

TT No.57: Andy Gallon - Sat 4th October 2008; **Marsden** v Kirkburton; WRCAL Prem Division; Res: 1-2; Att: 42 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: None; FGIF Match Rating: **.

Mills and hills, wind and water. Marsden, set dramatically in a spectacular semi-circular bowl at the head of the Colne Valley is, the epitome of, a South Pennines village. This is England's backbone. Sturdy rows of soot-blackened terraced cottages crouch as if sheltering from the elements which pummel and pound their tiles and chimneys in a ceaseless tattoo. Two eye-catching features rear skyward. The magnificent mills, chattering looms fallen silent but their grandeur a monument to the region's once-prosperous textile industry, are dwarfed only by the steeping hillsides climbing quickly to breezy moor tops upon whose reservoir-dabbed heathery heights one can truly feel the lord of all creation. Water was the lifeblood of Marsden's mills and here the River Colne and the Wessenden Brook collide noisily and powerfully. Within earshot of every narrow street, torrents rush and roar - first wild and free, then tamed and corralled deep within dank stone culverts. Victorian engineers in this place were not dissuaded from the challenge posed by reining in nature's worst excesses. The Leeds to Manchester railway line and the Huddersfield Narrow Canal, having climbed steadily up the narrowing gorge, both burrow through a daunting land mass by way of the awesome parallel Standedge tunnels, whose eastern portals are on the edge of Marsden. A song written locally describes them as "mouseholes in a skirting board".

To say West Riding County Amateur League Marsden's picturesque Fall Lane ground has a strong sense of place is something of an understatement. Bank Bottom Mill, a stunning if forbidding six-storey edifice opened in 1801, towers over this charming enclosure as once it cast its shadow across those who laboured long and hard within its walls and eked out an existence in the cottages huddled around its base, like worshippers at an altar. The ground is owned by the mill. The club, who celebrated their centenary last year, use it through a trust agreement and do not have a lease. This is a major problem. Marsden have talked in the past about moving into senior football via the North West Counties League but without some security of tenure they cannot apply for the grants required to improve their facilities. And so, the Cuckoos - named after a local legend - remain where they are.

But let's enjoy what there is to see - and, believe me, there's plenty. As you drive up Fall Lane, the ground is immediately to the left, slightly higher and banked up behind a dry-stone wall, hallmark of the area. Turn left at the top into Carrs Road and left again into a small unmade car park. The ground, now a little below, is laid out lengthways before you like a gem on a jeweller's cloth. The village centre is beyond, encircled by the brooding slopes, dark and austere. The changing rooms, in an oblong box of a building whose white paint is flaking away in the harsh upland climate, are to the right. A path leads to a gate in railings. Players descend

a grassy bank to the pitch; spectators bear right to the social club. This looks like a portable building, long and low, but the amount of moss on its flat roof betrays it is not a temporary solution. At the front, a canopy over hardstanding, with wire mesh protecting the windows from wayward shots at the mill end goal, provides the only cover in the ground. A pub - the up-for-sale Old New Inn - stands tall behind the social club, whose interior is cosy on a chilly autumnal day and offers hot and cold drinks. Team photographs and mementoes from past Marsden successes adorn the walls. Of particular note is an oil painting of a game in progress, with the mill a paternal, unchanging presence in the background. An adjacent shed houses the groundsman's equipment. The houses on Carrs Road are traditional millworkers terraces but behind them waves of sympathetically hewn new builds have sprung up. The highest must have a fabulous view of the watershed. These homes fade when the battle against the unforgiving terrain can no longer be won and the rough moors proper begin after the final farm intake wall.

The pitch, which slopes downhill towards the village, is surrounded by a metal post and rail fence painted white. There isn't any hardstanding, while dugouts and floodlights are conspicuous by their absence. The left side and village end are extremely narrow, with trees almost overhanging the pitch in places. There are more mill buildings - and a small mill pond - on the other side of Fall Lane. As with the main structure, these buildings are now used for storage. Textile production ceased in Marsden in 2003. Visible above the trees are three more village landmarks. The angular stone tower of St Bartholomew's Church - known as the 'Cathedral of the Colne Valley' - is over to the left. Though the church looks old, it is a 1911 rebuild. To the right, an ornate clock tower belongs to the Mechanics Institute, opened in 1861, the first of its kind, where manual workers were encouraged to get an education. Another massive mill, New Mill, sister to Bank Bottom, is adjacent on Brougham Street. Also disused, it dominates the heart of the village. Lower down the valley many redundant mills have, in recent years, been turned into fancy apartments. This effectively preserves them for future generations to marvel at and wonder about, and it's to be hoped Marsden's mills can be similarly saved. The modern brick building, rather incongruous in its design, to the rear of the bottom-right corner is a fire station. There is a triangular wedge of spare turf beyond the right touchline into which a mini pitch has been squeezed. Houses are located behind another dry-stone wall.

It is not, in all honesty, much of a game, though this isn't entirely the fault of the players. Manchester United and Chelsea would struggle to provide a spectacle in such a bracing gale. Isolated flashes of inspiration light up a dour battle on a sticky surface. Kirkburton, like Marsden promoted into the Premier Division of this league during the summer, take a grip with two early goals. Jordan Kenefick (12) puts away a diving header when an Adrian Smith cross from the right is helped on by Steve Chandler to find the scorer unmarked on the edge of the six-yard box. Adam Wilson (16) is a yard too high with a 20-yard free-kick and the same player (26) then cracks a sublime drive into the top corner from even further out. I was right in line with the shot and it was a goal from the moment ball left boot. Wilson, the

game's outstanding player, places an 18-yard volley inches wide of the target before Marsden start looking to get into the contest. Matt Poulain (38) blazes over when in space on the right side of the penalty area and a long-range free-kick from Matt Butters (42) brings a flying block out of Burton keeper Jordan Robinson.

The hosts reduce the deficit nine minutes into the second half. Carl Sykes crosses from the right and Dean Siddiq, all alone in front of goal, has the confidence to sweep a 10-yard shot into the net without breaking his stride. Much of what remains is messy and peppered with dissent towards Barnsley referee Steve Craven. The linesmen are provided by each club and told to indicate only when the ball is out of play. As you can imagine, one bloke in the middle can't get it right every time. And he doesn't. This must be a frustrating league to play in and follow. Wilson (65) loops a 16-yard header on to the roof of the Marsden net and home keeper Ash Connor gets the better of Jordan Tindle (81) in a one-on-one before Gavin Armitage wastes a stoppage-time chance to make it 3-1 when he climaxes a powerful run in off the left wing with a firm drive against an upright.

Marsden are noted for the quality of their match programme in a league of few issuers but - typically - they failed to come up with the goods for this local derby. They "usually" produce one but, clearly, be prepared to be disappointed on that score if you decide to turn industrial archaeologist and check out this lovely ground and fascinating village.

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