

TT No.113: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 5th December 2009; **Crook Town** v Shildon; FA Vase third round; Res: 2-4; Att: 250 (est.); Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

If I had to pick, say, just 10 non-league UK football venues worth visiting, the Millfield Ground would make my list. Even empty, the place has presence, atmosphere and a sense of history. Crook Town may now be living hand to mouth in the Second Division of the Northern League, but their home since 1898 is a signpost to past riches. Gazing around the grassy banking, it's not hard to imagine the five-figure crowds commonplace here in the 1950s and early 1960s, during which time the Black & Ambers won the FA Amateur Cup four times and took the Northern League championship on three occasions.

Given the recent deluges, it was a minor miracle that this FA Vase tie against neighbours Shildon went ahead. Had the weather-beaten west Durham hills not escaped without a drop of rain following an overnight downpour, the match would certainly have succumbed. Crook secretary Kieran Bennett had warned us the pitch was "a bog", but said an army of volunteers was engaged in mopping-up operations, and added that the referee, travelling up from York, was determined to play the game, whatever the conditions. Good lad. As it was, tons of sand were needed to absorb the worst of the water. The pitch was playable - just. And, to prove it, what a thrilling contest these famous old clubs put on for a bumper crowd. More of that later, but suffice to say there were six goals, with Shildon decisively scoring twice in second-half stoppage time, three penalties (one saved brilliantly), numerous near-misses and a sending-off.

Crook is a small town hunkered down in the lee of a spit of high ground to escape the worst of the wind howling remorselessly across the Pennines from the west. Since the demise of the coal mines, once this isolated community's lifeblood, Crook residents have had to settle for the quiet life. The same goes for their impoverished football club. The glories of yesteryear will never return, which makes watching a game at the Millfield Ground an especially poignant experience.

The railway, a branch from Witton Junction on the Bishop Auckland to Frosterley line through Weardale, once cut Crook in two. The town rang - round the clock - to the sound of steam engines, whistles and shunting trucks. Until its closure in 1965, the metals, suddenly redundant without pits and the Bankfoot by-products works to serve, ran in front of the turnstile block at the south end of the Millfield Ground on a course now occupied by the road heading towards Stanhope and Wolsingham. Given what lies beyond, it's tempting to dive straight through the turnstiles, but the photographs on the walls of the adjacent social club merit inspection. On this unusually busy day, getting through the door was an achievement in itself. The images are evocative. Crook Town at Wembley, a packed Millfield Ground, souvenirs from the club's 10 meetings with Barcelona, and pictures of a tour to

India in 1976 - including one of a team posing in front of a 100,000 crowd in Calcutta. Amazing.

Climb the bank behind the turnstiles, and the Millfield Ground is spread before you. Nine steps of terracing run the width of the south end, and provide a perfect vantage point. To the left, on the west side, are two contrasting stands. That furthest away is a splendid affair, dating from 1925. How much of the original structure remains is a subject for speculation, but it has been re-clad and repainted tidily in the club's black and amber colours. It is a classical stand of its era. There is a shallow standing paddock in front of and below the seating tier, a central players' tunnel (though the away team emerge from a door on the left side), a steeply pitched roof, and bench seats, reached by two sets of stone steps, raked to provide an excellent, if somewhat obstructed, view of the action. This is because, in addition to the four roof columns, one of the ground's six floodlight pylons pokes through the roof. From the seats, you look over the rooftops of the town - including an obtrusive four-storey pagoda housing the local authority - to a hillside which rears majestically to the east. Substantial dugouts, in white-painted brick, are located either side of the halfway line, and you'll find the team-sheet pinned up in an alcove to the left of the tunnel. A flat roofed red-brick shed is positioned between the main stand and its newer neighbour, and is used to prepare and serve (painfully slowly) refreshments. The more modern stand is similar to those at Esh Winning, a few miles up the road. It shelters nine steps of terracing, which curve round from the south end, and has a high roof, whose fascia is tilted sharply upward like the peak of a baseball cap.

