

**TT No.29: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 6th September 2008; **Kirkby Town v Bentley Colliery**; CML Prem Division; Res: 6-1; Att: 41 (h/c); Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

Central Midlands League clubs are queuing up to sign Kirkby Town forward Carl Haslam. After witnessing his latest one-man magic show, I'm not surprised. Haslam, who joined CML newcomers Kirkby over the summer in preference to Church Warsop after spending last season at Welbeck Welfare, is a rare talent. He scored with two absolutely sensational strikes, hit the woodwork direct from a corner, set up two other goals, went close on several other occasions and tormented the flummoxed Bentley defence throughout with his close control and clever dribbling. Kirkby officials say they get approached about the lad every week. Like many outstanding players before him, Haslam's not much to look at. He's tall but very slightly built and spent most of the half-time break feverishly topping up his nicotine intake. And he looked knackered in the last 10 minutes. But he's got that indefinable something, and certainly lit up a rain-lashed afternoon in one of the country's most depressing places.

Kirkby-in-Ashfield (to give the town its formal title) is not pretty. The cataclysmic demise of the coal mining industry and the loss of most of its once numerous railway lines has left it searching for a new *raison d'etre*. And Kirkby, so bleak it makes Mansfield look like the Cote d'Azur, hasn't found one yet. The miserable, pedestrian precinct, as dated as only 1960s architecture can be, is a study in hopelessness. There are boarded-up shops everywhere, the forlorn market cannot attract enough traders to come anywhere near to filling the available pitches and even the retailers who are open for business appear on the verge of closing their doors for good. Chief Whip Geoff Hoon, always good for a cock-up, is the local MP. If he manages to lose this seat come the next General Election, New Labour really will be in old trouble. Amid the squalor and decay, a statue of the late, great Harold Larwood dominates the market place like a sentinel. England and Nottinghamshire cricketer Larwood, born in nearby Nuncargate in 1904, was the brains behind the infamous leg theory of pace bowling which came to prominence in the legendary 1932-33 'Bodyline' Ashes series. The bronze, by Nottingham-based sculptor Neale Andrew, depicts Larwood in full cry at the point of delivery. Just to prove public art really works, the palpably heroic nature of the thing raises spirits in a gloomy town which has known more than its share of deprivation and poverty.

Kirkby Town's ground has also seen more downs than ups. Several clubs representing this hardy community have come and gone over the years, with lack of cash an enduring handicap. Town, champions of the Mansfield Sunday League last season, were formed over the summer to play in the CML, which needed to expand having lost 13 of its members. The club's home, in an earlier guise, was known as Lowmoor Road. Now, it is part of the Summit Centre (slogan: At the Peak Of The Community). As the marketing jargon has it, this is a not for profit

enterprise developed by the East Kirkby Welfare for the benefit of local people. Lottery cash (what else?) helped create the facility, which has opened in phases since 2000. And very smart it is, too. Which cannot be said of its surroundings.

The Lowmoor Inn, shut and permanently shuttered, and with bare-chested urchins splashing about with threadbare tyres in a huge oily puddle, marks the turning into Pavilion Road, opposite the sort of industrial units of a meanness which makes your heart bleed for those who have to work in them. The road leads past new but grubby houses (one of which is already boarded up) and past a cement works and joiner's yard into a metalled car park guarded by fencing daubed in gruesome anti-vandal paint. Then, thankfully, things start looking up. The futuristic Summit Centre, all red brick, grey cladding and sharp angles, is a light, bright and modern setting for pre-match refreshments and provides a chance to meet Kirkby Town's welcoming officials. If you want one of the club's colourful programmes, make sure you arrive early because the limited print runs sell out quickly.

The ground is over to the right, on the far side of an enclosed and floodlit five-a-side pitch. Players and spectators gain the near-left corner via a gate in a metal railing fence. A wooden hut serves as the turnstile. The sole stand, dedicated to one Mark 'Tiny' Crossland, is positioned between the halfway line and the penalty area, on the right touchline. With corrugated metal sheeting over a metal frame painted maroon, it provides column-free viewing on a couple of steps of concrete terracing. The remainder is concrete hardstanding alongside a post and rail barrier painted white. Note the remnants of the concrete panel fence which surrounded the pitch previously. Opposite the stand, dugouts are located either side of the halfway line. They are of breeze block painted white, with corrugated metal sheeting for roofs. Behind them, a grassy bank would be a good vantage point on a day more pleasant than this. The banking, which may have been terraced at one time, curves round behind the far goal. Red-brick semis, and their rear gardens, form the backdrop to each bank. There aren't any floodlights in what feels a very open, exposed ground.

Not entirely promising, then, especially given the awful weather, but the pitch, mowed in a sexy pattern of ever decreasing circles, is in remarkably good condition and the players treat us to an excellent first half. Kirkby dominate the opening stages and look like overrunning Bentley, who arrived only about 35 minutes before kick-off. Haslam takes just three minutes to enliven proceedings. He is put through on the right by a cross-field pass from Craig Stanton and though his low shot is scuffed it has the direction to evade Stuart Briscoe's right hand. Aaron Cordon, for Bentley, cannot match that accuracy when in the clear in the 16th minute but team-mate Karl Hope powers in a close-range header two minutes later when found unmarked by a free-kick from the right. Kirkby's David Bramwell (30) is high and wide after a sharp turn in the box and the half finishes with Paul Stanhope pushing a stiff Bradley Sykes (44) free-kick round a post.

A tight second half looks likely. But Kirkby, inspired by Haslam, score four times in eight bewildering minutes. Glenn Devine (50) volleys a good chance wide and Haslam (52) strikes the far post with a wicked in-swinging corner. This proves a

mere appetiser. For the main course, Haslam shimmies and sways past two bemused defenders on the left side of the box to cross low for Bramwell (55) to nudge the ball past Briscoe. Steve Carty takes a leaf out of Haslam's book to give Bramwell (59) a similar second before a stunning Haslam quickstep sees him skate round three defenders, and when Briscoe parries his eventual shot, Stanton (61) tucks in the rebound. Haslam (63) then switches to the right side of the field, again bamboozles a couple of Bentley players and smashes the ball voluptuously into the net off the far post. Football or an exhibition of art? Poor old Bentley cannot quite take in this turn of events but refuse to buckle completely and Kirkby have to wait until the 82nd minute for their sixth goal. Stanton collects a Bramwell knock-on to chip the defence and then smash a rising drive past the advancing Briscoe, with the ball finding the net off the underside of the bar. Stirring stuff.

Perhaps, one day, there might be a sculpture of Carl Haslam alongside Harold Larwood in the Kirkby-in-Ashfield market place. Maybe. But he'd better cut down on the fags.

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