

TT No.154: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 6th February 2010; **Workington** v Solihull Moors; Conference North; Res: 1-0; Att: 368; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

When, in the late summer of 1986, as a fresh-faced university graduate, I started work in West Cumbria, one of the first things I wanted to see was Borough Park. The fate of clubs losing their Football League status has always fascinated me, and Workington, made somehow exotic by their geographical isolation, were of particular interest. I could remember watching the Reds thrashed 6-1 at The Shay by Fourth Division rivals Halifax Town during what proved the visitors' League swansong in the 1976-77 season. Workington, who on occasion attracted crowds of less than 1,000 in a community where rugby league and speedway tend to be more popular, won just four of their 46 games, conceded 102 goals, and were voted out in favour of flash, brash Wimbledon, therefore ending a League career of 26 largely unsuccessful seasons. No other Football League club, it seemed, was keen on the idea of a long coach trip to Workington any more - even if the trek did virtually guarantee two points. They'd managed to get rid of Barrow, another Cumbrian outpost of the game, in 1972, and here was a golden opportunity to dispense with the Reds. Job done.

In 1986, the fabric of Borough Park was pretty much as it had been nine years earlier. The Main Stand still had its upper seating tier and roof, there was cover at the Derwent End, and the traditional corner floodlight pylons were at their original height. Having started the season playing for Greetland in the West Yorkshire League, I decided to maintain fitness by training with the Reds. I did this for a few weeks, and played once for the reserves, before realising my commitments as a journalist - not to mention my modest football talents - made it impossible to carry on. But it was a great insight into life at a friendly club. I got to train alongside the first team, then in the Northern Premier League, and after what to me seemed like exceptionally tough work-outs running up and down grass banking next to the River Derwent, cleaned up in the communal plunge bath in the home dressing room. Let's not explore this too carefully, but it did give me a strange thrill to think I was parking my backside in the same tiled spot as so many ex-League players. There was, in essence, a sense of history at the club. These were corridors once patrolled by such notable former managers as Bill Shankly, Keith Birkinshaw and Ken Furphy.

I met, and quickly became good mates with, a couple of Reds fans of my age who had returned after graduation to nearby Whitehaven, where I was working. We did a lot of groundhopping, especially in Scotland, but were fairly regular Borough Park attenders for midweek fixtures. At this time, the Reds were really struggling. The ground was starting to fall to pieces, the team hardly ever won, and gates hovered around the 150 mark. Long-serving secretary and ex-programme editor Steve Durham, now a life vice-president of the club, once told me: "I sometimes think we

invented bad luck." But Steve and a gallant band of enthusiasts kept the Reds afloat. After I departed for Teesside and a new job at the start of 1992, things got worse, and Workington plunged into the stygian depths of the North West Counties League. But in 1998-99 they won the championship at the first attempt, and crowds soared (some beyond 2,000) as they bounced back to the NPL. It was the first title secured by the Reds. There has been good progress since, and this season they are busy consolidating their place in Conference North, and have reached the quarter-finals of the FA Trophy - ironically with a shock third-round win at Conference National AFC Wimbledon. Interest in the club is building steadily again.

So, the need to visit Workington to write a magazine feature about the town's three famous Uppies and Downies festival football games contested every Easter presented an opportunity for a nostalgic trip down Memory Lane. I arranged the interviews for mid-morning, leaving plenty of time to have a harbour-side lunch, and show my partner what few sights Workington can offer, before taking in the Reds' match with Solihull Moors. We were rewarded with a cloudless sky for our expedition. In dazzling sunshine, the drive from York over the stark wilderness of Stainmore on the A66, then on beneath Blencathra's precipitous slopes, and along the shores of a hauntingly motionless Bassenthwaite Lake, under Skiddaw's solemn gaze, was a real treat. The fells, all winter shades, were topped with pockets of snow, and physical signs of the recent flooding which brought tragedy and despair to the area seemed few and far between.

Borough Park really is a mess now. So much so, the club's decision to turn their back on a proposed groundshare with rugby league neighbours Workington Town is simply baffling. Tesco are close to signing off an £18m purchase of a large plot of land called Laundry Field on The Cloffocks, part of which accommodates Borough Park. Allerdale District Council had planned to use some of the windfall to build an all-seater stadium for Town and the Reds on the site between the two present grounds which is occupied by a Tesco store. This was once Town's training ground, sold to pay off debts. But the Reds rejected the idea. The two clubs had shared Borough Park in the 1950s, when Town were formed. They weren't happy bedfellows, and in Bill Shankly's time as manager of the Reds, he made it clear he didn't want a rugby league team messing up his pitch. In the end, Town decamped a few hundred yards closer to the docks, and built Derwent Park, also home, off and on, to the Comets speedway club since the 1970s. Apparently, the Reds didn't want their independence threatening, but Borough Park is in such a sorry state, it's going to cost millions to put it anything near right. And as I remarked after my recent visit to Highbury Stadium, Fleetwood (see the report at TT910147), you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. However, much sentiment ties you to a location, sometimes you're simply better off starting again elsewhere.

