

TT No.167: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 7th March 2009; **Teesside Athletic** v Easington Colliery; Wearside League; Res: 0-0; Att: 59 (h/c); Admission: £1; Programme: £1 (56pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Redcar - it ought really to be Deadcar - must be one of the most depressing places in these islands. Some faded, but in parts still elegant, coastal towns hint at a heyday long passed. This spectacularly gruesome resort - cowering, chilled and cheerless, alongside the uninviting grey blankness of the austere North Sea, and assaulted mercilessly by wind and airborne sand - almost certainly never had one. Nearly two decades ago, I lived (nay, existed) here for 12 agonisingly long months. If anything, Redcar, despite a number of smartish new housing developments on the landward fringes of town, has gone even further and still faster downhill during the years since I executed possibly my greatest escape.

Everywhere, no matter how awful, ought to have a saving grace. This community, certainly on a cold, dreary, late winter day, does not. The front, fancifully titled The Esplanade, is grim. Rough pubs, those not boarded up, do little to invite custom, shabby guest houses tout half-heartedly for a trickle of trade, and empty, echoing amusement arcades rattle and hum pointlessly. On the parallel main drag, locals, desperate, despairing, old before their time and battered into submission by the vicious vagaries of life in the back of beyond, shuffle sightlessly through desolate streets, pockmarked by charity shops and closing down sales, as would the dazed survivors of a nuclear attack. With its lack of colour, air of hopelessness, and steam-belching steel plant, Redcar feels like an outpost of the former Soviet Union, with marginally less concrete. As if this unspeakable atmosphere of misery weren't enough, a conversation between a despicable loan shark and one of his unfortunate customers is overheard inadvertently, yet sticks uncomfortably in the memory. Out-of-place southern accent: "I'm working next week, so I can let you have 50 quid." Growled response: "Make sure you do. I know where you live." If anyone doubts bust has again followed boom in the UK economy, go to Redcar, and pray your community does not end up like this. Frighteningly, the darkest depths of the recession - here as everywhere else - have yet to be plumbed. Things will get much worse before they get any better. And worse, in a Redcar context, does not bear contemplation.

Happily, Teesside Athletic are doing their bit to lighten the gloom. Formed in 1993 from the wreckage of a Middlesbrough-based club of the same name, they are working wonders in taking football into the town, and have more than 800 members. Youngsters of both sexes are benefiting from playing in their numerous junior sides, and the senior men's first XI are pushing hard for promotion from the Wearside League, which they joined from the Teesside League in 2005. But lack of facilities could hold them back as they target a coveted place in the Northern League. They are seeking the go-ahead from planners to erect floodlights and build two low stands - one with seats; the other for standing spectators. Neighbouring

residents have objected, principally on the basis their views (such as they are) will be spoiled. Such myopic nimbyism is a real shame in a town that badly needs the energy and enthusiasm the club has to offer. Athletic can only wait, but insist the work required to gain a Northern League grading can be done in a matter of weeks. They have not given up hope of playing at a higher-level next season.

Athletic's ground, off Green Lane, is the last structure in Redcar when driving south on Coast Road. Just 300 yards from the sea, it is closer to the centre of neighbouring Marske than to the middle of Redcar. An uninspiring housing estate melts away to leave an access track as the continuation of Green Lane. This is shared with Redcar RUFC, a Durham & Northumberland Division Two outfit, whose McKinlay Park ground, boasting a stand and floodlights, is to the right, opposite the entrance to Athletic's mostly unmade car park. Athletic have benefited from £860,000 of grant aid from the Football Foundation - and a glance about indicates that such a sum does not go very far these days. A red-brick, single-storey clubhouse, which contains a social club at the near end and dressing rooms at the far, is positioned centrally and dominates a rather bleak site. It was opened by Middlesbrough manager Gareth Southgate in January 2006 - before things turned sour for him at the Riverside Stadium. A plaque commemorating the event, along with photographs, awards and testimonials, is displayed on the wall in the social club, which is warm (excessively so) and welcoming. Refreshments can be obtained here during the game and at half-time. One of several pitches has been enclosed by a tall, green wooden fence and linked to the dressing rooms by a flagged path. This is the ground, part of a site rented from the council for a peppercorn rent, Athletic hope to develop further in their bid for Northern League status.

