

TT No.227: Mike Latham - Wednesday 13 May 2009; Tesco Cumberland County League Premier Division: **Aspatria** 1-2 Netherhall; Attendance: 120 (h/c); No admission or programme.

The Cumberland County League strangely does not feature on many groundhoppers' radars, the lack of programme-issuing clubs being a major factor.

Despite that there are many compensations; the clubs are mostly located in scenic locations and I have found there is some good football to be enjoyed. The league also has an excellent website with results and fixtures regularly updated.

The league dates back to 1936 and its numbers increased following the disbanding of the Carlisle & District League in 2003. It covers a wide area from the coastal West Cumbrian towns around Whitehaven and Workington to Newcastleton in southern Scotland.

But declining numbers are a concern- only recently two leagues of 18 clubs operated; now there are ten clubs in the Premier Division and just nine in the Second and that includes the reserve sides of Whitehaven, Cleator Moor Celtic, Carlisle City and Windscale.

To counteract that there are five cup competitions and fixtures usually go on to the end of May, allowing many late season groundhopping opportunities.

Such was the case here, with the rare opportunity to see two unbeaten sides in mid-May playing a virtual title decider.

Aspatria, one point ahead of Maryport based Netherhall needed to win to lift the title. Their opponents, the defending champions, knew that a win would guarantee successful defence of their title while a draw would leave all to play for in their final league game against Cleator Moor Celtic Reserves in a fortnight.

Aspatra is a small town of around 3,000 people situated on the A596 between Maryport and Wigton, about six miles inland from the Solway Coast. Its name is Roman in origin, its literal meaning translated as 'the clearing of the serpent.' Agriculture forms a large part of the local economy though there is a large mattress manufacturing company and a large creamery located in the town to provide employment.

This part of Cumbria is a rugby union hotbed and the town's rugby union club regularly host Cumberland county games. They have produced many notable players, one of the most recent being Sale winger Steve Hanley who won England international honours.

The journey north from Keswick past Bassenthwaite Lake is as scenic as any in the country and Aspatria was reached in good time for the scheduled 6-45pm kick-off. The football ground is situated in St Mungo's Park, a pleasant tree lined setting with some rolling grass banks for elevated viewing.

The visitors looked as though they meant business, engaged as they were in a strenuous warm-up routine. Around 30 spectators had followed their team from Maryport and they predicted a keenly fought struggle. The opposing players knew one another well, often playing against each other either in this league or in local Sunday football while on opposing sides were two brothers- the home goalkeeper and the visitors' centre forward.

An experienced referee, Kenny Bragg, took control with two linesmen and controlled the game with an expert hand. Play was fast, fiercely contested but played in a good spirit and skilful players were allowed to play.

With the benefit of the strong wind behind him in the first half, the visitors' goalkeeper's long kicks were causing havoc. From one such kick the home defence got in a muddle and one defender headed an own goal on 25 minutes. Netherhall added a second goal with a header on the hour-mark and the league officials began to make preparations for the presentation of the trophy.

With one minute to go Aspatria scrambled a goal but Netherhall held out to lift the championship.

This was an excellent occasion and a good advert for this competitive league. A visit to Aspatria comes recommended.

06/20