

TT No.84: Mike Latham - Tues 9 October 2007: Midland Combination Premier Div. **Brereton Social v Meir KA**. Result: 0-0; Attendance: 43; Admission: £3; 12pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 1*.

A six-hour car journey to Arbroath on a boiling hot summer Saturday finally convinced me not to worry if I missed a few minutes of football on a visit to a new ground. Arriving five minutes after kick-off at Gayfield after the journey from hell, the score was 0-0 and after witnessing another five minutes I knew that there wouldn't be a goal if I stayed until the next Preston Guild.

I wasn't wrong and only the entertaining views of a fellow supporter on the terraces that border on to the North Sea enlivened one of the most miserable experiences of my football-watching career.

'Don't be fooled by this weather,' he intoned. 'In three-months' time, the wind will be howling, the waves will be howling and you'll be able to stand on that very spot and catch a haddock.'

I don't know why but that trip to Arbroath came back to me as I journeyed south on a typically busy M6 for my first dip, not into the North Sea but the murky waters of the Midland Combination. Level 6 in name of the non-league pyramid. The only haddock in sight was of the battered variety in the chip shops of the former coal-mining Staffordshire town of Rugeley, dominated as it is by a huge power station.

A combination of general disorganisation and arrogance on my behalf had convinced me that Brereton Social's Red Lion ground would be easy to find, just off the A51 towards Lichfield. Wrong! I hadn't reckoned on the new by-pass road that takes you past the Flue gas desulfurization plant of the power station and bypasses the town of Rugeley as if by magic. In no time at all I was on the outskirts of Lichfield and a hasty retreat was in order. By the time I found Armitage Lane and was drawing up inside the car park of the Brereton Social ground the game had already been underway five minutes.

No matter, as the man on the gate (who I later found out was called Michael) assured me it was 0-0 and took my cash and sold me a programme.

Scoreless it was and, after a few minutes of watching I was assured it was going to stay. You just get a nose for these things. To say the standard of play was dire is understating matters. Moreover, there appeared to be a bit of niggles between the sides perhaps carried over from a previous game. The referee, an experienced-looking chap, did his best but paid the price for not punishing properly two awful tackles in the first half.

When a home player committed just about the worst two-footed lunge I'd seen in a long, long time and was rightly despatched to an undisputed first use of the showers around the hour-mark it was no more than he deserved. Despite one spell

of ping-pong in the goal-mouth the visitors were unable to take advantage and a desperate encounter finished without a goal to warm the cockles.

Brereton Social FC were formed, I can inform you after perusing the 12-page programme, way back in 1899 but are currently one place from the bottom of the Premier Division of the Midland Combination with just one win all season. Their opponents, formed as a Sunday League side based at the King's Arms pub in 1972, have been members of the league for many years but currently lie just one further place off the bottom. 'Pub team football played between two pub-team sounding teams on a pub ground,' was the damning indictment of one ground-hopper whose acquaintance I encountered during a first half spent wandering around the ground.

In fairness I have been on far worse grounds and it is probably appreciated best on a Saturday afternoon rather than under the floodlights on a dark evening. There is a small club house with cover in front and a small stand on the entrance side. The rest of the ground is open standing though there is an impressive grass banking at the Red Lion end of the ground. The pitch is well grassed and in good condition though has a pronounced slope down from the corner at the club house end and the ground is bordered by trees, hedges and residential housing.

Michael, the gate man later came around with a football card but I am unaware if I won. With just 43 spectators returned as the official gate on the excellent league website he maybe has to wait until the next home game to fill the remaining seven spaces. Fair enough, and one knows that the £1 proffered is really an extra donation to the club, but spectators should be told the winner as a matter of courtesy. It was the same at Llanberis last Saturday- where the raffle winners were announced, but in Welsh. Maybe I won the bottle of whiskey- who knows?

So, all in all another Arbroath experience. A long way for no goals and if this is the best the Midland Combination has to offer (which, I suspect it isn't) then I won't hurry back. Decent enough ground, though, and far removed from the sanitised new grounds that are increasingly springing up. And the locals and club officials are friendly and welcoming. Interesting, though, that page 2 of the programme is devoted to the issue of bad language and yet the players seem oblivious to the issue. It may have been level 6 but it seemed little removed from pub football. And, just like Arbroath, I won't be rushing back in a hurry.

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