

TT No. 109: Mike Latham - Sat 13 Dec 2008: East Lancs League Division 1: **Rimington 2-2 Hurst Green**; Attendance: 55 (h/c); No admission or programme; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

Opportunities to watch a top-of-the-table clash in December, especially on a day largely ruined by postponements throughout the country are not to be sniffed at and I was fortunate to chance upon what proved to be a memorable afternoon in the Ribble Valley.

The weather put paid to various travelling plans as the various league websites updated an increasing toll of Saturday morning woe. Swindon Supermarine, Leamington, Banbury and Barwell had all been on my radar but by 11-30am all were off. I decided to stay local, mindful that in a last resort Preston's televised home game against Birmingham would definitely go ahead at 5-20pm.

The East Lancashire League has grown on me over the last year or so and I well remember an early season trip to the delightful village of Hurst Green for what proved to be a superb game against Stacksteads St Joseph's on an immaculate pitch. Hurst Green have continued their good form but the league website informed that they trailed leaders Rimington by one point having played one game more.

More in desperation than expectation I 'phoned the home secretary- he had relinquished the post but was very helpful and gave me the manager's number. A further call was made and confirmation received that the game had indeed survived the worst of the weather and would kick-off at 2pm.

I hot-footed it across the A59 from Preston, briefly crossing the border into Yorkshire before returning to the county Palatine after turning right and right again towards Rimington upon reaching Gisburn. A few miles later after going down a narrow country road that afforded spectacular views of a snow-capped Pendle Hill the village of Rimington was reached.

A tiny hamlet, mentioned in the Domesday Book and once the centre of a modest lead and silver mining industry Rimington hardly looked the scene of a top sporting match as it snoozed gently in the welcome early afternoon sunlight. But the collection of cars parked outside the Black Bull pub told its own story and after parking up and walking a few hundred yards the Coulthurst Jubilee sports field was located with the teams ready and waiting for the action.

The venue, it has to be acknowledged, was modest but this was a game that clearly was of huge importance to those involved. The playing field is accessed via Back Lane and a well-constructed gate leads one past a small floodlit all-weather tennis and five-a-side football area to the football pitch.

It is such a beautiful rural location, bordered by trees, and with a roped-off cricket square situated just behind the far goal. At the entrance is a stone building, in keeping with the area, that houses the dressing rooms.

One of the locals was proud to inform me that this was the only fixture that had survived the weather in the league this Saturday, but what a fixture it was. Keenly fought and fast moving, the game, controlled expertly by a veteran referee, proved to be a terrific encounter.

The visitors, attired in a smart black and white striped kit, took a 16th minute lead courtesy of a precision free-kick but gradually the home side, in a distinctive orange kit, came back into things. Just before half-time their balding striker equalised with a smart header and seven minutes after the re-start they were ahead when their other striker saw his speculative shot from distance take a kind deflection.

The tackles continued to fly in and no quarter was asked or given but Rimington looked the likelier winners. In the last minute, however, the visitors forced a corner from which, after a mad scramble in a muddy goalmouth, they equalised. Just 21 seconds remained on the clock and their joy was unconfined.

It was a great game in a lovely setting and further proof that the East Lancashire League can serve up some tasty games that would satisfy even the most discerning of groundhoppers.

Within fifteen minutes of the game ending I had negotiated the narrow, winding road back through Chatburn towards Clitheroe and arrived at Shawbridge just in time for the start of the second half. Losing 1-2 at half-time Clitheroe fought back to take a 3-2 lead before Brig earned a point through a late penalty after a cracking, roller coaster half.

Then it was off to Deepdale where Preston North End's Championship fixture with second-placed Birmingham City had been put back to 5-20pm for the convenience of the television cameras. A parking spot opposite the main entrance was easily secured for £3 and £20 secured entry to the Bill Shankly stand behind the goal. The newly-constructed pavilion stand has made Deepdale an impressive four-sided venue and a late goal from sub Parkin gave the home side a deserved victory and rounded off a good afternoon's action.

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