

TT No. 130: *Andy Gallon* - Sat January 17th 2009; **Bootle** v Whitley Bay; FA Vase Fourth Round; Res: 1-3; Att: 272; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

As driving rain and a soul-searching gale whipped mercilessly across mud-bound New Bucks Park from the direction of the Mersey, Wembley, a sun-drenched afternoon in May, shirt sleeves and the FA Vase final seemed as distant as the end of the global financial crisis. Stripped of the gloss - huge crowds, vast stadia and bowling green pitches - which adds a sheen of sophistication and glamour to the professional game, this sweaty, mid-winter arm wrestle between part-timers was football in the raw. And it was great.

A compelling tie turned on three key incidents - all involving Bootle players. Full-back Carl Dale was sent off in the 25th minute for what referee Danny Gratton deemed a dangerous tackle. We were close to the incident, but looking directly at Dale's back as he went in with the subtlety of a banger racing driver. It was a full-blooded challenge, certainly, but a straight red card seemed very harsh, and provoked a four-letter response from several disgruntled Bucks players. In the referee's defence, he did have a better view of the lunge than anyone other than Craig McFarlane, who was on the receiving end. So, advantage Northern Leaguers Whitley Bay from an early stage. Just before the hour, elusive striker Andy Fowler, who had put his team ahead from the penalty spot a minute after the restart, found himself through on goal, but rolled a low shot inches wide of Bay keeper Terry Burke's left-hand post. Had it gone in, then I don't think Bay would have come back. Then, with 13 minutes left, and the score at 1-1, Fowler, the North West Counties League First Division's player of the month for December, and Bootle's most potent threat, limped off with what looked like a hamstring injury, sustained while chasing down a pass aimed deep into a corner. In his sorely-felt absence, Bay scored twice, including a goal in stoppage time, to book their place in the last 16 and a tie with Midland Alliance Stratford Town at Hillheads on February 7th.

Strangely, this was a game which improved as the weather worsened. All but a few seconds of the first half were played in relatively benign conditions. The heavy pitch, a source of problems for Bootle in recent weeks, was in a shocking state, making passing football extremely difficult. The action was as agricultural as the ploughed field on which it was staged. Indeed, Bay manager Ian Chandler took one look at it upon arrival, and opted to change his tactics and starting line-up. Things began to happen only after Dale's departure. The hosts' sole chance fell to speedy Joe Doran, a 35-yard free-kick which almost crept past Burke, who saw it late through a ruck of players before diving to make a smart save. Bay went close on three occasions. Leon Ryan couldn't get sufficient power behind a three-yard prod from a puddle to beat a clutch of defenders and Mark Mawdsley on the goal-line,

Phil Bell scooped a volley over from eight yards, and Paul Chow's crisp, angled drive brought the Bucks keeper to his knees at the near post.

Spectators were still in the social club when Fowler went down theatrically under a Ryan challenge on the right side of the penalty area at the start of the second half. It didn't look like a foul, but the referee, possibly evening things up for the Dale dismissal, gave Fowler the chance to open the scoring, and the frontrunner made no mistake with a fizzing strike. Chow somehow headed over in front of goal before Fowler failed to convert that important chance for 2-0 when through. Paul Robinson, just on as a sub, equalised with his first touch in the 64th minute, firing in a cross-cum-shot from the left. It caught the wind and flew over Bucks keeper Mawdsley. With Fowler off the pitch, Bay went ahead with 10 minutes left. A Lee Picton long throw, again from the left, wasn't dealt with by the home defence, and top scorer Chow, unmarked at the back post, had time to trap the ball and pick his spot from 12 yards for his 22nd goal of the season. By now, the rain was coming down in torrents, and we were provoking discord with our neighbour, thanks to our umbrella harbouring ambitions to become the sort of kite spotted on Formby's golden sands earlier in the day. Bootle had an effort scrambled off the line in the closing moments before, two minutes over the 90, Bay put the outcome beyond doubt, and spared an increasingly sodden gathering the ordeal of extra time. An anxious Mawdsley, realising those Wembley dreams were fast fading, picked up a back-pass in his penalty area, and sub Chris Reid drove in low when the free-kick was touched to him by Lee Kerr.

