

TT No.166: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 20th February 2010; **Chorley** v Lancaster City; UniBond Div. One North; Res: 1-2; Att: 438; Admission: £7; Programme: £1.50 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

I've seen it all now. After today's barely credible sequence of events, I can't wait for this frustrating, weather-ruined and increasingly pointless season to end. Here's our time line of misfortune: 0930 I make a check call from our home in York to Paul Sergeant, the helpful chairman and secretary of West Lancashire League First Division club Hesketh Bank. Paul reports it is frosty and foggy alongside the Ribble estuary, and plans to inspect the club's Station Road pitch at 1000. Yes, they've done a programme. Call around noon, he suggests, for a final yay or nay.

0945 We set off from York, and the journey towards Skipton via Harrogate is conducted amid brilliant sunshine. It's cold, but not raw. I can't help a pit stop on Wetherby Road to take a couple of photographs of Harrogate Town's tidy little ground, the gates to which are open. In glorious weather, it looks a picture as three members of the ground-staff prepare for the Blue Square North visit of AFC Telford United. As we drop off Blubberhouses Moor's lofty heights on the A59, fog can be seen in the valley ahead. It looks and feels distinctly wintry when we break for coffee in Gisburn. We are enveloped in fog of varying density until we pass Clitheroe, by which time the sun has broken through.

1150 We pull over as we approach the A59's junction with the M6. I make another call to Paul, who confirms the pitch is fine and the match will definitely go ahead. We opt to stick with Hesketh Bank's game against Burnley United, and put Fulwood Amateurs, who are playing Turton in the same league's Richardson Cup competition, on the backburner for another week or so. Our third option (a last resort) is Chorley's UniBond League Division One North clash with leaders Lancaster City. I'm not in the least bothered about that because I've been to Victory Park, for football and rugby league, on several occasions. A Southport back-up would have been nice. I watched them several times while a student at Liverpool University in the early 1980s, and have always had a soft spot for the Sandgrounders - and Haig Avenue. Southport is just eight miles from Hesketh Bank, but they don't have a fixture of any description today because scheduled opponents Workington are in FA Trophy quarter-final action at Stevenage Borough.

1300 We arrive in the isolated village of Hesketh Bank after picking our way through the depressing centre of unappealing Preston. The pitch looks heavy, but eminently playable. I take my pictures of the ground, which is bathed in bright sunlight. It's a pleasant, if basic, set-up. We drive due north towards the Ribble, and eat our picnic overlooking a pancake flat landscape of crop field monotony. Operation market garden. It reminds me of the four years I lived in Lincolnshire. Hesketh Bank really does feel like the end of the line. We look at each other, and start humming the 'Duelling Banjos' tune from 'Deliverance'.

1315 We drive a couple of miles south to Tarleton, Hesketh Bank's neighbour, and stroll round what few shops there are. An upmarket fashion store for women over 45 has a window display proclaiming 'Spring is Coming'. On cue, snow starts to fall. Not, as I recall, in the weather forecast for the North West. In order to avoid a real soaking, and wishing to stay warm, we return to Station Road, where the sun has come out again. Miraculously, the snow seems to have bypassed the village.

1400 The Hesketh Bank players emerge from the changing rooms in the complex's cricket pavilion and start warming up on an adjacent 3G pitch. The opposition, Burnley United, arrive. Ominously, and perplexingly, the referee is examining the surface in minute detail. Within 10 minutes, the home manager trots over to tell his players the match is off. Nobody, certainly not the manager, can believe it. His players take some convincing. We exchange glances and sprint, Le Mans 24 Hours-fashion, for the car. Fulwood Amateurs are out because they kicked off at 2.30. We've got 45 minutes to get to Chorley. Some fast driving on back roads which twist and turn despite the flat terrain, and a certain amount of luck with educated navigational guesswork, and we pull up as close to Victory Park as we can get.

1445 We walk, at a brisk pace, the five minutes from where we've abandoned (rather than parked) the car to Chorley's turnstiles. We hand over our cash, and reach the programme seller just as he's dolefully surveying the empty cardboard box at his feet, and saying: "That's it - that's the lot gone." No!! My worst nightmare. Well, almost.

1500 We take our seats in the 1950s vintage Main Stand, which looks very much the worse for wear, as the game gets under way. Victory Park, a traditional setting, is a right dump - boy, has it gone downhill since the last time I saw Chorley here in 1991. The decay of the facilities has clearly mirrored the decline of a club which played in the top tier of the non-league game as recently as 1990. Gloomily, I glance around at those lucky enough to have a programme. Lancaster dominate on a gelatinous surface, without creating much in the way of clear-cut chances. Chorley are terrified to shoot, and over-elaborate when they get near goal. It's easier to pass the buck than take responsibility. The contest is the epitome of scrappy.

1544 Jordan Connerton, the league's top scorer, puts the visitors ahead a minute before the break. Chorley fail to clear their lines, and Connerton, turning smartly 10 yards from goal, hooks a left-foot volley across Magpies keeper Zac Hibbert and into the far bottom corner. I determine to unearth a programme at half-time, and manage to persuade a lad-and-dad combo to part with theirs. The bloke's come to watch his son, Connor Millington, play for Chorley, but the midfielder wasn't told he was in the side until the morning of the match, so his name isn't in the team listings. It means that the chap is not bothered about keeping it as a souvenir. Hurrah! I return to my seat, one of the few in the Main Stand still to have a back attached, and discover my partner has persuaded one of the guys sitting to our right to give us his programme when the match is over. Suddenly, we have two!