There's little to say about such a basic ground's infrastructure. The flat pitch is enclosed by an unpainted metal post and rail fence. There is a strip of grass about five yards wide between this and the perimeter wooden barrier. Dug-outs, with breeze block bases and green wooden roofs, face each other across the halfway line. Spectators and players enter via the flagged path in the near-right corner. Programmes are on sale from a table by a gate. The planned stands would be positioned around halfway on the near-right side. It is hoped to have three floodlight masts on each side. Looking south, the rooftops of Marske, with the stubby tower of St Mary's Church prominent, dominate. To the west, the housing estate of New Marske rises towards Errington Woods and tree-topped hills, beyond which is the market town of Guisborough. Look closely, and you can spot the ground of New Marske Sports Club, another Wearside League club. Behind the Athletic clubhouse is a pitch used for juniors, and then the houses on Green Lane. The murky sea, and a cavalcade of passing tankers and freighters, can be glimpsed above a slight rise between Coast Road and the shore. It's not, by any stretch of the imagination, an attractive spot.

Sadly, this game promised far more than it delivered. The combatants had scored nine goals between them in midweek, so a goalless draw was far from unexpected. Before kick-off, Athletic were third, and Easington Colliery fourth. Both were level on 48 points, with New Marske (playing a Monkwearmouth Charity Cup tie this

afternoon) second, two points ahead, and Newton Aycliffe top of the table, with a five-point cushion. Easington, having played the most games, were in greatest need of a victory. In the event, a goalless draw suited New Marske and Newton Aycliffe best. The latter won their game to open up a six-point advantage in a four-way battle for the title. A strong wind, blowing out to sea, made good football difficult, but Easington had the best of the contest in both halves and will be disappointed not to have won.

The opening 45 minutes passed off almost entirely without incident. Athletic mustered the only two scoring opportunities. Keeper Joe Atherton did well to tip over a dipping Billy Millington shot from the edge of the penalty, and James Smuk got up well at the back post to meet an Andrew Porritt free-kick, but directed his downward header wide of the target. Thankfully, there was more - though not much - to enjoy in the second half. Easington's Lee Smith, whose calm passing was a feature of a frenetic encounter - found himself through on goal five minutes after the restart, but his volleyed finish was diverted wide by the outstretched right boot of keeper Stuart McDonald. Gangly Athletic striker Daniel Drazdauskas, an awkward customer who had the knack of getting past his man, outpaced his marker, only to shoot straight at Atherton when in the clear. The Easington keeper reacted smartly to palm over the bar a well-hit Lance Skelton volley from just outside the box, and Atherton went low to his right to smother a low drive by Porritt. Easington relied increasingly on the long throws of Danny Flounders, who was summoned upfield from the centre of defence to take them so many times in the last 20 minutes, he was visibly drooping by the advent of stoppage time. The nearest the visitors went, despite their monopoly of possession, was substitute Tom Orchard's 18-yard free-kick, which he curled fractionally too high having misjudged the strength of the wind.

So, a trip begging more questions than it provided answers. If I were a betting man, I'd say Teesside Athletic may have to put up with another season in the Wearside League. Residents' objections are notoriously difficult to fight, and the club appear to have too much to do in too short a period of time. Shame, of course, but ground grading is a huge part of the modern non-league game. Getting the team right on the pitch is often the easy bit. Ironically, Easington, who have also applied for promotion, may find it simpler to win a place in the Northern League. They were longstanding members until relatively recently, and have their facilities in place. If they can finish in the right position in the table, they could be on their way up.

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