

TT No.220: *Chris Freer* - Saturday 2nd May 2009; **New Mills** v Ashton Athletic; North West Counties League Premier Division; Score: 1-0; Attendance: 262; Entertainment: 2/5.

With the season drawing to a close (or climax, if you like) it's time to look around at who's liable to be making the move up to Step 4 (or Level 8 as I like to call it). I've had my eye on the tussle in the North West Counties League Premier Division between Fylde and New Mills for some time, and with the two teams set to meet on the final Saturday of the season, I decide to take advantage of a cheap train fare (£8.30 according to National Rail enquiries website) and visit the Church Lane ground of New Mills this week to hopefully 'get one in the bag' for next season.

At Long Eaton station the miserable ticket seller scratches his head and insists "... cheapest to New Mills is £21.20." I show him the website on my phone clearly stating £8.30 but he just puts on his jobsworth hat and I have to pay the higher fare. So that's another letter I've got to write. I break the journey in Sheffield to enjoy a Wetherspoons brekkie and take advantage of my CAMRA discount vouchers during their beer festival. "You can't use those for the beer festival beers," gleefully informs the bar manager, impervious to my insistence that it was OK in London last week. I'm sure they make up the rules as they go along...

I arrive in New Mills and am immediately impressed by the place. It's on the edge of the Peak District, and features rolling hills, plunging ravines and some outstanding industrial revolutionary architecture. I treat myself to an uphill walk to the Good-Beer-Guide-listed Pack Horse Inn which overlooks the town, and enjoy an alfresco, sunlit pint amongst a gathering of walkers. I'd seen loads of them get off the train at Edale earlier, and it strikes me that the only difference between their hobby and mine is that I have to fit a football match into the schedule. The walking and the beer drinking we have in common!

The Church Lane ground is a brisk ten-minute (uphill) walk from New Mills Central rail station. Look all around and all you can see are steep, sheep-strewn hillsides, plus the local church - one of the more picturesque settings for a footy ground. The programmes are on sale at the gate and are modestly priced at £1. You tend to get what you pay for, but there's enough in there to show that somebody has put the effort in. It certainly isn't packed full of the usual website stuff. The bar is inside the ground and is showing live football. Unfortunately, decent beer is conspicuous by its absence so I make do with a Guinness, my occasional stand-by. A quick check of the snack bar and the good news is that the legendary cheese pies are on sale, only £1.35 with mushy peas, which I think is a bargain. I eat my fill. The ground is on a slope, and it's flat standing all round apart from two low stands on one side, one of them primarily terracing, the other all seats. I take up position in the latter, fancying a sit-down after my hike, but am soon chased out to pitch-side by the waft of smoke from some inconsiderate addict.

I've been looking forward to this game all week, the free-scoring exploits of New Mills of late leading me to believe I'm in for a goal feast. It never really looks like happening, with little goalmouth action, save for a couple of good penalty shouts. "If that'd bin on t'centre spot, he'd a gen that!" mutters a local and he's right. I once went to a Question and Answer session staged by former Premier League referee Peter Jones, and I asked him why refs took a tolerant view of fouls committed in the penalty box. I suggested that they clearly looked at the consequences of their decisions in advance and thus invariably turned a blind eye. He retorted that this was nonsense. I would have liked to have countered with something witty but only the word "Bullsh•t" sprang to mind.

Back to the action, and the second half starts with some promise as the mouthy home number nine runs clear on goal and inadvertently sets up his striking colleague for the opening goal. I say mouthy because for most of the match he appears to be at loggerheads with many of his team mates, offering choice words of encouragement (or not) throughout the ninety minutes. Even the ref has to intervene at one stage. Not my idea of a 'team' player. News has already filtered through that Fylde are two-up at Bacup, so it looks like it's all going down to the last match of the season. Understandably, the crowd are subdued and reflective and busy working out permutations, pausing briefly to grimace as Ashton hit the post late on.

It finishes 1-0, New Mill's 21st consecutive league victory, which must be some kind of record. Win number 22 - or even just their third draw of the season - next Saturday will be the difference between stepping up to the Unibond, or another season playing the likes of Ashton Athletic.

There's more on my blog at <http://flynn123.wordpress.com>

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