

**TT No.42: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 13th September 2008; **Ryton** v FC Halifax Town; FA Cup First Round Qualifying; Res: 0-4; Att: 300 (est.); Admission: £6.50; Programme: £2 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

Forget Catherine Cookson. Brown tourist signs bearing the words 'Welcome to Newcastle United Country' ought to herald Tyneside's approach. For this, it seems, is a land in which the affairs of The Toon preoccupy the population. Every man, woman and child know what's going on at St James's. The club's influence on the region is of biblical proportions. Recent days have seen The Messiah (Kevin Keegan) fall out big time with Judas Escariot (Mike Ashley). Special K, the one who Walks on Water in a Geordie Wonderland, is in The Wilderness after another of his disappearing acts. Possibly for 40 days and nights. Maybe longer. It's the talk of Tyneside. A car parked close to the Ryton ground bore a sticker indicating how its owner had NUFC on his mind 24/7. It's an unhealthy obsession which is taking a tighter and tighter hold at a time when the young are encouraged to think the Premier League is the only form of football worthy of their attention. No wonder the dear old Northern League is struggling for spectators.

Despite the all-pervading speculation about the Magpies, there is considerable excitement in Ryton ('Britain's Floral Small Town') over what their programme describes as the "biggest day in the club's relatively short history". It's the FA Cup and the "illustrious visitors" are FC Halifax Town. When Ryton were formed to kick off the 1969-70 Northern Combination season, the Shaymen were playing in the old Football League Third Division. How the wheel of fortune turns. I refer to Ryton in the loosest sense because the club's charming Kingsley Park ground is in the neighbouring village of Crawcrook. This was once an industrial landscape. Coal mines proliferated and famed railway engineer George Stephenson was born in a one-room cottage down the hill in Wylam. Nowadays, the air is cleaner, the fields greener and the atmosphere quieter, though the sweeping terraces built to house miners and their families provide an unbreakable link with the past.

Kingsley Park, home to Ryton for a decade, has been hewn from the Tyne Valley's upper slopes. It is picturesquely located at the point where urban gives way to rural. From the clubhouse windows, a 180-degree vista forms a stunning backdrop as the land falls away towards the mighty river, out of sight in the trees below. The hilltop community of Prudhoe can be seen to the west, with Heddon-on-the-Wall dominating on the rising ground opposite. A small, mostly unmade, car park leads to the gabled clubhouse and a wooden hut serving as a turnstile. Such is the expected demand for booze, an al fresco bar has been laid on to supplement the pumps indoors. The view, of both ground and valley, makes the clubhouse a pleasant place to linger. As does the chance to flick through 'Northern Ventures Northern Gains', the Northern League's excellent magazine. The dressing rooms are round the back, with the players accessing the pitch via a flagged way alongside a floodlit and enclosed five-a-side facility, and then down a flight of steps. The lie of

the land means the brick-built clubhouse is above the level of the pitch on a grassy bank. And what a pitch. Similar to the one at Moat Lane, Gresley, it undulates to such an extent travel sickness may be induced in the unwary.

To the left, after passing the pay hut, is a strip of aggregate on top of the bank. Seven bus shelters to the rear provide rudimentary and rather comical cover. Like a retirement home for the species. This is the best vantage point in the ground. Even if the game is dull, the scenery is constantly diverting. It would be a terrible waste to visit Kingsley Park in bad weather or for an evening fixture. Dugouts, tall and narrow, are positioned either side of the halfway line. Flagged hardstanding below continues round the pitch, which is surrounded by a scaffolding barrier painted white. Behind the west end goal, a 25-yard cantilever cover shelters six rows of plastic tip-up seats in a mixture of Ryton's Inter Milan-esque black and blue colours. The stand is anchored permanently, the seats bolted to a temporary metal frame. To the right of the stand, for masochists only, there is a single row of uncovered seats. There are two simple - but stylish - wooden covers over flat areas of concrete on the northern side. A bungalow fills in the north-east corner, with another grassy bank at the east end rising to a line of trees. It's a good place to lose balls, as Halifax's players discovered during the pre-match kickabout. Welcome to the big time.

Ryton have made good progress since graduating to the Northern League from the Northern Alliance three years ago. They won promotion to the First Division last season having finished third in the bottom section and have made a solid start at the higher level. Given Halifax's relatively indifferent beginning to life after liquidation, and bearing in mind the idiosyncratic pitch, I fear an upset could be on the cards. A tight opening period, interesting only if you enjoy midfield arm-wrestling, does little to ease those concerns. But with 29 minutes on the clock the Yorkshiremen take the lead. Exotically named debutant Cavelle Coo, just arrived on a month's loan from Droylsden, floats in a free-kick from the right and when Lincoln Adams makes a nuisance of himself in front of keeper Ben Starford, Ashley Stott rams the loose ball into an empty net. Within a minute, Ryton squander a great chance to equalise. With all the goal to aim at from 12 yards, Anthony Healer shoots straight at John Kennedy, who was once on the books at Sunderland. Better keep quiet about that. Town's Adam Morning (39) strikes the crossbar with a crisp half-volley from 25 yards before Halifax gain a vital second goal in stoppage time. A good passing move down the right ends with Stott picking out the onrushing and unmarked Morning, and he can't miss from the middle of the penalty area.

Halifax kill the tie by making it 3-0 50 seconds after the restart. Paul Gedman, also just signed on loan for a month from Droylsden, heads in a Peter Moore cross. What his effort lacks in power, it makes up for in direction and creeps between Starford's left hand and an upright. The same two players combine for the fourth goal in the 53rd minute. Moore finds Gedman 12 yards out and the striker's clever dummy creates space for a crashing drive into the top corner. Game over. Much of the conversation, in suitably shocked tones, revolves round The Toon being 2-0 down to Premier League rookies Hull City. I'm surrounded by amateur David

Colemans, relaying to anyone within a 10-yard radius what BBC Radio Newcastle is pouring into their ears. Gedman goes close to a hat-trick with 12 minutes left. Carl Patterson clears off the line from Adams but Gedman, whose work-rate is impressive for someone claiming to be looking to get fit while at The Shay, pokes the rebound wide from close range. Ryton never give up but don't have any luck. Ross Preston (67) heads across goal when it looks easier to score and Glenn Reay (86) misses the target with an even simpler opportunity as Halifax's concentration lapses. Ryton's Latin motto translates as Second to None. Sorry but they were in this tie.

All that remains is to tune in to BBC Radio Newcastle and absorb during the drive back down the A1 the aftermath of the afternoon's shocking events at St James's. The Toon have lost 2-1. The phone-in callers are a mixture of unhappy Magpies and gloating Mackems. Tellingly, the threatened boycott of the match has failed miserably to materialise. More than 50,000 fans could not, despite what they think of owner Mike Ashley's antics, bring themselves to stay away. Even for one day. And that's maybe why Newcastle United have never amounted to much. When you can count on that sort of unconditional love, it's easy to be complacent.

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