

TT No.119: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 12th December 2009; **Tow Law Town v Consett**; Northern League Division One; Res: 0-0; Att: 105 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Another Saturday, another iconic Northern League venue. Last weekend the Millfield Ground in Crook, this weekend Ironworks Road at Tow Law. There's nowhere, as it were, quite like Tow Law. This friendly club are happy to accept that Northern Premier League Buxton pip them to the title of 'highest ground in England', but Ironworks Road - isolated, surrounded by hills and with stunning moorland views to the south, west and north - feels as though it, rather than The Silverlands, should have the accolade.

The Lawyers have played at their distinctive, atmospheric enclosure since 1892-93, when miners, finding themselves with time on their hands during a strike, dug the place out of the steeply sloping valley side. Striking pitmen were back again, in 1921, to rebuild a ground which, recently, has undergone another impressive transformation. Pride of place goes to a splendid new clubhouse, paid for with £70,000 of grant aid from the Football Foundation and Ferryhill-based Banks Developments, who specialise in regeneration and have been a long-time supporter of the Northern League. More cash was wheedled-out of Wear Valley District Council to do up the characterful main stand, and Tow Law have just clinched another sizeable award to erect a £28,000-plus wind turbine above the terracing on the east side. This will generate electricity for the club's exclusive use, and any surplus will be diverted into the National Grid. The imaginative project is expected to raise about £5,000 a season - useful income at this level.

A December visit to Tow Law - perched on a spine of high ground between valleys high up in the west Durham hills - is not an expedition to be undertaken lightly. Multi-layering, and not spending too long in the toastie clubhouse before kick-off, is the key to staying warm during the 90 minutes of on-field action. In clear, windless conditions, we thought it was pretty chilly, especially when a blanket of fog began to roll in ominously just before half-time, but the hardy locals, who take a real pride in the harshness of their micro-climate, reckoned it was a canny afternoon. Certainly, they said, compared to the previous Tuesday night, when Consett were again the visitors for a Brookes Mileson League Cup tie. Even the Lawyers fans, seemingly impervious to winter's icy blast, commented on how cold they'd been when returning to the sanctuary of their firesides, having seen the match abandoned in the 55th minute owing to freezing fog.

You'll find Ironworks Road at the north end of a village (with a population of less than 2,000, it's hardly a town) which straggles out along the spectacular A68 Darlington to Corbridge road. The new clubhouse, opposite a foundry and in the south-east corner of the ground, is likely to be your first port of call. Smart, modern and tasteful, this is a marvellous place for a pre-match pint. A range of souvenirs is available behind the bar. Don't be put off by the building's unadorned

exterior. Blandness stops the moment you cross the threshold. The adjacent turnstile brings the spectator out at the south end, with netting suspended from poles designed to protect houses and cars on Ironworks Road. To the right, there is a refreshment hatch in the wall of the club house. Five steps of uncovered terracing are to the left, with the long, narrow building beyond housing the dressing rooms. Notice how the pitch slopes downhill with the ruling terrain from east to west. The east side consists of more uncovered terracing, and waste ground behind is used for parking by players and officials. This is where the wind turbine will be located.

The main stand, about 20 yards long and straddling the halfway line, is on the west side. It is a simple, propped cover over four rows of black and white plastic tip-up seats. If the random numbering on them is puzzling, that's because they came from Darlington's old Feethams ground. Club secretary Steve Moralee, fed up with a day's shopping in town with his missus, popped along to the Quakers' former home to see how demolition was progressing, and bought on the spot a job lot of seats from the contractors for a bargain £1 apiece. It's a lovely stand, emblazoned in the club's black and white colours and Lawyers nickname. The rear wall, dazzling in black and white stripes, boasts a wonderful mural in the centre. The lower left area is reserved for the disabled. Dugouts, low and red brick, are positioned either side of the halfway line at the front of the stand. More netting either side doesn't always - not in this game, at least - prevent balls flying out of the ground and down towards the cottages clinging to the side of the valley. Peep over the perimeter fence from the cramped strips of flagged hardstanding next to the stand and you get a magnificent view of the surrounding hills.

