

**TT No. 152: *Andy Gallon*** - Tue 17th February 2009; **Barnoldswick Town v Coppull United**; West Lancs Premier; Res: 2-0; Att: 121 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: 20pp (donation); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

If North West Counties League officials reject Barnoldswick Town's 2009-10 membership application, they will be shooting themselves in the foot big time. For here is a go-ahead little club which would be a major asset to a rather hit-and-miss competition. Town have almost completed the work needed to gain the required ground grading, and are confident of getting their already impressive house in order by the March 31 deadline. The club, formed in 2003 when Barnoldswick United and Barnoldswick Park Rovers merged, have been keen to join the NWCL for two or three years, but were thwarted by an ever-increasing number of preconditions. Two major stumbling blocks, a new access road to the ground and floodlights, have now been overcome. Apart from building a couple of pay boxes and blocking off a path, Town are almost there. Nothing can stop them now, surely?

However, in what is an all-too familiar tale redolent of an exclusive golf club, the getting in is the difficult bit. Once you're there, you're laughing. First-time visitors to the grandiosely titled Silentnight Stadium (the sponsors, a bed and mattress manufacturer, have a factory in town, next to the Leeds & Liverpool Canal) will be astonished that it's taken so long for Barnoldswick to make the step up. This is a first-class venue, boasting the sort of facilities which put to considerable shame established NWCL members such as Daisy Hill, Ashton Town, Norton United and Oldham Town.

The ground - and here's a novelty - is set in a public park, Victory Park, on the semi-rural northern edge of a town now known only for its Rolls-Royce works after the demise of its numerous wool mills. Many of these survive, but have been adapted for other uses. Uniquely in my experience, one is allowed to drive through the ornamental park gates and alongside flower beds and grassy borders to reach Town's home, which is located beyond a floodlit artificial mini-pitch, a smart new stone pavilion and an unkempt bowling green. If the club are promoted, this unusual avenue of pleasure will be closed off, thereby ensuring the NWCL is not liable for any compensation pay-outs arising from ghastly accidents involving, say, dog walkers and motorists. Hence the need for the new access road and additional parking space.

Entering the ground from the pavilion, or south, end gives the visitor the best perspective of the stadium. As you pass through metal gates in this south-east corner, you are on slightly raised land, looking down on the pitch which stretches away to the north. The near end is nothing more than a yard-wide concrete path. A high stone wall backs on to the rear garden of a sympathetically converted venerable barn, whose doubtless delicate fruit and veg are protected by netting suspended from posts above the goal. To the right, or east, a broader hardstanding

path is squeezed between the pitch and a grass bank, which leads up to a boundary fence of wooden slats. The NWCL wanted Town to erect a solid barrier here, but eventually relented, despite the possibility of skinflints watching the action for free. The ground of the town's cricket club, who play in the Ribblesdale League, is on the other side of the fence. Beyond can be glimpsed Bankfield Mill, now part of the Rolls-Royce empire. This side is the best place from which to view the game because the dramatic slopes of Weets Hill, steeper and higher than anything else in the locality, rear strikingly beyond the rooftops of Barnoldswick's densely packed ranks of dark terraced houses.

Astride the halfway line on the left, or west, side is a substantial stand. This structure, four yards deep and about 25 long, is made of stone, and shelters five deep rows of terracing. Its overhanging fascia carries adverts for the stadium sponsor. The roof is supported by eight slender columns. Note two rather incongruous - and very spindly - crush barriers either side of the home dugout. This is made from breeze block, painted blue and is markedly bigger than that provided alongside for the visitors. A belt of firs masks part of the new access road on the other side of the perimeter fence. This is the most spacious part of a deliciously cramped venue, and there is plenty of room for Town, if the need arises, to build a much bigger stand.

Strung, rather untidily, along the far, or north, end are four buildings, each different in scale and style. The biggest, on the extreme right, is the social club. This single-storey brick structure has a pitched roof and was opened in 2000 by then-Burnley striker Andy Payton. Inside, it is tidy, modern, warm and welcoming. Programmes, for which donations are asked, are available behind the bar. There is also a kitchen dispensing all the usual footy fodder, and toilets. A photo montage shows how the ground has developed from a rough field, and there are also pictures of previous seasons' team line-ups on the walls. The smaller building alongside houses the dressing rooms, with the players accessing the pitch via separate doors and flights of steps either side of four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats, which are sheltered by a canopy. The other two buildings, smaller still, have a similar seating arrangement, and the one in the north-west corner has a store for the groundsman's equipment. Behind this end is the new car park and access road, both surfaced with a coarse aggregate. A small, floodlit pitch, used for training and pre-match warm-ups, lurks the other side of a gate in the north-east corner, by the cricket ground. The lights, first used on January 27th for a 2-1 West Lancashire League Premier Division defeat by Turton, are of the most variety. There are three per side, with three lamps on each. The pitch, apparently not a good drainer at the best of times, and rather heavy for this match after the recent sudden thaw, is surrounded by a post and rail fence painted blue and grey.

Barnoldswick needed three points against lowly opposition to maintain any hope of staying in a title race led strongly by Charnock Richard. They collected them comfortably. With better finishing, Town could have had six or seven. At least the two goals they did score were of a decent quality. Big Franny Powell, promoted from the second team, got the opener in the 14th minute. He climbed superbly,

and then hung in the air (impossible, I know, but that's how it looked) before meeting skipper Stewart Airdrie's cross from the right with an unstoppable header. Co-striker Neil Chapman made it 2-0 in the 55th minute. Facing Andy Almond in a one-on-one, he picked his spot to net low from the edge of the box. Chapman, having squandered three similar chances in the first half, had to get it right in the end. The Coppull keeper, who made several excellent saves, got the better of him with eight minutes left, when he dived to his right to turn aside the Town player's firmly-struck penalty, awarded for a clumsy David Rimmer challenge on Airdrie. Coppull threatened rarely, though Thomas Jordan had to clear an in-swinging corner off his line, and Max Dewitt dragged a shot across goal with only home keeper Mitch Walker to beat.

The town of Barnoldswick (dubbed 'Barlick' by locals, and infamously moved into Lancashire from Yorkshire's West Riding as part of the 1974 shake-up of local government) can only benefit, you feel, from its football club joining the higher-profile North West Counties League. The canal and railway brought welcome prosperity and rapid growth to the town, but since the former's decline and the latter's 1965 demise, it has been bypassed by the world. Both the A59 and A56 swerve as if to avoid this sleepy hollow, which would go undiscovered by all but the most determined explorer. Quite how some of the shops in the pleasant, but deathly still, market place make a living, I can't imagine. And these, presumably, are in the prime spots. One, 'Fun and Games', has given up the struggle, and is advertising a closing down sale. Another sign of our economically worrying times.

Whether Barnoldswick's players are up to NWCL football is a matter for conjecture, though recent newcomers to the competition have done well in a First Division always of an indifferent standard. They did tire a little towards the end of this game, but the effects of the gelatinous surface and an enforced lack of matches can't have helped. Off the field, there can be no doubt Town are well equipped for promotion. And with Barnoldswick being a self-contained town in its own right, rather than a suburb or a village, the team should be able to count on decent backing from the community. The attendance for this game illustrates the point. How many NWCL First Division clubs, AFC Liverpool aside, can boast regular three-figure crowds? Exactly.

06/20