League and in recent seasons gained a place in the North West Counties League having arranged to stage home fixtures a couple of miles from their village at Keighley's Lawkholme Lane rugby league ground. Since the switch, they've impressed, winning promotion to the First Division. Steeton FC, formed in 1910 and in the First Division of the WRCAL, are playing catch-up but are ambitious, well organised and eager to follow suit.

Life in Silsden's shadow is not easy, however. In a community where both codes of rugby are played, the pool of football talent is shallower than in many places - and Silsden, being the senior club, tend to lure the likeliest lads. Steeton, restricted to a single pitch, also have the handicap of not being able to field a large number of youth teams. But they have several long-serving stalwarts working hard behind the scenes and an influx of personnel from the defunct Keighley Phoenix club provided extra impetus. Having attained FA Charter Standard status, their immediate target is getting back into the WRCAL's Premier Division, from which they were relegated recently after just one season. That, alas, must wait at least another campaign because this one has seen the team finish mid-table in the First Division.

The Doris Wells Memorial Field, on the Silsden side of the village and owned by Steeton with Eastburn parish council, is a ground of considerable charm and appeal. Its bucolic setting compensates for relatively limited facilities. No cover, no terracing, no hardstanding, no floodlights. Steeton, founder members of the South Craven League in 1922, have played here since 1969, when they had to give up for redevelopment a pitch close to Airedale General Hospital. Access off Station Road is via Summerhill Lane, which soon becomes an unsurfaced track. A pair of attractive iron gates lead into a metalled car park in front of the Jack Fortune Pavilion, a single-storey, flat-roofed, oblong structure fashioned from stone. This tidy building, with doors and window sills painted in the club's green colours, contains changing rooms for players and officials, toilets and a refreshment hatch. Steeton's programme, of which they are justifiably proud, can be bought here. For this level, it really is first class and draws travellers from far and wide. There isn't a bar and so the club is based at the Goat's Head alongside the village's main crossroads, two minutes' walk away. If you head up there, keep going beyond the pub and take time to wander round the maze of narrow streets comprising former

millworkers' cottages. The village is bisected by the lively Steeton Beck, which, culverted and cosseted, once powered the looms. You can climb the hillside behind for a stunning view of the Aire Valley - and of Silsden FC's former home ground.

Steeton is a ground where the delight is in the detail. Note the two nearest corners. There is scarcely room to take a kick from the Ds because of the presence, on one side, of a huge oak and, on the other, of an angled wall separating the pitch from adjacent semis which boast a grandstand view. A drystone wall (gritty signature of the locality) runs down the left touchline, with a strip of grass squeezed in alongside the white painted metal post and rail fence which encloses all but the far end. Summerhill Lane runs the other side of the wall next to some extremely nice residences - one of which, Oakfield House, is a dark, historic presence boasting castellations and mullioned windows. An uncovered breeze block dugout, painted green, is located on the halfway line and used by home officials. Beyond the opposite touchline, which has an open bench on halfway for the opposing camp, there is a wide area of grass used for training, pre-match warm-ups and which has some very basic floodlights. Allotments lead up to houses and the old main road to Keighley before the land rises steeply to reveal, poking above the treeline, Steeton's main landmark. This turreted building, reputed to be haunted, is Jubilee Tower. It was constructed in 1887 to mark Queen's Victoria's Golden Jubilee and originally served as lodgings for gamekeepers and woodsmen on the Butterfield Estate.

The pitch, which seems quite narrow and short, dips downhill almost imperceptibly towards the Keighley end of the ground, where there isn't space for any spectator accommodation. The goal nets are hard up against an immaculately coiffured hedge over which Steeton's cricket ground can be seen. This also is a gem, complete with whitewashed, gabled pavilion. The team play in the Aire/Wharfe League and, unusually, both footballers and cricketers were in action on the day of my visit. This might sound a little dangerous but the cricket club had taken the precaution of using a wicket as far away from the football pitch as possible. It would have taken a prodigious slog to threaten a footballer with a thumping headache and, in the event, the two games passed off without mutual interference. Beyond the cricket ground, a meadow dotted with daisies and dandelions runs down to an embankment of the electrified Keighley-Skipton line, once part of the Midland Railway's fabled route to Scotland via Settle and Carlisle. The broad floor of the Aire Valley, into which is crammed a trunk road, river and canal as well as the railway, stretches away before the land rises again to the heights of Rombalds Moor. Steeton is pretty much the point at which the industrial West Riding peters out and the landscape takes on a greener, more rural aspect. On a beautiful sunny afternoon, it's picture postcard perfect.

I wasn't, in all honesty, expecting great things of this match but, having allowed to slip by two or three opportunities to visit Steeton this season, I was just grateful to be there. The hosts, reckoned by their fans to have a young but rather naive side, had produced three successive 3-3 draws before routing Salts 5-0 at the Doris Wells

on the previous Thursday evening. Farnley, from the south side of Leeds and also based at an attractive ground, were second bottom and without a win since January 5. They never looked like getting three points here, despite flattering to deceive in the third minute when Luke Miller, through on goal, brought a flying save out of James Wiggan. Aaron Hollindrake (6 & 10) then scored twice in four minutes, slotting into an empty net after keeper Chris Hardwick had blocked efforts from John Butcher on both occasions. Farnley, last day of the season and all, could have thrown in the towel but, credit where it's due, they stuck gamely to their defensive duties and half-time was reached without any addition to the score, despite a couple of close shaves.

Hollindrake played a part in the third goal in the 54th minute, heading a long free-kick from Wiggan back across Hardwick for Dave Scott to ghost in unmarked at the back post and nod home from close range. Three minutes later, it was 4-0. The omnipresent Hollindrake tried his luck with a 35-yard free-kick and Hardwick, possibly caught in two (or more) minds, succeeded only in palming a well-struck shot into his own net. Keeper Wiggan then got in on the act to make it 5-0 in the 76th minute. Clearly thrilled with his assist for Scott's goal, he took aim with a free-kick inside the centre circle of his own half and, with Hollindrake making a nuisance of himself on the edge of the six-yard box, the ball squirmed under the unsuspected - and increasingly forlorn - Hardwick. As an elated Wiggan celebrated, Hollindrake, as any good striker would, claimed loudly he'd got a touch. Glyn Tular was inches away from giving Farnley an instant reply, with a driven cross-shot and Hollindrake wasted a clear chance to complete a four-timer when he headed tamely wide of a post when well placed.

There's clearly some potential at Steeton, a community growing rapidly thanks largely to easy rail access for Leeds, Bradford and Skipton commuters. The team play neat, effective, enthusiastic football spoiled only, on this evidence, by a tendency to over-elaborate. Whether they can overcome the debilitating 'Silsden Effect' and scale the pyramid to the same degree as their local rivals, only time will tell. But, if they don't, it won't be for the want of trying.