

TT No.87: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 11th November 2008; **Askern Villa** v Scarborough Athletic; NCEL League Cup round two; Res: 2-1 (AET); Att: 76; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Mud, mud, inglorious mud. Appositely, on the 90th anniversary of an end to the slaughter in the Flanders trenches, the area in and around the Askern Miners' Welfare was an ankle-deep quagmire. The lighting on the approaches to the ground was some way south of adequate, which meant everyone ended up with the sort of footwear a deep-sea diver would have found handy. Plus size and heavy. Seldom have I endured a more joyless evening at football. An uninteresting town, wintry weather, a featureless ground and an awful game, which, adding insult to considerable injury, meandered tediously into eyeball-rolling, dull, extra time. The sole (and I mean sole) consolation was being spared a penalty shootout. Even I, by this stage way past caring, joined with the locals in cheering Askern's 109th-minute winner.

To stretch the First World War analogy a little further, I'll suggest Askern is located in a no man's land between Selby and Doncaster. This desolate plain, once concealing priceless deposits of coal, used to be Premier League mining country. Now, of course, the pits are a mere footnote in the region's history. Colliers haven't toiled beneath Askern since 1991. I'd been to the town before, though not recently, in the football club's Central Midlands League days. The number of new houses which has mushroomed between the M62 and the village since my last visit surprised me. I guess, from a regeneration viewpoint, their advent is to be welcomed. But this, especially on a wet and wild evening, still feels like a faded, jaded community in the back of beyond. It wasn't, however, always like this. One, possibly the only, striking landmark - and a major signpost to the past - is a lake in the town centre, alongside the main A19 Selby-Doncaster road. From the 1700s to the outbreak of the First World War, people flocked, latterly by train, to Askern to 'take the waters' at what now seems a most unlikely spa. At its height, the town boasted five bathhouses and numerous hotels. The discovery of coal, and the advent of mining, killed the spa trade. Not surprising, really. Imagine either Bath or Harrogate with pitheads.

The Miners' Welfare, austere as only these buildings can be, and entrance guarded by a colliery winding wheel memorial, is on the southern fringe of the town, sandwiched between the A19 and a council estate. It all seemed very dark, as if either there weren't sufficient streetlights or those in use were fitted with 40-watt bulbs. There isn't a clubhouse at the football ground, so chances are you will select the welfare car park if you want a pre-match pint. The ground is a couple of hundred yards away. So near and yet so far. There now followed a deal of slithering about in the inky murk, searching desperately for 'terra firma' amid the sludgy grass. Eventually, having stumbled accidentally across a paved path, I found a tiny footbridge over an oily beck and came out in a car park shared by the

footballers and the adjacent cricket club. Potholes and puddles abounded. To reach the turnstiles required me, literally, to walk on water. Again, the lighting level was desperately poor. Once inside the ground, the negotiation of more sodden grass was needed before reaching the haven that was a strip of hardstanding behind the near - east - goal. Never had I been so relieved to feel concrete under my feet.

Wobbles over, it was time to take stock of the surroundings. This is a very open, exposed ground, with little (certainly at night) to detain the roving eye. The dressing rooms, behind the east goal and beyond a wide strip of waterlogged grass, are at the base of the cricket pavilion's rear. This would be, in an ideal world, a charming wooden structure, with idiosyncratic fripperies to delight. But it's not. Brick and concrete, the pavilion is as appealing as a military pill box. Refreshments are served round the front, up top, though night vision goggles would be handy to get there without mishap. The turnstile, new, along with a fence, to meet the grading requirements of the Northern Counties (East) League, is made of breeze block, painted white and roofless. The worst programme I've ever seen in this league was on sale, though NCEL standards appear to have slipped this season among the various newcomers. Metal railings, also painted white, steer the players in the direction of the pitch and continue round the playing surface. There is hardstanding behind the east goal and along most of the south side but, other than that, it's part-flattened, part-tussocky grass. The sole area of cover straddles the halfway line on the south touchline. This stand, 15 yards long by four yards deep, is a basic, column-free affair over three shallow steps of terracing. The dugouts, extended recently, by the look of it, are of breeze block and positioned immediately in front of the stand. The one curiosity of this unappealing ground is the disparity in the distribution of the floodlight masts - two on the near side; four on the far. And that's your lot, unless you want me to extol the virtues of the sweeping grassy tracts surrounding the pitch, a cowpat flat landscape and a vast, angry sky.

This promised to be a decent game, and a groundhopper from Redditch told me how he'd selected this fixture on the basis fourth (Askern Villa) were playing top (Scarborough Athletic). I'd applied the same misguided logic to the evening's entertainment. For 30 minutes, things went well. But, rather like the First World War, after speedy and promising opening engagements, the match soon became bogged down in an attritional slog - seemingly without end. I felt a bit sorry for the players, to be honest. The pitch cut up so badly, there really wasn't much they could do on it. The old timers in a crowd swelled by the Scarborough hordes (fewer than for a league game, though) weren't impressed. One heard the word 'quagmire' mentioned. "Quagmire?" he said. "You don't know what you're talking about." He didn't look like a veteran of Passchendaele, mind.

It all began so brightly. Askern, now with the suffix Villa (presumably as a fairly decent joke) rather than Miners' Welfare, went ahead inside a minute. Boro failed to deal with a probing cross to the back post and skipper Mark Vickerage laid the ball off for Daniel Ferguson, unmarked 12 yards from goal, and he drilled a low

shot past Aaran Reid. The visitors went close through Ryan Blott, who fired wide when well placed, and Richard Medcalf, who shot straight at Liam Copley. But Boro equalised with 33 minutes on the clock. Rob Ellis beat Copley in a one-on-one after Blott's clever dummy had allowed Dave Thompson's pass to evade the defence. Tom McLaughlin should have regained the lead for Askern four minutes before the break, but failed to make a clean connection inside the six-yard box, and a relieved Reid was able to make a save.

Villa (how daft does it sound?) went even nearer in the 55th minute when Boro's Joel Hartley, a tricky, old fashioned winger, cleared a Melvyn Cotton header off the goal-line. It then began to rain heavily, testing the capacity of the small stand, and further damaging the Somme-like pitch. With both sides bedded down in their trenches and mounting only sporadic attacks, extra-time was inevitable. Askern, the more adventurous team during normal time, upped the ante over the additional 30 minutes. Curtis Walker, who has been watched by Sheffield Wednesday and Doncaster Rovers lately, volleyed weakly when clear in the 100th minute, and Reid turned his effort round a post. Vickerage (103) was inches wide with an angled 12-yarder and, six minutes later, Ferguson hit the winner, slipping the ball home from close range at the far post after a low Jonathan Mirfin cross had eluded everyone else. The avoidance of a penalty competition owed everything to Villa keeper Copley, who pulled off two breath-taking diving saves in the climactic moments to deny first Mark Griffin and then fellow substitute Danny Gray.

I couldn't possibly recommend a visit to Askern, but if you're intent on going, make sure it's for a daylight game on a dry day. Otherwise, take a miner's lamp and a frogman's outfit.

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