

**TT No.210: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 18th April 2009; **Kirby Muxloe** v Borrowash Victoria; East Midlands Counties; Res: 1-0; Att: 110; Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*/

Kirby Muxloe are poised to become the first winners of the East Midlands Counties League title after this crucial victory over sole rivals Borrowash Victoria. By the final whistle on a tense, if relatively uneventful, afternoon, the hosts found themselves six points clear with two games to play, and a goal difference three better than the Vics. The fat lady may not be singing, but she's clearing her throat and glancing expectantly at the orchestra.

As with so many important games, this contest, which had been in my diary for several weeks, fell some way short of expectations. The onus was on Borrowash to win, and they pressed forward from the kick-off. But they struggled to create much in a nagging wind on a hard, dusty pitch, and when the visitors did get a shot off on goal, intriguingly-named Kirby keeper Elliott Shilliam was equal to the task. Kirby, for whom a draw would have been fine, seemed content to play out the 90 minutes without exerting themselves unduly. They managed just two shots on target, and scored from the first. It was the sort of match in which a single goal was always likely to be enough. Even the bigger-than-average crowd, ostensibly there to cheer Kirby on to a second successive championship, after last season's Leicestershire Senior League Premier Division success, was strangely muted. An air of unreality abounded. Perhaps the glorious sun took everyone by surprise, though that could not be said of a wind which denoted winter rather than summer.

Kirby Muxloe is a pleasant, well-to-do village in rural Leicestershire, handy for commuting into the county town, and spoiled only by its proximity to the M1 motorway, whose roar is a constant presence. The big attraction for visitors is a 15th Century castle, which is 10 minutes' walk from the football club's Ratby Lane ground. The castle, now in the care of English Heritage, may look ruinous, but it was never finished. Lord William Hastings, the first Baron of Huntingdon, and a trusted follower of Edward IV, began construction in 1480. He planned a splendid residence on a quadrangular plan, with the buildings to be enclosed by walls, towers and a moat. There was also to have been a garden. But, just three years into the project, work ceased when its instigator was executed for his opposition (treason, effectively) to the seizure of the throne by Richard III. Despite this abrupt end - for both Lord Hastings and his castle - the site, renovated in 1911 by the Ministry of Works, is worth seeing. There is a tower of warm red brick, and a delightful (if you can blot out the traffic noise) walk round the moat, on which alternately playful and protective swans, geese and ducks provided infinitely more entertainment than the footballers managed later in the day. The image of the world's cutest duckling somersaulting (safely) down an overflow wall into a patch of mud will stay with me for some time. A view of the castle, looking across the moat, features strongly on the club's badge. It was the ideal spot for a picnic.

Ratby Lane is a lovely little ground. Kirby Muxloe, founded in 1910, amalgamated with the village's cricket team in 1972 to form Kirby Muxloe Sports Club and share the impressive clubhouse on the site. They progressed via the Leicester Mutual and Leicester City Leagues before joining the Leicestershire Senior League in 1982. Their Premier Division championship triumph in 2007-08 secured a place for this season in the new East Midlands Counties League under long-serving manager Gary Keenan, who has been at the helm since the 1989-90 campaign.

Wrought iron gates lead into a small car park, which is metalled and fringed with pine trees. This is the south end of the ground. The clubhouse, painted white, with a flat-roofed extension tacked on to the original pitched-roof portion, is over to the right. Fans are required to use a side entrance because the players emerge from the front, where the dressing rooms are, and turn sharp right to access the pitch down a flagged path and a makeshift 'tunnel' consisting of hurdles and rope on metal stakes. The clubhouse contains two bars, the largest of which, closest to the pitch, is light, bright and airy. I imagine the club do a roaring trade hiring out this room for wedding receptions and the like. The building also contains a kitchen, from which the usual refreshments are dispensed.

A gate in the fence next to the players' 'tunnel' marks the access point for spectators, who pay and can pick up a programme (glossy, but with far too much 'static' content) at a table. A broad strip of grass separates the clubhouse from the pitch, which is at a slightly lower level. To the left of the clubhouse when looking north to south is a five-a-side court. This was opened in 1999 and features an all-weather floodlit training pitch. Alongside, in front of the clubhouse, is a patio laid out with picnic tables. The main stand, a squat, chunky affair, is between the dead-ball and the halfway lines on the east side. It is 20 yards long and five yards deep. Of whitewashed breeze block, with four sturdy roof columns, it contains three rows of backless seats. Behind, the cricket ground, looking particularly fine with the new season looming, stretches away to an embankment upon which the M1 runs. Very noisily indeed.

There is a small cover behind the goal at the north end. This, like Lord Hastings' castle, is unfinished. Some roof panels are missing, and it shelters an area of grass, rather than terracing. To the rear, the land falls away through wooded meadows before climbing towards the village of Groby, whose church tower, complete with a flag of St George, is visible above the highest boughs. An ugly power line and its attendant pylons disfigure an otherwise unblemished scene. Spectator accommodation on the west touchline is limited to a concrete hardstanding path, which surrounds the ground. Another broad area of grass leads up to more attractive pines, which separate the sports club's land from Ratby Lane. Dugouts, of a modern Perspex design, are positioned either side of the halfway line. A post and rail fence, painted white, encloses the pitch. The floodlights, switched on during the 1997-98 season, are masts, with three per side and two lamps mounted on each. Kirby Muxloe are clearly an upwardly mobile club, and there is plenty of room on this site to build bigger and better stands if the need arises.

Borrowwash began the match like a team who knew their season was on the line. Michael Lyons brought a diving save out of Shilliam with a drilled effort from the right side of the penalty area, and Jamie Pawley was fractionally too high with a first-time 16-yarder following a cross from the right by Rob Spencer. Kirby's Jamie Mason, who could have had a hat-trick, woke up the home fans when he got away in the inside right channel, only to shoot across advancing keeper Tom Stones and over the crossbar. Vics right-back Tom Betteridge was allowed more space than a cosmonaut, and team-mates Lyons and Andrew Tansley never stopped running. The game, an unappetising stalemate, meandered along towards half-time, in the run-up to which Shilliam saved well from Pawley and Spencer.

Borrowwash's attacks became increasingly frantic as the second half got under way, but their spirits were punctured irreparably on the hour when Kirby broke the deadlock. Stu Verrall and Danny Gibbons combined to sweep the ball out to the right, where Mason stepped inside his marker and smashed a rising drive into the roof of Stones' net from 12 yards. Given the importance of this fixture, it was an exceptionally composed finish from Kirby's second-top goal-scorer. You sensed there was no way back for the Vics. They continued to press, but despite some pretty football, couldn't find a telling pass in the final third of the pitch. Pawley went closest with a snap shot tipped over the crossbar by the stubborn Shilliam, who was more acrobatic than his bulk suggested he might be. Vics substitute Sean Gummer aimed too high with a well-struck effort before, with a minute left, Mason broke through again, but Stones stood his ground and batted away the Kirby striker's fierce shot.

Any celebrating at the final whistle appeared to be done by the players, rather than the spectators. And yet this was Kirby's final home game of another successful season. Perhaps the people here take some stirring up. I can't see Kirby, unlike Lord Hastings, leaving this particular job unfinished. They should get the point they require from trips to Gedling Town and Graham Street Prims. Kirby are also aiming to join Borrowwash in the League Cup final, and face Holbrook Miners' Welfare in the semi-final at the Vics' ground in Spondon on Wednesday night. A trophy double would, for sure, mean castles in the air.

06/20