

**TT No.37: *Mike Latham*** - Tues 28 August 2007: Westmorland League Division 1: **Keswick v Wetheriggs Utd.** Result: 0-1; Attendance: 100 (h/c); Admission: no charge; No programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

“Don’t forget that the Westmorland League is a players’ league, not a spectators’ league.” Wise words from the Fylde based oracle a couple of years ago prepared me for regular sorties into the uncharted depths of level goodness knows what of the pyramid.

He was right, of course. If the very least you expect from a game is a programme then this league, with the exception of Penrith-based Wetheriggs United is not for you. Nor if you expect floodlights, an enclosed ground, a mere hint of terracing, a tea bar perhaps or even a roped-off pitch.

But despite the lack of all that, this league becomes more and more compelling, a thought that sustained me on the journey north with just a handful of grounds left for me to tick off the league. Over the last two years I must have seen as much Westmorland League football as virtually anyone and it will be a sad day when there are no more unvisited grounds in a rugged and beautiful part of the country.

This was a game to savour, with Keswick regarded as the up and coming team in the league and Wetheriggs the dominant force at this level until Kendal County stole their thunder last season. But, as the Westmorland Gazette pointed out in their splendid preview of the new season, County have lost several players to Milnthorpe Corinthians in the West Lancashire League and so are re-building. So, this game may well have been contested by the champions elect.

There was little hint of excitement as I ventured into Fitz Park on a sunlit evening just after six o’clock. An under-11s cup final was being played out on the adjoining cricket ground, which had recently staged a Minor Counties game involving Cumberland. An idyllic setting, tree-lined and over-looked by brooding mountains, the skyline dominated by Skiddaw, it is no wonder that in 2001 it was voted the most beautiful cricket ground in England by Wisden. It is, simply, breath-taking.

The football pitch lies beyond the cricket field, again bordered by trees with the fast-running River Greta along one side. A distant field, currently pasture land, may provide a future home for Keswick FC but for the moment this is where they stage their home games until their first choice, a caravan and camping site known as Walker Park, becomes available after October 1st when the holiday-makers move out.

The players change in the cricket pavilion and, just a few minutes before the scheduled kick-off I rather unnervingly realised that I appeared to be the only spectator present as the teams warmed up. But by kick-off time, as if by magic, around 50 spectators had materialised out of nowhere and the crowd swelled to over one hundred as the game went on.

The game was tight, fast and competitive with Keswick dominating much of the possession but unable to pierce an expertly marshalled visitors' defence with the Wetheriggs goalkeeper simply outstanding. It seemed increasingly likely that one goal would settle a tense encounter as half-time came and went with the score-line blank.

The game had been played in a good spirit until, almost without warning, an ugly fracas developed on the hour-mark with the referee, an experienced official who had controlled the game with an expert touch, suddenly forced to brandish a few red cards. That he chose to send-off two Wetheriggs players and just one from the home side seemed inequitable and handed the home side a definite advantage.

But the nine men of Wetheriggs dug deep, condensed the space and looked increasingly confident of stealing a valuable point. Come the last minute and in a rare attacking move the visitors earned a penalty when one of their forwards was tripped on the edge of the area. With virtually the last kick of the game the penalty was converted and the visitors' joy was unconfined.

High drama indeed, with the boil-over and red cards contrasting sharply with the air of civility and calm being played out by the youngsters on the adjoining cricket field. Happily, further unpleasantness was avoided and the players made their way off calmly enough at the end though Wetheriggs had clearly earned an important scalp in their first league game of the season.

When the final score-line of 0-1 is recorded on the excellent Westmorland League website in the days to come, it will scarcely tell the tale of an evening of high drama by the banks of the Greta. There can be few more idyllic places to watch football than this and, with Keswick switching back to Walker Park from October, a return visit is required to tick-off the other venue. A players' league it may be, but there are plenty of attractions for the traveller.