

TT No.235: *Andy Gallon* - Fri 22nd May 2009; **Newton Aycliffe** v Teesside Athletic; **Shipowners Cup Final**; Res: 0-1; Att: 587; Admission: £2; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***

Newton Aycliffe have been one of the season's success stories in the North East. While Newcastle United, Sunderland and Middlesbrough were battling the threat of relegation, and Darlington struggling to breathe beneath the avalanche of debt which threatened their very existence, this small-town club have been going quietly and efficiently about their business in the relatively unheralded Wearside League. They crushed Annfield Plain 7-3 to clinch the title - and promotion to the Northern League - by a three-point margin the weekend before they hosted this game, the final of the Sunderland Shipowners Charity Cup, a competition which dates back to 1898-99. The championship triumph was all the more laudable because many of their games were played away from home at Sunnydale Leisure Centre in neighbouring Shildon while improvement work was completed at their own Moore Lane Park ground at Newton Aycliffe Sports Club, an attractive complex shared with the town's cricket, rugby union and archery clubs.

The long wait to go home, which ended at the start of April and led to an impressive average crowd of 270 over 10 games, was surely worthwhile because the site has been transformed from two bare pitches at right angles to the present arrangement into an extremely tidy little set-up. Grant aid, including almost £300,000 from Sedgefield Borough Council's local improvement programme and £20,000 from the Football Foundation, helped pay for the ground to be enclosed, the erecting of dressing rooms, dug-outs and six mast floodlights, and the laying of hardstanding. There's more to come, too. Aycliffe plan to build two stands - one seated, one terraced - along with hospitality and catering facilities. The club have been given a year's grace by Northern League grading officials to finish the job.

Access, through a soulless 1970s housing estate of the sort which proliferate in new towns, is not promising, but, happily, this uninspiring approach proves to be a red herring. Inside, it's an unexpectedly picturesque setting. The flat-roofed Sports Club, adjacent to a metalled car park and neatly painted in cream and green, provides a bar and has picnic tables on a patio overlooking the cricket pitch. The football ground can be seen over to the south, at the end of a tarmac path which describes the cricketers' boundary. A pay gate (where an excellent souvenir programme was available) in the wooden perimeter fence brings the spectator out near the north-western corner. The changing block, a large portable building spotless in fresh white paint, is to the left. Dug-outs, natty Perspex affairs, straddle the halfway line on the northern touchline, behind which is the rugby pitch - used on this evening for target practice by archers. The planned stands are earmarked for the southern side, which backs on to a wood, with houses beyond. A broad area of grass, possibly used for training, is behind the eastern end, with the busy A167, linking Darlington and Durham, thankfully hidden beyond a thick hedge.

The flat, wide pitch was in beautiful condition after an afternoon of pampering. 'Aycliffe', from two Saxon words, means 'oak clearing', and Moore Lane Park is exactly that.

Given all this, trust me, then, to catch Newton Aycliffe's young side, who'd scored an average of 3.4 goals per game, on one of the few off-days they'd had all season. Teesside Athletic, who faded to fourth in the title race after a disappointing final five games, proved their 2-0 league victory at Aycliffe on April 27 was no fluke. And the visitors from Redcar deserved their success. They got an important early goal and never really looked like surrendering the lead, being solid at the back and dangerous on the break. With the game attracting a ground record crowd of 587 (well above the previous best of 372) on a glorious summer evening, I'm sure the home officials felt they'd missed a chance to impress casual visitors and potential supporters.

Teesside, beaten 5-1 at home by Aycliffe in the league as recently as May 9, scored what proved to be the winner in the 10th minute. Roy Hunter cracked in a low free-kick from 20 yards, and his far from powerful effort somehow evaded Michael Leighton in goal. A soft one to concede. Lance Skelton and Hunter were fractionally too high from a similar range before a tight opening half ended with Liam Cooper sending a half-volley straight at visiting keeper Stuart McDonald, whose handling was faultless throughout.

The Redcar team continued to create the better chances after the restart, with twin strikers Dan Drazdauskas and James Kesterton both going close. The former's pace and muscle made him a constant threat to Aycliffe's central defenders, and attracted purrs of appreciation from a knowledgeable crowd - many, apparently, Sunderland followers. McDonald had a rare moment of anxiety in dealing with a 12-yard Kyle Swankie drive, but gathered the ball at the second attempt. The hosts' last chance came and went with 10 minutes left, Cooper slicing badly wide from the edge of the box after patient passing had left him with a clear sight of goal. Teesside celebrated their success with gusto, receiving the magnificent trophy from the Wearside League chairman, who urged Aycliffe to strike a blow for his competition by winning promotion to the First Division of the Northern League at the first attempt. Despite this below-par showing, Aycliffe will, I'm certain, be a credit to their new surroundings - on and off the field.