

TT No.215: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 25th April 2009; **Westella & Willerby** v Louth Town; Central Midlands League Prem Division; Res: 1-2; Att: 50 (h/c); Admission: £2; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Perhaps I should reconsider my strategy of seeking out late-season games which are meaningful to both teams. Last week's much-trumpeted title decider at Kirby Muxloe provided decidedly poor entertainment, and this fixture, another crucial top versus second affair, was even more tedious. A hard, dusty and threadbare pitch didn't help. So tired has the surface become at Westella & Willerby's new Blackburn Leisure Social Club home in Brough, that one of the club's programme columnists felt obliged to pen an advance apology. He blamed a lack of work done on the pitch by the facility's staff when Hull City made an 11th hour decision to pull out of pre-season training at the site, and his own club for then overplaying it and using it (in bad weather, presumably) when they shouldn't have. Whatever the reason, the end result is the same. An impossible playing-surface.

There were, however, other factors which spoiled this contest - and the afternoon as a whole. As sliced clearance followed misplaced pass followed scuffed shot, I began to wonder: 'Can these really be the best two teams in this division?' There could be no excuse for the amount of foulmouthed dissent shown towards referee Graeme Eccleshall by both sides. The two benches were also having a go at the referee and each other, and, in a couple of instances, spectators. On top of that, there was a distasteful undercurrent of aggro between the players. It was no surprise that Louth Town were reduced to 10 men for the last 14 minutes when a red card was shown to full-back Mike Armstrong for apparent use of an elbow. My partner, who'd attended her first rugby league match two days previously, was moved to remark on the contrast in the discipline levels in the two sports. The rugby league players from Leigh Centurions and Featherstone Rovers accepted the referee's decisions mostly with scarcely a murmur. These amateur footballers, aping the worst excesses of top-flight professionals, carped, whined, swore and niggled from first whistle to last. I don't expect to see particularly good football in the Premier Division of the Central Midlands League, but essentially childish behaviour from the protagonists is unnecessary. I don't think that's an unreasonable viewpoint.

The dreadful pitch aside, the Blackburn Leisure Social Club - at least on a dry, sunny afternoon - is pleasant enough. Brough, a nondescript, but growing, commuter town on the banks of the River Humber, is about eight miles from Westella & Willerby's traditional base in Cottingham, a delightful village which has become a suburb of Hull thanks to creeping urbanisation. The Friesians gained FA Community Club status four years ago, and run 19 teams across senior, junior and girl's football. They are completing their first season at the £1m Roy Waudby Sports Arena, which is shared with amateur rugby league and cricket, and cannot, unfortunately, be developed to Central Midlands League standards. Westella &

Willerby are in a bit of a cleft stick because it is by no means certain they will get the go-ahead for floodlights at 'Blackies', from where they have operated since the start of this campaign. The league will give them 12 months' grace, thus allowing them to go up to the Supreme Division next season, but it is a problem awaiting a solution. The club are also desperate to improve the pitch, and are in talks with the site owners about various options, including the possibility of rotating it through 90 degrees.

You reach 'Blackies' via the easily-missed Prescott Avenue, a narrow thoroughfare which opens out quickly to reveal a decent multi-sport complex. There is free car parking to the left and, to the right, squash and tennis courts, and two bowling greens. The main football pitch is positioned at right angles to the access road. The social club is ahead and behind the north end goal. It is an architectural curiosity, possibly from the 1930s, complete with clock tower. Despite a drab, unappealing exterior, surprisingly, inside it has been tastefully refurbished, and offers live Premier League action on big screens, and the chance to sit on a terrace above the football pitch and booze the afternoon away, roasting slowly in the sun. If that's your thing. I'd say there was an additional 30 spectators, most preoccupied with events down the road at the KC Stadium, watching for free from here.

A table in the ground's north-west corner serves as the turnstile and programme sales point. There isn't any hardstanding or cover. The pitch is enclosed with one of those flimsy plastic post and rail barriers which do not inspire confidence when you lean on them. Straddling the halfway line on the west touchline is a scruffy two-storey brick pavilion, which houses the dressing rooms and has a central players' tunnel. The boxy structure needs a coat of paint badly. Dugouts, Perspex over green metal frames, are positioned in front. Netting suspended from poles protects the pavilion's windows, with the same arrangement repeated at each end of the ground.

There isn't any room behind the north goal for spectator accommodation because the metallised continuation of Prescott Avenue leads towards three other pitches stretching away to the east. The south end is also hemmed in - this time by an estate of new houses. Beyond, the railway line linking Hull with Selby can be heard, but not seen. Indicative of how rapidly Brough, handy for rail-bound commuters to Hull, Doncaster and Leeds, is expanding, there are also new houses to the north and east of the 'Blackies' site. Developers must be casting covetous glances in the direction of these broad acres.

Visitors Louth Town all but clinched the Premier Division title with victory in this match, which was preceded by an unexplained minute's silence; the home players wore black armbands. Their success left the White Wolves level on points with Westella & Willerby, with the cushion of three games in hand. Three points avenged a 2-1 defeat by the East Yorkshire club at Park Avenue on January 31, a setback which ended Louth's 11-game winning start to the season. But the Lincolnshire men have lost just once in the league since, and that a 4-1 home reverse against third-placed Kirkby Town in their fourth game in eight wearying

days over Easter. Louth, Westella & Willerby, and Kirkby are all likely to be promoted.

Given the pinball nature of the game, it was entirely appropriate that all three goals were messy. The visitors, backed by a vociferous band of supporters ('Hardcore Crew') with a nice line in flags, went ahead in the 16th minute after an early scare in which Andy Appleby had to head off his own line. Kurt Crossley capitalised on a failure to clear and hesitancy at the centre of the Friesians defence, and nipped in to loop a header over keeper Taylor. Having seen two reasonable appeals for a penalty fall on deaf ears, Westella & Willerby equalised with 22 minutes left. Gordon's shot on goal was diverted past keeper Craig Wherry by Laud's outstretched leg. Armstrong's dismissal seemed to galvanise Louth, and they won it in the 80th minute. Top scorer Paul Watts, with 31 goals to his credit, fired in a well-struck 20-yarder, and when Taylor found it too hot to handle, Crossley was on hand to side-foot home the loose ball. The final whistle was greeted by ecstatic celebrations from the Louth players and fans. Understandable, perhaps, given the club's troubled history in recent years.

So, as an expedition in search of the Beautiful Game, this trip to Brough was a miserable failure. Finding beauty had to wait until after the match, and a stroll through the picturesque wooded dales of neighbouring Welton and Elloughton. Near the end of a charming exploration of chalky dry valleys, and having left the shelter of the trees and climbed to Welton Top, there was a panoramic view, looking south towards the North Lincolnshire shore, of Brough and the wide, silvery expanse of the majestic Humber. The scene was lit gloriously by the deep orange rays of the setting sun. Magical. Ample compensation for the depressing football experience which had gone before.

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