

TT No.32: Andrew Gallon - Sat 25th August 2007; **Armthorpe FC** v Kiveton Park; Central Midlands Premier; Res: 1-5; Att: 20 (h/c); Admission: £2; Programme (12pp): 50p; FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Every football fan worth his salt knows the pit village of Armthorpe is the birthplace of miner's son Kevin Keegan OBE who, having been rejected by local pro club Doncaster Rovers, got a second chance at nearby Scunthorpe United and went on to become European Footballer of the Year twice and England's player of the 1970s. Quite what Keegan would make of the quality of the football at the bottom of the Central Midlands League Premier Division can only be imagined.

Armthorpe FC, new to the competition this season, are managed by former Darlington, Sunderland, Halifax and Barrow midfielder Steve Gaughan, a Donny lad who lives just up the road. He's finding it tough at this level. After a couple of 0-0 draws to open the campaign, 12 goals have been shipped in the last two games, both lost. Three of his players haven't bothered turning up for this match, so he's forced to name himself on the bench. The Football League must seem a long way away. Visitors Kiveton Park boast a celebrity connection of their own. Former world superbike champion and 2007 series leader James Toseland's older brother Simon is playing up front - and contributes a hat-trick. Talented family.

Armthorpe FC share the Church Street ground of Northern Counties (East) League Premier Division club Armthorpe Welfare. Next door is the Markham Main Sports and Social Club, named after the colliery which dominated village life between 1920 and its closure in 1996. There won't be much work in Armthorpe nowadays but it's tidy enough, though most with an interest in football are standing at the bus stop in red and white shirts and heading off to watch Rovers play Bournemouth at the Keepmoat. As if to emphasise life here has always been a grind - and poverty never far away - the library has put on a display remembering the workhouses of the district.

An unheralded, metalled lane squeezed between a health club and a budget supermarket (odd neighbours!) takes you to the entrance gate and turnstile. It's a basic ground but everything is beautifully maintained. On a lovely, sunny afternoon, Church Street is a picture. Almost everything is painted fastidiously either white or black, unifying the constituent elements and making for a dazzling backdrop. The pitch looks almost as perfect as the bowling greens in the miners' club next door. The players change in a red-brick pavilion in the left-hand corner to the left of the entrance. To the right, behind the main stand, dedicated to one Philip Mitchell, is a collection of portable buildings and breeze block huts housing the loos, groundsman's accommodation and club offices. It's the only less-than-tip-top part of the ground. The main stand has a low, propped roof and, I have to say, rather uncomfortable bleacher-type seats. The man alongside me was standing after 20 minutes, rubbing his backside ruefully.

There is a small area of cover behind the far goal, with a wide, concrete hardstanding strip running right the way round. Large areas of grass, neatly mowed, lead up to the boundary fence. Trees and shrubs at the perimeters lend a semi-rural atmosphere. The pitch surround is a barrier of two halves - a solid wall at the near end; post and rail at the far. Modern bungalows adjoin the ground to the south and west, with a landscaped spoil heap in the distance providing another reminder that King Coal once sat on the industrial throne in these parts. One characteristic feature of the ground is the huge, square floodlight pylons - out of scale with the surroundings. They look like corner lights but are positioned level with the edge of each penalty area and are tall and bulky enough to dominate the village.

There were chances for both teams before Kiveton Park broke the deadlock with a 12-yard shot from Toseland (31), the ball finding the net via the underside of the bar to round off some neat passing. Darren Woodrup struck the inside of a post when through on goal but Toseland's team-mate doubled the visitors' lead five minutes before the break when a lucky ricochet saw him race clear to round keeper Chris Yates and tap into an empty net. That was hard on the hosts, for whom Ricky Sharp was a constant threat on the left wing. If only his colleagues could get on the end of those crosses!

Eleven minutes after the restart, Kiveton Park made the points safe when Jamie Webster rattled an angled, 16-yard drive into the bottom corner. Richard Thomas (61) lobbed Armthorpe FC a lifeline but within minutes Toseland finished confidently in a one-on-one to scupper hopes of a fightback. To add to the misery of Gaughan (who may now need to invoke Doncaster's post-industrial slogan 'Discover the Spirit'), Yates fumbled a routine high ball on the edge of the box, giving the alert Toseland a walk-in for his treble.

The Central Midland League (bless it) makes it a requirement of membership that clubs issue a programme for every game. Armthorpe FC's slimline production (in common with most in the poorly attended Premier Division) contains rather less reading material than the average Peter and Jane starter book but, as ever, something is infinitely better than nothing. Where Gaughan goes from here, only he knows. He's clearly getting cheesed off with having to do so many jobs to keep things afloat but he should stick at it. A player of his experience has so much to pass on to the young lads at Church Street and, on the evidence of this performance, they need all the help they can get.