The north end, east side and the furthest segment of the west side consist of grass banks, which must have looked marvellous when occupied by a big crowd. They are largely unused these days, with a narrow concrete path, which runs round the ground, providing adequate accommodation. A barrier of white concrete posts and two black metal rails surrounds the pitch. It's neat, tidy and draws together what could easily be a rather rambling, disparate venue. The Millfield Ground is hemmed in by houses, many of them bungalows, with only the south end, post-Beeching, allowed much in the way of space to breathe.

The build-up to this game had been marred by the midweek resignation of Crook manager Peter Dixon and his assistant Paul Foster. It seems one of the club's sponsors had pulled out, and the two were not thrilled about an impending cut in wages and budget. Word is, they're off to Northern League First Division struggler's, West Auckland Town, where more cash has been promised. It seems likely a lot of the Crook players will desert, too. This was to be the last game with Dixon and Foster at the helm.

We feared Crook might simply go through the motions - and, thankfully, couldn't have been more wrong. The home team were desperately unlucky. They dominated for long periods, had the chances to win, battled heroically with 10 men for the last 35 minutes, and were undone cruelly by two Shildon strikes in added time.

Not that things began well for Crook. Shildon, from the First Division of the Northern League, went ahead in the 13th minute when Chris Bell's cross from the right flank was headed in from close range by Danny Richmond. The midfielder jumped with two defenders and the goalkeeper, and sustained a head injury for his bravery. As a cartoon-esque lump appeared above an eye, Richmond had to be replaced. Crook, playing superbly on a surface with the consistency of rice pudding, should have equalised between the 23rd and 25th minutes. Gavin Barton shot tamely at goalkeeper Keith Finch when well placed, and saw a defender get in the way of a goal-bound effort, before skipper Daryll Hall's back-post volley crashed to safety off the outside of an upright.

Shildon somehow survived to the break, but Crook equalised in bizarre circumstances six minutes after the restart. Lanky winger Adam Nichols ended a fine run in from the left wing with a shot which flew high and wide. The referee gave a goal-kick, but having consulted a wildly flagging linesman, awarded a penalty. Ignoring the air of incredulity pervading pitch and terraces, Darren Kokes rammed in a well-struck equaliser. Four minutes later, Crook left-back Andrew Green was shown a straight red for apparently raising his arms while holding on to the ball in an attempt to prevent a free-kick from being taken quickly. There was nothing in the incident. Again, there was astonishment on and off the pitch as he trudged disconsolately in the direction of an early bath.

If anything, Crook did even better a player down. They were soon a goal down, however, with Shildon scoring again in the 57th minute. Bell saw an angled drive parried by Dave Lanning, but was first to the loose ball and, from a tight angle, hammered the ball high into the net. Kokes replied with an effort which brought a diving save out of Finch before Crook won a second penalty with 19 minutes left. Phil Brumwell, once a pro at Darlington, clearly, and foolishly, tripped Barton when the impressive striker had his back to goal, and Kokes, aiming for the other side of the net this time, made it 2-2 with another confident spot-kick.

That wasn't the end of the drama. In the 74th minute, Shildon's Steven Johnson skated smoothly through the mud, and rounded three defenders on a burst down the middle which came to an abrupt halt when Lanning brought him down. Astonishingly, the Crook goalkeeper was neither cautioned nor dismissed, and added insult to injury by flinging himself to his right to divert over the bar Adam Johnson's driven penalty. Kokes was a foot wide with a 25-yard pot shot at an empty goal after a weak Finch clearance, but Shildon stole victory as the match moved into stoppage time. A deep ball from the left fell to Bell beyond the right post, and his cross from the dead-ball line was turned in by Adam Johnson, who had raced up in support, and with Lanning lured out of position, had the simple task of finding an empty net from six yards. Finally, Crook's heads went down, and they conceded a fourth, which gave the final score a wholly misleading look. John Butler was given time to shoot from 20 yards, and though Lanning got both hands to his effort, the ball had enough momentum to pat-a-cake in the mud and roll over the line. It was very hard on poor Crook, who had given their all to a pulsating encounter.

So, another setback for Crook to take on the chin. But the people here are used to battling against adversity. Let's hope the club can move forward from the obvious unpleasantness caused by the departure of their managerial team. Crook may never rise to their former heights, but it would be good to see the club in the top division of the Northern League. The Millfield Ground, in every respect a grand stage, deserves that much at least.

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