

TT No.120: Mike Latham - Thursday 1 January 2009; Unibond League First Division South: **Goole AFC** 0-3 Stocksbridge Park Steels; Att: 202; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Lancashire was frost-ridden as a new year dawned and as the morning wore on the inevitable toll of postponements rose- even Southport, normally a banker in frosty conditions, falling to the weather.

Desperate times and it struck me, as I worked my way through the internet, just how few clubs still make use of their web pages to convey important information and save endless 'phone calls. Notable exceptions were Kings Lynn and Gateshead who both conveyed news of positive early morning pitch inspections. 'Go east' seemed to be the message but I was conscious not to be stranded should an isolated game be called off at the last minute and decided to try and find a venue nearer to back-ups if needed.

What a delight, therefore, it was to telephone the Goole secretary at midday. He not only confirmed the game was on and the pitch soft, he was so enthusiastic and friendly in the course of a 30 seconds conversation that it made a trip to the VPG (Victoria Pleasure Grounds) unmissable. If only every club secretary was as friendly and helpful after some of the grumpy and unpleasant people, I have encountered on the other end of a telephone this season.

The journey across the M62 was trouble-free and the eastern side of the country certainly seemed to have escaped the worst of the icy blast. Easily found just minutes from J36 of the M62, Goole was indeed a frost-free green oasis and VPG easy to find down Carter Street off Boothferry Road. After parking close by in a tightly packed residential area it was reassuring to see the players warming up on a pitch that looked in superb condition. Since they installed new drainage in the summer, at a cost of £11,000, Goole's pitch problems of the recent past appear to be over; it's one to remember on frosty or rainy days.

I had last visited the VPG 15 years ago and little had changed though the ground, now council owned had certainly been tarted-up. The club began the season with a ten points deduction for entering a CVA over an unpaid Inland Revenue bill but gave the impression of having a heart and soul of volunteers and helpers all getting the jobs done that are needed to put on a game of football.

The immediate impression was of a warm and friendly club with a wonderful tea bar where the home-made meat pie was world class. The vice chairman manned the excellent souvenir shop and his daughter dispensed 'Goal-den' goal tickets. The team line-ups were displayed by the entrance, a superb service that so many clubs overlook. There is a cosy bar under the main stand.

The ground is basic for level four of the pyramid with a running track around the pitch detracting from the atmosphere. There is a small seated stand that also has a

sponsors' box and a small covered terrace and a small covered standing area opposite. The Spion Kop terrace at the town end is long gone. The ground's outlook is dominated by two water towers, the original slim, red-brick one dwarfed by its 145-foot high neighbour, reputedly the largest in Europe when constructed in 1927. Trains regularly rumbled by though the cranes at the docks were as still as the corner flags.

On a dry, wind-less but bitterly cold and misty afternoon visitors Stocksbridge were much the better side, with Vardy's two strikes on 18 and 33 minutes (the second a superb 20-yard effort) continuing their promotion push. But they hit the woodwork three times and couldn't breathe easily until sub Menga stabbed home a third on 85 minutes.

Goole is a purpose-built town to serve the terminus of the Aire & Calder Canal Company and though 45 miles inland remains an important port. The VPG first opened in 1888 and has since staged football, rugby, athletics, wrestling matches, sports galas and heavy horse shows. Originally home to the town's rugby club, known as the 'Seaporters' the VPG staged senior rugby league for a brief time just after the turn of the last century until Goole folded in 1903.

The ground was also home to Goole Town FC (formed 1900), formerly members of the Midland League and Yorkshire League who became founder members of the Northern Premier League in 1968. The club continued in the NPL until folding in 1996 due to financial pressures. Goole AFC were formed in 1997 and carried on playing at the VPG, fighting their way back up the football pyramid and rising through the Northern Counties East League to re-join the NPL.

A visit to Goole comes highly recommended; it is a proper football club with a heart and soul, some stalwart club officials and supporters and the best meat pie on the circuit.