

TT No. 159: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 13th February 2010; **Euxton Villa** v Haslingden St Mary's; West Lancs Premier; Res: 1-1; Att: 60 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

You don't need an array of impressive stands to create a characterful set-up - and Euxton Villa are living proof of that groundhopping axiom. They made their home at Runshaw Hall Lane, a mile from the residential village of Euxton, as recently as 1986. Euxton is pronounced with a silent 'u', and was once famous for a Royal Ordnance munitions factory which employed up to 40,000 in its heyday. Since closure, the land has been used to create Buckshaw Village, one of the biggest urban developments in the North West. Though basic, the Jim Fowler Memorial Ground boasts a sylvan setting of considerable charm. A smart clubhouse, whose pleasant bar is the beating heart of a friendly little club, was opened in October 2008. Essentially, there's everything here a club in the Premier Division of the West Lancashire League could need - and that bit extra to make it a memorable destination for the traveller.

Euxton FC were formed in 1907, and played in the West Lancashire and Preston & District Leagues. Their early years were nomadic before they settled on a site off Runshaw Lane, close to where the village shops are now located. In 1986, the club managed to buy a large plot of land adjacent to Runshaw Hall Lane, and part of the Runshaw Hall estate. Two years later, they merged with Euxton Villa Juniors, and changed their name. They run 15 teams of all age groups in various leagues. It's a great success story, and particularly laudable given the number of competing clubs in this football hotbed. Villa's non-league neighbours include Chorley, Charnock Richard, Coppull United and Fulwood Amateurs, while professional powerhouses Preston North End and Bolton Wanderers have long been major attractions.

The ground is located opposite Runshaw Hall, a minor country pile latterly owned by the Bretherton family, and now converted, along with its outbuildings, into posh apartments. A narrow lane opens out into a large car park, part of a spacious site featuring three full-size pitches, a junior pitch and several small training areas. The clubhouse, opened by Chorley MP Lindsay Hoyle, is ahead as you enter the car park, with the first team ground immediately behind. The other pitches stretch away to the left, or east. The dressing rooms and toilets are part of the clubhouse, whose bar has French windows looking onto the ground. Bag a prime table, and it's the perfect place to linger over a pre-match mug of tea. Portsmouth were battering Southampton in the south coast derby as we pondered the game ahead. Villa, who don't charge for admission, are one of the few West Lancs clubs still issuing a programme, and these are available behind the bar. Take time to check out the many framed shirts on the walls. They include signed examples from Bolton Wanderers, Rochdale and Wigan Athletic.

Your abiding memory of the Jim Fowler Memorial Ground is likely to be the wonderful trees, which tower over the pitch on three sides. Judging by the number of logs lying about, those on the east side have recently received the attentions of a tree surgeon. The pitch, which undulates noticeably, is surrounded by a barrier of black wooden posts and white metal railings, with the gaps infilled by orange plastic netting. There are neither stands nor floodlights, though there is hardstanding at the near end and midway up each side. Two modern Perspex dug-outs straddle the halfway line on the west touchline, while a much older - and more appealing - version remains in place opposite. A murky, narrow brook separates the west side of the ground from Runshaw Hall Lane, and the club use a specially designed long-handled tool to fish out the numerous balls booted into the water. A small lake secreted among the trees in the south-west corner is a haunt of anglers. There isn't, given the presence of brook, lake and trees, much room to build stands here, though there is an area of grass behind the far goal which could be brought into play should the need arise.

I figured this fixture between two clubs looking to pull away from the relegation zone would be closely contested, and so it proved. It was exciting, end-to-end stuff, though Villa will reflect with regret on the number of chances they squandered. Judging by first team coach Mark Warburton's reflections in the programme, this has been a problem all season. He said: "We have given most teams plenty to think about. We have dominated long periods, but not killed teams off." Credit to Haslingden St Mary's, though. The visitors might have chosen to sit back on an early lead, but did not. They were always dangerous on the break, and pushed for a winner in the closing stages as enthusiastically as their hosts.

St Mary's were quickly out of the blocks, and went ahead in the eighth minute with a well-taken finish. Micky Lee crossed from the left flank, an unmarked Chris Scott climbed at the near post to place a glancing header wide of exceptionally tall keeper Ross Baxter and into the far bottom corner. Villa improved from the moment they gave speedy - but hitherto isolated - striker Danial Hogg more support. A combination of keeper and defenders prevented Stuart Bingham equalising with a diving header after Elliot Dunn had hooked the ball into the six-yard box. Hogg then took too long to shoot when through on the left side of the penalty area, with his eventual effort blocked by a defender, and Dunn struck the bar from 16 yards with a rising drive. St Mary's keeper Chris Cogger palmed Gavin Cooper's 20-yard free-kick over the bar, and the visitors survived two huge scrambles, before the equaliser arrived a minute before the break. Cooper played a free-kick from near the right-hand corner flag into the centre of the box, and Sam Bolton, unchallenged, crashed a five-yard header into the net. It had been coming.

Villa bossed the second half, but couldn't find a winner, leaving the bench wringing hands and shaking heads in frustration. Cooper's powerful run down the middle and subsequent fierce shot forced a fine tip over from Cogger as the hosts began the half as they meant to go on. Hogg, a real handful to the St Mary's back four, saw a close-range effort somehow deflected over the bar, and the pacey Villa striker

then planted an angled drive a yard wide of the far post having dispossessed a defender and lured Cogger out of his goal. Hogg sliced a shot when clear, and, with 10 minutes left, Dunn saw a bullet header hit the underside of the bar and then the inside of a post before being cleared. Haslingden remained a threat, though, and keeper Baxter had to be alert to palm over a fizzing Scott pot shot from outside the box. Villa continued to press, but St Mary's held out for a hard-earned point, which might prove priceless come the end of the season. At present, just four points separate the bottom six clubs. The title race in this league's Premier Division is equally compelling, with leaders Garstang a mere five points better off than sixth-placed Lostock St Gerard's.

For the warmth of the welcome, the appeal of the surroundings, and the opportunity to chase down some paper, a visit to Euxton Villa rates highly. We made a real day of it by including an enjoyable, if muddy, morning circuit of the nearby Anglezarke reservoir, overlooked, as so many places are in this part of the world, by the heights of Winter Hill (1,496ft) and Rivington Pike (1,191ft). The tightness of the battle at the bottom guarantees Villa will have plenty more meaningful home fixtures before the season is over.

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