The Main Stand, on the west touchline, at Borough Park is an eyesore. Safety concerns in the late 1980s led to the seating tier and roof being crudely lopped off, and the void covered with unsightly metal sheeting. The forlorn terraced paddock in front remains, with the central area now occupied by a 20-yard kit-type stand whose seats are reserved for the media, club officials and guests.

Underneath, at the north end of the stand, is a cramped, low-ceilinged social club, which is scarcely any more appealing than it was when Terry, Ian and I used to go in for a half-time pint amid dankness reminiscent of a cave. The entrance to the central players' tunnel is guarded by iron gates painted white, with modern dug-outs - the sort produced by double glazing manufacturers - either side of the halfway line. Note the unusual floodlights. The traditional four corner pylons were once much taller and quite graceful, but had to be reduced substantially in height because their condition had become dangerous. To the rear of the stand is a narrow strip of tarmac serving as a car park, beyond which the temporarily closed road to Northside runs towards the River Derwent bridge which collapsed, killing a police officer, during the recent storms.

Opposite, the Popular Side Stand, a basic, multi-columned cover over terracing, spans the zone between the two penalty areas. This used to be standing room only, but had five rows of black plastic tip-up seats installed to compensate for the loss of those in the Main Stand. From here, looking west, you can see the floodlights of Derwent Park. To the rear used to be the now-raised Lonsdale Park greyhound stadium, also on The Cloffocks. The Derwent End, to the north, had a timeworn, pitched-roof cover over the steps right at the back. It was identical to that which still remains at the facing Town End. The terracing at the front is still used, but the rest has been abandoned as a grassy bank. The River Derwent, out of sight, flows towards the Irish Sea to the rear, and beyond houses on the Northside council estate are ranged across the horizon. Numerous wind turbines, which have sprung up all over Workington in recent years, are also visible.

The corrugated metal cover at the Town End is a real museum piece, and the amount of rust visible among its girders suggests this, too, won't survive the salty sea air much longer. Pop your head through the access gap midway along the cover, and more evidence of Borough Park's depressing decay can be seen. A grassy bank leads down to turnstiles which haven't seen customers in a long, long time - and almost certainly won't ever again. Beyond here, between the ground and the offices of Allerdale District Council, is Soapery Beck, a murky watercourse. A small bridge crosses it, and this is the scopping (or throwing) off point for the annual Uppies and Downies games, which start at 6.30pm on Good Friday, Easter Tuesday and the following Saturday. The backdrop here is dominated by the squat, but attractive, parish church of St Michael's, its tower hunkered down against the icy winds whipping off the cruel sea. Take it from me, when the weather's vile, which it often is on this exposed coastline, Workington is as bleak a place as they come.

I'll give the Reds the benefit of the doubt about this performance, which extended their unbeaten sequence to 12 games, and was preceded by Darren Edmondson being presented with the Conference North manager of the month award for January. Their display had 'After the Lord Mayor's Show' written all over it. Judging by the hyperbole in the programme, Workington were sensational at AFC Wimbledon last week. Up there with the best days in the club's history, according to Steve Durham. Not so against Solihull Moors, who weren't too particular about what they kicked, and will surely struggle to avoid relegation. For me, it was like

being transported back in time almost two decades. The Reds on top, but failing to take their chances, and, in the end, hanging on grimly for a dour single-goal victory. T'was ever thus.

Beanpole striker and top scorer Gareth Arnison got the winner in the 41st minute. Phil McLuckie charged down Phil Midworth's clearance, and crossed from the right for an unmarked Arnison to guide a 10-yard header into the unguarded far side of the goal, with keeper Danny Crane protecting his near post. Three other incidents in the first half are worth a mention. Reds keeper Tony Caig saved superbly from Liam Murray in the second minute, Arnison, a man apparently incapable of staying on his feet, saw a decent penalty shout turned down in the 20th, and the slender marksman struck a post eight minutes later when put through on goal by a deft Jonny Wright lob.

As the heavy pitch cut up after the break, the quality faded. Moors' Ryan Beswick hit the side-netting after a purposeful break, Crane twice denied Anthony Wright in quick succession, and then clutched an Arnison header, before visiting skipper Lee Downes had a first-time effort from the edge of the box deflected an agonising foot wide of the far post. But the Reds, marshalled well by centre-half Lee Andrews, looked solid enough at the back. "A win's a win," reflected one old timer as he headed for home and a warming fire at the final whistle. Despite that deservedly sparse praise, it was an enjoyable afternoon at Borough Park - like meeting a friend from the past. Sad, though, to see the old girl in such reduced circumstances. Not for the first time this season, I gazed around and marvelled at how the scene must have looked when a ground secured its record attendance. In this case, 21,000 for the visit of Manchester United in the FA Cup in 1958, shortly before the heartbreak of Munich. Amazing. Home, I believe, is where the heart is, and however dowdy Borough Park has become, Reds devotees will always love this patch of grass they call their own.

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