

TT No.182: *Andy Gallon* - Tues 9th March 2010; **Whitehaven Amateurs v Guisborough Town**; EAM Cup quarter-final; Res: 3-0; Att: 30 (h/c); Admission: £3 (incl. 24pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Plans to build an 8,000-capacity stadium for Whitehaven Amateurs and the town's semi-professional rugby league club to share have taken another step forward. Energy Coast West Cumbria, a regeneration body, has pledged about £4m towards the £11m sports village project - and 10 other possible funders have been identified. The venue could be ready by 2012, but the scheme depends on the football club allowing their ground in the broad Pow Beck Valley to be used for its location. That is by no means a certainty. The County Ground, or the Focus Scaffolding Sports Complex, as it is called in these sponsor-saturated times, has been transformed in recent years. Once a clapped-out athletics track used mostly for insignificant school's events, it is now a smart little stadium hosting Northern League action. What's more, it offers all the facilities Whitehaven Amateurs are likely to require in the foreseeable future. With their small crowds, they don't need a big stadium, and I'm sure they don't want the hassle of sharing with the rugby league club, their sights set on Super League, but whose adjacent Recreation Ground home is falling to pieces. That sort of mixed marriage never seems to last much beyond the honeymoon, and the footballers may well decide they are better off going it alone. We'll see.

Access to the County Ground is down an easily missed single track lane off Coach Road in the southern part of Whitehaven, a town which still manages to look shabby and depressing, despite having millions spent on transforming its harbour from workaday fishing port into swanky marina. All in the name of luring tourists further west than Wordsworth's Cockermouth. But this always was the industrial belt, and looking at the derelict property and boarded-up businesses, the self-styled Georgian Port has a long way to go before it can rival Keswick, Windermere and Ambleside as must-see Lakeland destinations. Even Workington, also the recipient of a major facelift, is starting to look more appealing. And that's really saying something. The aforementioned single-track lane threads a path for about a quarter of a mile between the railway line linking Corkickle with St Bees, and the unappealing back of the rugby league ground. Just before a dead (in every respect) end, a half-right turn through gates brings you out behind the County Ground's east end goal. The whole of this basic, but spotlessly tidy, set-up is now spread before the onlooker.

The tarmac access track continues between a beck and the rear of the Recreation Ground's main stand (an uninspiring modern replacement for a ramshackle wooden original of some charm) and the County Ground's two kit stands to reach the Amateurs' dressing rooms, social club, kitchen and offices in the north-west corner of the site. These are housed in a collection of flat-roofed buildings. There is a large, metalled car park behind the west end goal, and on this evening was

patronised heavily by parents whose kids use the neighbouring 3G pitch. This is full size, floodlit and surrounded by a 20ft mesh fence. It's a considerable improvement on the marshy wasteland it was built upon. Pow Beck, a sunken and murky watercourse, describes an arrow-straight course behind the clubhouse and car park. Beyond are fields, on my visit patrolled rather thrillingly by a silk silent barn owl, all effortless swoops, and then the heights of Kells, where the former Albright & Wilson 'Marchon' chemical works once stood. It's shut now, adding to local unemployment in an area heavily reliant on the Sellafield nuclear plant, but giving long-suffering residents a rest from the noxious nasties which used to belch from its sinister chimney stacks.

The most arresting aspect of the County Ground is its immaculate pitch. Even after our terrible winter, it's flat, firm and well grassed. The Amateurs have a dedicated volunteer groundsman, and his efforts are helped by the reserves playing on the 3G. Apart from a concrete hardstanding path and a barrier of blue metal railings round the pitch, there's not a lot to describe. The kit stands, about 15 yards long, are positioned either side of the halfway line on the north touchline. Both have alternate rows of blue and yellow plastic tip-up seats, and the one nearest the entrance also offers four metal steps of terracing. You've seen this arrangement a hundred times elsewhere. The portable wood and Perspex dug-outs, on wheels, presumably to prevent vandalism, sit in between. High mesh fences behind each goal help keep the ball within bounds. There are two floodlight masts on each side. The observant will notice, at the east end, the remains of the former athletics track, with fencing still curving round in elliptical fashion. The track was a sandy sort of aggregate, rather than tartan, therefore nature has been quick to recolonise it. Beyond the railway line at this end, the land rises quickly, with the dense ranks of houses which comprise Corkickle covering the terrain. Whitehaven, despite its relatively small size, is made up of several distinct areas - all of which have their own names and characters. As if they were London suburbs. For Finchley, Hounslow and Leyton, read Bransty, Mirehouse and Hensingham. That's always tickled me.

Talking of tickles, I'm happy to report this game, a quarter-final of the Ernest Armstrong Memorial Cup, lived up to its billing. Both teams are in the top six of the Northern League's Second Division, and played with the style and confidence such a lofty placing engenders. Whitehaven were flattered by their margin of victory. Guisborough had long spells of possession, and moved the ball about sweetly, but were unable to hurt their hosts where it matters - in the final third of the pitch. For David Onions, the Priorymen's skipper and top scorer, it proved a frustrating night. He struggled to get a sniff of goal. No 'Onions Skins Haven' headlines, then.

Guisborough didn't arrive until half-past seven (the way the North East clubs whine, you'd think West Cumbria was a foreign country), therefore the referee agreed to put back the kick-off until five-past eight. The visitors appeared to be caught cold because Whitehaven, formed in 1994 when Wearside Leaguers Marchon FC were disbanded, took just seven minutes to go ahead, nippy little winger

Darren Donald scoring the first goal of a hat-trick. He crowned a slick passing move with a firm shot which beat 'gobby' keeper Steven Gill on his near post. Kevin Connolly, who had provided the assist, then struck the bar with a 10-yard header from a Stuart Shaw free-kick, and Gill did well to deny David Dustin in a one-on-one. At that point, the visitors woke up. They began to push Whitehaven back, and though Mickey Roberts and classy playmaker Tom Portas tried their luck from range, the Priorymen trailed by a goal at the interval.

Dustin, put through by Connolly's delicious pass, scuffed an early chance to double Whitehaven's lead, allowing Gill to save comfortably. Guisborough pressed and probed without testing Brian Miller in the home goal. Only a brilliant Gill save prevented a Whitehaven strike in the 73rd minute. Connolly broke down the left to pick up a ball from Shaw, and crossed to the near post, where Donald met it on the volley. Gill dived to his right to flick the ball round the upright. Breath-taking. Within a minute, however, Donald rolled a low effort past Gill from the edge of the box. Still Guisborough kept coming. Callum Hannah spurned a great chance to pull one back, slicing wide with the goal at his mercy. The visitors were leaving themselves exposed in defence, and Gill had to make another save in a one-on-one as Donald skipped through again. Miller reacted superbly to tip over a 25-yard screamer from Shane Henry, and Michael James saw kept out two headers in quick succession from Harrison Davies corners. Miller, on his knees, clutched the first, and Gary Hewitt cleared the second off the goal-line. Just to prove it wasn't Guisborough's night, Whitehaven broke away in the last minute. Donald latched on to a long ball over the top, and chipped the advancing Gill delightfully. The keeper, expecting an offside flag, was furious with the linesman on the south touchline, but the Cumbrians were through to a second consecutive semi-final in this competition for Division Two clubs.

Should the ambitious stadium plan go ahead (and a similar idea in Workington has foundered), the County Ground will be transformed for the second time in recent years. Rugby league is the dominant sport on Cumbria's nuclear coast, and Whitehaven Amateurs will undoubtedly come under pressure to surrender their independence. But they have little to gain, and much to lose. Don't be surprised if they dig their heels in, and opt for maintaining the status quo.