

TT No.40: Andrew Gallon - Wed 29th August 2007; **Bacup Borough** v Silsden; North West Counties; Res: 0-5; Att: 68; Admission: £5; Programme (20pp): £1; FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Bacup Borough's appealing West View home has an unmistakably Pennine setting - you really couldn't be anywhere else but on the backbone of England. The ground has been hewn from the flank of one of the steep-sided, narrow valleys boring into the highest, at 835ft above sea level, town in East Lancashire and is surrounded by magnificent upland scenery. A daytime (or, in this case, a late summer evening) visit is essential to appreciate fully such an attractive location.

Bacup, a name thought by some to derive from a thirteenth century word '*fulbacope*', meaning 'the brook in the shut-in valley', was built, like so many of its Rossendale neighbours, on cotton mills. By 1880, there were 110,000 looms chattering away in the town. All have fallen silent as the textile industry first faltered and then died, leaving behind a place which, physically and economically, is a dead end. It's a shame. In its heyday, Bacup must have been a thriving centre. Now, it's neglected, squalid and mournful. Even the mellow rays of a fading August sun cannot disguise that.

Some of the former mills survive having been converted for other uses but a wander round emphasises this is not a prosperous community. Dereliction and decay is everywhere. The locals seem downcast and almost resigned to an existence without hope. Even a new shopping arcade next to the outdoor market has been unable to sell all of its units. Weeds sprout from the cracks in the pavement by the rebuilt bus station (trains, in a post-Beeching world, don't come here anymore) and the shelter glazing's are daubed with graffiti. Streets, some still cobbled, of tiny terrace houses, many soot-blackened, rise in soldierly rows up the vertiginous slopes, clinging to the terrain as doggedly as Bacup holds on to a grim life played out to the constant background music of water rushing through culverts and channels. Nature tamed once oiled the wheels of industry, kept the looms humming and the money pouring in.

Today, it seems nobody cares. But that's not quite true. There are pockets of resistance to a tide of apathy which hits the football club as hard as anyone else here. The Bacup Natural History Society has laid out a signposted trail guiding the visitor to most of what is left of the town's more glorious past. Particularly pleasing is the 'Wall of History', featuring more than 30 inscribed foundation stones from previously important buildings long demolished.

To find West View, turn right off the Burnley Road just before the Irwell Inn and climb the one in four angle of Cooper Street. A right and then a left takes you into the intriguingly named Cowtoot Lane, with the ground at the top on the left, opposite a red-brick primary school and before a group of ghastly, three-storey new-builds constructed by one of the club's sponsors. It's a cramped spot. The road

peters out into a footpath beyond the ground, whose car park has room for just 10 vehicles. The Martin Peters Sports Bar (two huts 'tarted-up' and joined at the hip; according to the sign, it's 'The Place to Be Seen') forms the club's facade, with the turnstiles down a snicket alongside an end terrace to the left. Tunes from the 1960s blare out from the tannoy across a still, warm evening. They seem appropriate in the land time forgot.

Most climbs bring the reward of a view - and this is no exception. You enter via the south-west corner and the tidiness of the ground, painted in the club's black and white colours, is striking. Also, immediately obvious is how much the pitch, surrounded by a concrete panel fence, slopes downhill from east to west. To the left is a small hut and the 30-yard long main stand, containing five rows of red seats and a small directors' box with black seats. Beyond are the low-slung, flat-roofed dressing rooms, set back slightly and linked to the pitch on the halfway line by a black cage tunnel. Further down is a section of flags and grass. Behind are the rooftops of neighbouring semis. The poky gents in the north-west corner is a gem. They don't make them like that anymore!

Behind as you enter the ground are the sports club buildings (it's cosy inside) and beyond a flat area housing two portable buildings - one for the public address announcer - and a parking place for the club's venerable charabanc. A narrow strip of flags, which runs right round the ground, leads to the east side. This has a low cover by the halfway line, with grass leading up to a drystone wall which forms the boundary on all sides. Wonderful. The north-east corner and far (north) end are a bit of a mess because a ditch has been dug to put in a drain still, presumably, awaiting delivery. A long, low cover - like all the rest, brightened by advertising hoardings on its fascia - provides protection from the elements. Behind, red-brick terraces stretch away towards Burnley. In every direction, the land rises and falls.

Borough, beset by injuries, went into this game without a win in the North West Counties League's top division this season - and they were on the back foot from the kick-off. Frankly, the home team were a shapeless, shambles, though they did improve in the second half when they switched to a three-man defence. "Headless and chickens springs to mind," observed one old-timer as events unfolded.

Chris Simpson (19) side-footed Silsden's opener to round off a lightning break up the right wing before Danny McNulty (29) was allowed to drift in from the left and crack a dipping 20-yarder on the run into the roof of the net for a superb second. Borough's defence went AWOL for the third, Dan Moriarty (36) crashing a rising drive past the exposed Jack McGregor after some considered passing.

One of the Borough players confirmed to friends in the crowd manager Brent Peters' half-time team talk had been "interesting" but, nevertheless, once the action resumed Silsden were back in control. Andy King saw a 25-yard piledriver cannon back off the inside of a post before Lee Reilly (55) bullied his way past half-hearted challenges from a defender and the keeper to bludgeon in the fourth. Tony Carroll then sliced wide Bacup's only real chance of the night and Reilly (79)

rubbed salt in the wound with a low shot on the turn after good work from sub Tom Applebee.

Off the field, Bacup do, however, seem to be moving in the right direction. They have a decent commercial operation in place and, as well as a regular programme (not always the case here in campaigns past), produce a four-times-a-year community newsletter. The tidiness of the ground (again, an improvement on previous seasons) also indicates a club at least looking to move forward, rather than merely going through the motions of completing the fixtures. Boss Peters clearly has his heart in the job (witness his tirade in the programme against the local paper and its sports editor) and believes results will improve when key players return to fitness. Let's hope so, for the chill blast of winter is felt more keenly in these hills than in most other parts. A few wins would raise spirits and warm the hearth.

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