1602 The game grinds to a halt almost immediately after the restart. For eight minutes. The referee has injured a knee, and cannot continue. An announcement, seeking a qualified replacement from within the crowd to act as the fourth official, is made. The senior linesman takes over in the middle and the fourth official is handed a linesman's flag.

1624 Lancaster centre-back Jonathan Smith stabs the ball goalward from 12 yards. It strikes the underside of the bar, comes down over the line, rears up and catches the netting. It's an obvious goal, but the Dolly Blues' celebrations are cut short by the stand-in referee awarding a goal kick. He is persuaded by the incredulous City players to speak to the substitute linesman, who also, it transpires, failed to spot the ball had crossed the line. Where do they find these officials? Maybe they'd be better off getting all of them out of the crowd.

1631 Galvanised by this timely stroke of luck, Chorley equalise in the 67th minute. A bout of head tennis in the penalty area ends with Alex Porter nodding the ball past City keeper Martin Fearon. This heralds the Magpies' best spell of the match. They push, they probe, they press - but they cannot break through again. To the chagrin of their fans, who have been baiting the Lancaster lot throughout. City manager Tony Hesketh and his assistant Phil Brown walked out on Chorley for the Giant Axe last season - and took several members of a talented squad with them, four of whom are in action today. No wonder the home supporters don't like them.

1644 Lancaster, far from impressive considering they top what is, frankly, a very poor league, grab an 80th-minute winner to decide an uninspiring contest. A hopeful cross is lofted in from the right, and Chorley skipper Wayne Maden jumps for, and misses, the ball. Former Magpie Connerton, lurking behind the burly centre-back, gets in a scruffy downward header, which creeps, as if in slow motion, past Hibbert. The Chorley keeper is a liability. He's been hesitant all afternoon. He should have come for this cross into his six-yard box, and he should have been able to get down to make a save. Miserably, Hibbert is not up to either straightforward goalkeeping task.

1657 The final whistle blows. I call my brother, who is watching our team, FC Halifax Town, against Mossley. He reports we've won 4-2 at The Shay to keep the pressure on Lancaster in the race for automatic promotion to Blue Square North. We reach the car just in time to catch James Alexander Gordon on Five Live run through the day's results. Annan Athletic, my partner's favourite Scottish team, have won 2-0 at Berwick Rangers. Cheers from the passenger seat.

1900 We arrive home in York after a journey via the M61, M62, M1 and A64. I turn on the lap top, and check the day's events in the UniBond League. Another pasting for Durham City. Halifax's promotion rivals Skelmersdale United and Curzon Ashton both drop points, which is great news, but Colwyn Bay have won. Not so good. I turn to the West Lancashire League website, bring up the results and double-take. Hesketh Bank 2 Burnley United 2. How can that possibly be?

1910 Puzzled, and intrigued, I e-mail Paul Sergeant, who replies within half an hour. I now quote him verbatim:

"I got a call from our manager at 2.15 to say the referee had called the game off - I couldn't believe it!! He was actually a replacement referee - the original official had cried off at 11.00 due to illness. This new ref rang me at 11.30 to confirm the fixture - he was travelling from Accrington and said he would be at the ground at 2.00. I was approached by the visitors, who were wandering all over the pitch. I spoke to their manager, who was also bewildered. I asked where the referee was, and he said he was sitting in his van on the other side of the car park. I introduced myself, and asked him why he had called the game off. He repeated as per your note (ie. it was dodgy on the south side). I questioned his decision and he became very defensive. I asked him if he understood the time, effort and expense that goes into staging a match, even at our level. All he could say was that he had travelled for an hour to get here as well. I said but you are entitled to half your fee and full travelling expenses. I don't want any money, he said, wound his window up and drove off!! I then rang the league, who said that if we could find an official for a second opinion at short notice then do so if both teams were in agreement. On the off chance, a local referee who is also a member of the West Lancashire League refs was at home when I called. He agreed to come down to the ground and at 2.50 he said in his opinion the pitch was perfectly playable. A quick call to the league and they sanctioned that the game could go ahead. Kick-off time was moved to 3.15 and the game was played without any problems. Shortly after the match I was contacted by league officials that they were in total agreement that the result should stand. I am sorry you missed the match - which was actually a very enjoyable, end to end game - needless to say with no injuries to any players. Look forward to seeing you at some stage. Our first team are now not at home until April!!"

2000 Full marks to Hesketh Bank for persistence, and for taking advantage of an alternative available only to clubs on the lowest rungs of the pyramid. Well done, too, to the West Lancashire League for reacting with common sense. You see, the referee's decision isn't always final! Feeling even more cheesed off, we eat dinner, watch a film on DVD, and head for bed about 15 minutes before midnight. And dream of balmy summer days spent doing anything but watching - or trying to watch - football. Roll on May. The 2009-10 season is one we won't forget in a hurry.

06/20