

TT No.68: Mike Latham - Weds 26 September 2007: Northern League Division 2: **Thornaby** 1-3 North Shields. Attendance: 50 (h/c); Admission: £4; 40pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

While football at the highest level is awash with an obscene amount of money, the grass roots clubs struggle along with long-serving club officials eking out a survival plan year after year against often seemingly insurmountable odds.

Such is the case at Thornaby, where the club survives despite obstacles that would shatter a mere mortal- the great survivors of the Northern League battle on. Their Teesdale Park ground is situated in a remote location, found by following a wooded track between two houses for about half-a-mile until two stone gate posts signify the entrance.

In the distance lies part of the old Stockton Racecourse, which witnessed its last race in 1981. Part of the course is now built over by an industrial park while the golf club has claimed another part. The Thornaby ground has suffered as much as any I have seen from sickening vandal attacks with the lack of a secure fence leaving the place open to the gangs of youths that roam the area. Evidence of the vandals' work is everywhere- the shell of a wrecked stand behind one goal the classic example.

But Thornaby battle on, even though they were demoted to division two a couple of seasons ago after the Northern League officials deemed their ground not suitable to stage division one football. They have a point- the crumbling terrace on the near-side is fenced off, the small main stand on the far side is another target for the vandals and the graffiti signifies an area with obvious social problems.

Yet, despite it all, Thornaby are still here and their small group of club officials offered a warm and cheery welcome to the traveller. The 'gate' is taken on entrance and this is a ground where you drive your car inside the ground with a choice of parking behind the terrace, and a chance to watch the game from inside your vehicle, or behind the wrecked stand behind the goal. Amazingly, in a show of defiance, a tea bar still operates from the rear of this building, serving pies, Bovril and other hot drinks which were welcome on such a bitter evening.

And the playing surface is immaculate, flat, covered in lush grass and expertly mown. Perfect for what proves to be a good game of football. A 40-page programme is a good effort, too.

Thornaby start in impressive style and should have put the game beyond doubt by the break, instead having to settle for a slender one goal lead. And the visitors, growing in confidence as the game wears on, seize their chance- two quick-fire goals around the hour-mark and a third 15 minutes from time secure their first win of the season.

Thornaby, I am told, look sure to leave the ground shortly and may share at near-by Marske. The intention is to build some housing near the entrance, tarmac the road and improve the football ground while aiming it more secure. Thornaby are trying to re-arrange as many games as possible, aiming to fit in as many home games as possible in the first half of the season to minimise the effects of the ground-sharing. So, there are plenty chances to fit in a trip to Teesdale Park, situated off Acklam Road and just a few minutes' drive from the A19 into Middlesbrough.

After initial concerns over the run-down nature of the ground and the perceived menace of some of the local yobbos that inhabit the area, I actually enjoyed the evening. Everyone I spoke to was friendly and positive about the club's future and there is clearly a hard-working and dedicated group of people determined that Thornaby will continue to play in The Northern League. If they could only get their hands on just a fraction of the weekly wages that their Premiership neighbours spend out then the future of the club would be guaranteed. The contrast between the 'haves' and 'have nots' is never better illustrated by a visit to this part of the world but, given the choice between a Premiership game at the sanitised Riverside Stadium or a game of proper football at Teesdale Park I know which I would plump for. Sadly, judging by the attendances not many people seem to share my view.

06/20