

TT No.185: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 13th March 2010; **Rothwell Athletic v Carlton Athletic**; West Yorkshire League Prem Division; Res: 2-2; Att: 68 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

The Rabbit Trap, evocative name of Rothwell Athletic's ground, is up there with the Dripping Pan, the Giant Axe and the Dovecote on my list of picturesque favourites. Unearthing the reason for such an unusual choice was high on the list of priorities as we headed for the famed Rhubarb Triangle south-east of Leeds, and this local derby in the Premier Division of the West Yorkshire League. Harold Crilly, Rothwell's obliging webmaster and programme editor, was happy to provide an explanation. It seems the players used to change in the basement of a pub, now razed and beneath a housing estate, on the bottom side of the sloping pitch, and had to climb out and up - in the manner of rabbits - to reach the ground. Harold, a Lancastrian, has strong connections with Atherton Laburnum Rovers, for whom he once played. His father, Jack, was chairman, and Rovers named their ground, Crilly Park, after him in 1981 following his sudden and unexpected death 12 months earlier. Steve, Harold's son, is manager at Rothwell.

The Rabbit Trap is down the rather more prosaic Royds Lane, a short distance from the centre of a town associated with coal mining for more than 600 years. The last pit here shut in 1983, and there is a winding wheel memorial in the middle of the roundabout at the nearby junction on the M1. The Rabbit Trap site is shared with Rothwell Cricket Club, members of the Pontefract League First Division, and former winners of the Hepworth Cup, a big deal in this part of the world. A small car park backs on to a squash club, and a path to the right of this uninspiring brick structure leads down to the dressing rooms and social club complex the footballers and cricketers share. There is a bar and a kitchen dispensing the usual refreshments. It is at this point we realised how high up we were, and just how chilly it could be in mid-March, even when the sun is shining. There is an impressive view to the north, across the football ground and beyond densely packed houses towards the motorway.

There is a steep south-to-north downhill slope which affects both sports. The cricket ground, worst hit, stands on a shelf above the Rabbit Trap. The top of this embankment, lined with benches facing in the direction of the summer game, provides a fine vantage point from which to watch the football. A concrete path with blue metal railings leads down the grass banking, and gives the players access to the pitch from the dressing rooms, which are in the south-west corner. This is a relatively undeveloped set-up, and typical of the West Yorkshire League. There's no cover, no hard standing and no floodlights. The barrier round the pitch comprises white concrete posts with blue metal railings. The dugouts, whitewashed breeze block with blue metal sheeting roofs, face each other across the halfway line. Netting suspended from posts extends the width of the east end, behind which are new houses on Rona Croft and then Oulton Park golf course. Half

the houses and their back gardens on The Oval and Lismore Close beyond the north touchline - where the pub used to be - are protected by more netting on posts. There's very little room to improve the facilities, though there is a wide strip of grass behind the west goal. A belt of mature trees separates this from more houses on Royds Lane. We are, after all, deep in suburbia.

After a slow start, this turned into a cracking contest. Visitors Carlton, from the neighbouring village, were bottom of the table and battling relegation, but had beaten Rothwell 6-1, one of only three league wins this season, at their place in November. The match was not as one-sided as the score suggests. We were told by Harold that Rothwell, also now in the lower reaches of the standings, had hit the woodwork four times that day, and missed a penalty.

The opening 20 minutes were not promising. Decent football was tricky on a sticky, sandy, bumpy pitch - and made even more difficult by a strong, numbing wind. Things started to improve when Oliver Crossley's muscular burst down the middle set up a one-on-one for Ryan Donoghue, but Carlton keeper and captain Chris Young used his left leg to make a good save. Visiting striker Ashley Beck was well wide with a fierce 20-yard drive before his team scored twice in quick succession. In the 31st minute, a long throw from the right by Dave Pickering was helped on by Beck, and Chris Thornton stole in on the blind side of his marker to stab the ball home from 10 yards. Four minutes later, Thornton was then the victim of a clumsy Matthew Hale challenge in the penalty area, and the Carlton wide man sent keeper Lee Wood the wrong way from the spot.

The second half was delayed a few minutes because one of the linesmen had spotted loose netting in the goal Rothwell were to attack. The evidence of the first half indicated repair work wasn't really necessary because the home had barely managed a shot. But the introduction of interval substitute Aiden Perkins changed the game. Perkins, playing on the left wing, added pace, flair and invention. Two minutes in, and Rothwell pulled one back. A Perkins free-kick from the right evaded two Carlton defenders, and Donoghue had time to bring the ball down before ramming a firm effort wide of Young and into the net, despite Thornton's attempt to clear on the goal-line. Perkins then forced Young to tip over his in-swinging corner. Carlton were a danger on the break, and Danny Bray found the side-netting from a good position. Rothwell drew level in the 63rd minute with a lucky strike. Paul Mitchell, a lad with an eye-catching haircut, fired over a cross from the right, and with Young backpedalling furiously, it dropped into the far corner.

Our money was now on a Rothwell victory - but again the woodwork conspired against them. Crossley shot tamely wide after a one-two with Tom Marsden had put him through, and Perkins saw a bending 20-yard free-kick cannon off the bar with Young beaten. Thornton squandered a great chance for his hat-trick when he was denied by Wood following a David Evans cross, and with 12 minutes left, Mitchell hit the bar with a dazzling 25-yard thunderbolt. Two minutes later, Carlton had John Methintis sent off for a second booking, but the hosts could not put the seal on a determined fightback by scoring a third.

It's not often I take a look at the West Yorkshire League, mainly because so few of its club's issue programmes. Full marks to Rothwell, formed in the early 1920s, for making the effort - and also to the three young lads selling them. They wouldn't take no for an answer! This was a most enjoyable afternoon, and what the match lacked in quality, it made up for in drama. Oh, and in case anyone is wondering about the Rhubarb Triangle: This is an area of nine square miles (once three times as big) bordered by Rothwell, Morley and Wakefield, and also containing Carlton. It is famous for the production of winter 'forced' rhubarb, an industry which dates back to the early 19th Century. This form of rhubarb, grown in artificially heated sheds, is more tender than the outdoor summer version. I wonder if it's served with 'forced' custard?

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