The stand at the north end is a cracker, and possibly the best place to be when the wind gets up. In a style, reminiscent, of Luton Town's Kenilworth Road, its low roof climbs upwards in three separate steps. Again, this is a simple, propped cover over a couple of broad steps of terracing. The club's name and badge features in the centre of the fascia behind the goal, and on the rear wall. There are 13 black and white plastic tip-up seats in each corner. Refugees from Feethams, the lot. There is a hummocky field to the rear before the land rises to a bank of trees. The pitch is surrounded by a neat barrier of white concrete posts and black railings, and overlooked to the east by a number of houses. The four spindly mast floodlights along both sides have two lamps on each.

Goalless this keenly-fought contest on a boggy surface between teams respectively placed eighth and seventh in the First Division might have been, but lacking in excitement it was not. Northern League games are generally frenetic, and derbies in the competition are even more frantic. Only good goalkeeping, wayward finishing and an unimpressive referee's failure to award Tow Law what looked an obvious penalty late in the second half, prevented a break in the deadlock.

The game kicked off in bright sunshine, but fears of fog, encountered already at various places and times during the day, were never far from our thoughts. Consett, who brought a decent number of fans with them, had the better of the first half. Daniel Olusoga hit the roof of the net with a chip from the right side of

the box after keeper Barry Poskett had fumbled the ball at the feet of the diminutive, but speedy, Gavin Parkin. Poskett did well to palm aside a first-time, 20-yard David Pounder effort which reared up in front of him, before Olusoga volleyed over the bar with the net at his mercy after the Lawyers keeper had parried a fierce Gary Ormston drive. The best Tow Law could muster in reply was a curling, 18-yard shot from Andrew Thompson, dealt with well by Steelmen keeper Daniel Staples, who got down quickly to push it round his right-hand post.

The fog, advancing like infantry across no man's land, duly arrived during the last 10 minutes of the half, though, thankfully, it had cleared substantially by the time the players emerged for the second period. The visitors again had the best of the proceedings. Parkin and Andy Burton, whose fancy footwork at left-back caught the eye, both shot straight at Poskett when well placed, before Tow Law's Thompson aimed across Staples and wide of the far post after a lively passing movement. The referee, Mr Keogh, who had angered both benches, and flummoxed the assessor next to us, with some bizarre decisions, blundered badly in the 72nd minute. Right-back Matthew Gowland clearly tripped Lawyers striker Lewis Teasdale in the area, and yet the whistler waved play on. Poskett had to dive to deny Steven Huggins from 20 yards, and opposite number Staples did even better when he tipped over a fizzing Daniel Craggs effort from a similar range. Incredibly, Mr Keogh, whom we'd seen perform equally badly at Ashington a few weeks previously, awarded a goal-kick. Consett almost snatched victory with five minutes left. Parkin danced round Poskett and planted a firm shot in the direction of goal, but the alert and fleet-footed Craggs got back to boot the ball off the goal-line. A draw was a fair, if unlikely, result. Before this match, Tow Law had been held just once in 23 league games, and Consett in two of their 22.

For those whose eyes are left jaded by modern stadia, a trip to the wilds of Tow Law is a must. Ironworks Road is a smashing little ground, bursting with individuality and whose incomparable setting merely adds to its charms. If you do visit, gaze around this cosy arena and marvel at how a record crowd of 5,500 was squeezed in during the 1967-68 season when the Lawyers trimmed Mansfield Town, then a Football League club, 5-1 in the first round of the FA Cup. "It was like playing at the North Pole," the Stags manager remarked. Shrewsbury Town were held 1-1 in the west Durham hills in the second round before Tow Law lost 6-2 in the Gay Meadow replay. That result meant Arsenal were spared a trip to Ironworks Road in round three in January. One leading journalist of the time described that prospect as "a fate worse than death". It's a long way from that, but if you do decide to go there in mid-winter, make sure you wrap up well. True to form, as we dropped down towards West Auckland on the A68 en route home, the lingering remnants of fog disappeared. In every respect, Tow Law is another world.