The town of Bootle boasts a proud footballing history, but the present club does not bear any relation, other than its name, to the one which played in the Football League at the end of the 19th century. Poor gates, and indifferent results, led to Bootle, founder members of the Second Division, being wound up after the 1892-93 season. Competition, for hearts and minds, from Everton up the road simply proved too keen. Liverpool, ironically, replaced Bootle upon their demise, and have, I suppose, gone on to justify their election. The club, originally Langton, now bearing the town's name, dates from 1953, and has only recently climbed back into the North West Counties League after a spell in the Liverpool County Combination. Bootle, before kick-off, shared the lead in Division One with AFC Liverpool, and appear to be heading in the right direction since moving into New Bucks Park in 2005. The site of the old Bucks Park ground, opened in 1977 alongside the Steam Packet pub near the end of the M57 and M58 motorways, was a vandal-blitzed pile of ashes by the time its doors closed for the last time, and is now covered by a fitness centre and its car park.

New Bucks Park, close to the historic Aintree racecourse, isn't a venue about which to get too excited. Its location, tucked away deep within a modern industrial estate, is familiar new ground territory, and its infrastructure basic, lacking in character and, in parts, of an apparently semi-permanent nature. To make matters worse, we were greeted at the turnstile by an undignified squabble between opposing officials. A Bootle jobsworth had accused one of the Bay contingent of handing free passes through the perimeter fence to enable others to avoid paying

their £4. I don't know who was in the right, but the trading of insults and raised voices left a nasty taste in the mouth. So much for non-league friendliness. Next up, and an indicator, perhaps, of how well, or otherwise, Bootle are run, was a lack of available programmes - and this for an FA Vase game. Numerous promises of "they're on their way" were made to disappointed spectators before it transpired the club chairman was feverishly stapling them together in the club office. They went on sale 15 minutes into the match, prompting a minor stampede in the vendor's direction. But better late than never, and at least an improvement on my visit to the old ground, where the club couldn't be bothered to produce one at all.

Most of the facilities are on the northern touchline. The turnstile block brings you out near the north-west corner, between a portable building, dispensing refreshments through its open door and, straddling the halfway line, a single-storey block housing the social club, bar, toilets, offices and dressing rooms. This structure, about 35 yards long, squat and with a pitched roof, is clad in cream panels, with the windows facing the pitch covered in protective wire mesh. Inside, it is shockingly spartan. The floor and most of the seats are of untreated wood, though the atmosphere, helped along by a large number of visiting fans determined to enjoy themselves, was lively. The players' tunnel, one of those retractable concertina affairs, is attached to the east end. Beyond are more portable buildings. The main stand is a 25-yard long kit structure, boasting four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats. It is positioned between the social club and the turnstile. Hardstanding runs round this bleak little ground, with the pitch surrounded by railings painted in the club's dark blue colours.

There is another, rather smaller, kit stand behind the goal at the western end. This has three rows of terracing, with a similar offering, in concrete and without cover, alongside. A small, surfaced car park is to the rear. Arrive early to take advantage. Dugouts, Perspex curving over blue metal frames, stand either side of the halfway line on the southern touchline. A scruffy, oblong area of grass leads up to the perimeter fence, behind which runs an overgrown goods railway line. Beyond that are the busy electrified tracks linking Liverpool and Southport, rows of red-brick terraced houses and the futuristic sheds of the industrial estate, which embraces New Bucks Park on three sides. To the rear of the eastern end is a narrow strip of grass, set up as a mini pitch with goals. With the main pitch in such a sorry state, I expected pre-match warm-ups to take place there. But no. Both sets of players went through their choreographed routines on the main pitch to leave it a shredded mess by kick-off. Sometimes, groundsmen must wonder why they bother.

So, defeat leaves Bootle free to concentrate on winning promotion, while Whitley Bay have the chance to reprise their run to the Vase final of 2002. The Seahorses would welcome a trip to Wembley because the national stadium was a building site at the time of their victory over Tiptree United, achieved at Villa Park, which doesn't whisper quite the same magic, does it?

