

TT No.38: *Mike Latham* - Wed 29 August 2007: West Cheshire League Division 1. **Christleton v New Brighton**. Result: 1-2; Attendance: 50 (h/c); Admission: None; 8pp programme: 50 pence; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

You always have a good chance, I have found, of finding a picturesque ground when the directions go something like this: “go into the centre of the village and take a left after the duck pond and follow the long track down to the ground.”

No, I wasn't going to MK Dons or Shrewsbury Town's new ground but in fact venturing once again into the West Cheshire League on a beautiful late August afternoon with the sun shining from a clear blue sky.

It was an ideal day, in fact, to appreciate the village of Christleton at its best. It's no wonder the village regularly wins the accolade as the best-kept village in Cheshire despite being just a couple of miles from the traffic-filled streets of Chester, a beautiful Roman city just choked by cars, and a minute or so from the M53. Football has been played in the village for over a century and the club have been members of the West Cheshire League since 1966 which was a very good year for English football. It was fitting, therefore, that England World Cup hero Bobby Charlton was guest of honour at the club's centenary dinner in 1997.

Down by the duck pond the players of Christleton were warming-up awaiting their visitors from the Wirral. The Little Heath ground is simply idyllic, a complex shared with the local cricket club, who compete at a high level- in the Cheshire County League. The cricket ground, with the best manicured turf I have seen for a long time is tree-lined with superb views over miles of rolling Cheshire countryside.

The football ground is similarly well maintained, the one shared side being roped-off, the other three sides surrounded by a permanent post and rail fence. The dug-outs are located along the far side and there are two rustic small covered standing areas with a third small structure doubling up with the cricket ground. The only disappointment is that the pavilion and club house, which is used as the dressing rooms is a rather featureless, functional brick building out of step with the surroundings.

Moreover, despite a decent turn-out for this 6-15pm kick-off neither the bar nor the tea bar in the pavilion are open for business- no wonder that the club's turnover, as demonstrated by the set of accounts hung on the notice board wall, is so small when such money-making opportunities are spurned. No attempt is made to take admission or even conduct a raffle but the enterprise of 'Long Tom', the New Brighton programme editor, ensures that the game at least has the distinction of a programme- a modest eight-pager nonetheless but packed with historical information and up-to-date stats. In the true spirit of non-league football, he has compiled the programme himself and donated copies to the home club for them to sell.

The playing pitch is simply magnificent- a veritable green carpet- and to be fair players from both sides attempt to do it justice. Both teams, I was informed, have undergone huge changes in personnel from last year, but New Brighton are enjoying a decent start to the season and earned their fourth win in five games after coming from behind to leave the home side still looking for their first league success of the campaign.

The only sour point was provided by a second half flashpoint- hardly a repeat of the Battle of Rowton Heath, a bloody conflict fought during the Civil War in 1645 just down the road- but sufficiently serious for the referee to brandish two red cards, one to each side.

This was a decent game, well contested and generally played in a good spirit with a backdrop that was quintessentially English. Long Tom's endeavours ensured the evening would have a long-lasting souvenir and helped assuage the disappointment of lack of facilities for the spectator. Surely a half-time cup of tea is the basic requirement of any game of football.

06/20