

TT No.137: Mike Latham - Saturday 16 January 2010: Vodkat League First Division: AFC Blackpool 1-0 Irlam; Attendance: 74; Admission: £5; Programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

The Vodkat League (North West Counties League) had suffered more than most from the ravages of the wintry weather and had endured four successive blank Saturdays either side of Christmas.

At long last, salvation appeared in a little oasis on the Fylde Coast. Despite all the other league fixtures being postponed AFC Blackpool's game with Irlam got the go-ahead after an early morning pitch inspection.

After all the problems with the weather it was something of a surprise, therefore, to arrive at Jepson Way and find the playing surface looking absolutely immaculate. The pitch was green, flat and with no trace of water or snow and the surrounds equally free from any hint of the weather that had held the country in its icy grip.

AFC Blackpool is one of three clubs that operate within a few hundred yards of one another with Squires Gate, from the Premier Division of the Vodkat League and Wren Rovers, a former NWCL side now operating in the West Lancashire League in close proximity. Fleetwood have also opened an impressive, floodlit training base within a few hundred yards of the ground that is also used for reserve and youth team fixtures and is known as Collins Park.

The club's roots can be traced back to just after the second world war when, playing as Blackpool Metal Mechanics, home games were staged at Stanley Park before the current ground was inaugurated in 1949.

After playing in local leagues Mechanics joined the West Lancashire League and then the Lancashire Combination before the North West Counties League was formed in 1982. In 2005 there was a merger with Lytham St Annes FC who had just won the West Lancashire League Division One title and the club was re-named AFC Blackpool in May 2008 when Blackpool Mechanics FC and Squires Gate Junior FC merged together.

Close to Blackpool Airport and about two-and-a-half miles from J4 of the M55 motorway, the ground is named after Mechanics' long-serving late secretary and founder member Walter Jepson. Despite being close to a new housing estate there is still plenty of room for the club to develop its facilities and an added bonus is the close proximity to the Shovels, a popular real ale establishment on the main road between Lytham St Annes and Blackpool that is rated by those that know these things as one of the finest pubs in the County Palatine.

I had first visited the ground to watch rugby league in the early 1990s when Blackpool Gladiators RLFC (who began as Blackpool Borough) played out their existence at the Mechanics ground in the early 1990s before leaving the senior

Rugby League in 1993 and finally folding in 1997 following several years in the amateur ranks. Though little had changed since that time the welcome was still warm and the ground was immaculately maintained.

With cover on all four sides, standing behind both goals and two seated stands on either side of the halfway line, a pitch that is superbly kept and perfectly flat, the facilities are as good as any in the Vodkat League. The clubhouse is situated next to the dressing rooms at the entrance and there are good bar facilities and a small tea bar that cheerfully dispenses hot drinks and pie and peas. With so much competition locally Mechanics, as they are still known, inevitably struggle for support but despite Blackpool hosting Queen's Park Rangers down the road, attracted 74 paying spectators including several groundhoppers.

AFC Blackpool won the game with a goal midway through the first-half but that only tells half the story. Fourth-placed Irlam dominated a feisty game for long spells territorially and did everything but score. There was a certain inevitability when they contrived to miss a penalty two minutes from time, the impressive home 'keeper diving to his left to pull off a fine save.

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