

TT No.2: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 8th August 2009; **Penrith v Morpeth Town**; Northern League Division One; Res: 5-0; Att: 205; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Frenchfield Park is a welcome addition to the growing list of new grounds. Though well out of town, this £1m stadium boasts the rare distinction of having more appeal than the one it replaced. Design, materials and setting play a big part in this assessment. The lofty main stand, of an unusual appearance, and finished with light-varnished wood and white painted cladding, has a spotlessly Scandinavian feel. Perhaps Ikea are branching out. This sensation is heightened by bucolic surroundings which feature the steep, pine-topped slopes of the Eden Valley and the lush, livestock-filled fields of the Rivers Eamont and Eden's shared flood plain.

It's taken 12 frustrating years for Penrith to reach this stage. Their vacated former ground, Eden Council-owned Southend Road, can now be bulldozed as part of a stalled retail and residential development known as 'Penrith New Squares'. According to the associated marketing mumbo jumbo, it's - unsurprisingly - an "exciting project". Penrith, known as 'The Old Red Town' because of the preponderance of red marl which went into its construction, loves to talk up its broad range of individual shops, along with its charmingly narrow passageways and streets. All that could be killed stone dead by the proposed cathedral to consumerism, but that didn't deter planners from pressing ahead. However, it may not come to pass at all because the developer, £5m in debt, is facing a winding-up order in the High Court. Indeed, Frenchfield Park was finished only after intervention over a 14-week period by Eden Council, who saw the job through thanks to North West Development Agency cash. Council-supplied and funded generators are providing power at the stadium, with a mains connection not scheduled to be put in place until later in the month. The Southend Road ground, its central location apart, was short on strong points. In recent years, dilapidation and decay had been allowed to set in. Given the choice between a hillside backdrop covered in grass and dotted with sheep, and one dominated by scruffy council houses, I'll take the Herdwicks and herbs every time.

There are some rumblings of discontent, however. Frenchfield Park, constructed by Penrith-based Atkinson Building Contractors, is less grand than originally planned. There was to have been a larger hospitality area, extending with balconies beyond the width of the main stand seating tier, and the stand roof ought to have done a better job of providing protection from the elements. Word is the developer, who was supposed to foot most of the bill for the stadium, scrimped somewhat as the project progressed. The Blues get two years of rent-free action there, and then, so I was told, they must find £5,000 a season. Just as well they have a wealthy owner these days.

Frenchfield Park is visible to the left as you travel east along the A66 on the Appleby side of town. To find it, you need to take the A686 Alston road, go past

the tidy Winters Park ground of Penrith RUFC on the left, and then bear right down a lane in Carleton Village. Shortly before this becomes a dead end, you turn left through gates and follow a road round past the Frenchfield Sports Centre fields (where Penrith's junior teams have been based for a year) and its well-appointed pavilion to reach the stadium car park. A remarkable amount of effort has gone into something as inconsequential as this. Red bricks have been laid in setts, and a pleasing effect bodes well for what is to come.

The solitary turnstile block, spick and span, appears to have had its pay windows put in the wrong place - at the front rather than to the side. Passing through, you find yourself to the south of the main stand, a tall, narrow structure with separate access on the sides to each dressing room. There is a catering hatch in the wall. Nearby, set in the stand wall, can be seen a plaque commemorating a former player in the local junior league who died in 1995 at the age of 24, and also what appears to be a foundation stone bearing the legend 'PAFC 1948'. Staircases at the front of the stand lead to eight rows of blue plastic tip-up seats, with a couple at the top fitted with tables and set aside for the press. From here, the River Eamont can be seen over to the south-west, passing under the A66, the traffic on which provides a constant, but fairly subdued, background drone. Straight ahead and to the left are the dramatic slopes of the Eden Valley, and the scandalously underrated hills of the North Pennines. Beyond, below a central clock, are floor to ceiling sliding doors which lead to a tastefully furnished bar. The cantilever roof is high and without side screens. Four speakers for the largely ineffectual public address system are mounted on the fascia. The teams reach the pitch via their own tarmac walkway and gap in the pitch surround. This barrier is one of those bulky, flimsy plastic affairs, with wire mesh infilling. An impressive number of advertising hoardings are attached. Twin dugouts, Perspex over metal frames, are positioned either side of the stand, and are set back slightly from the pitch to provide a tarmac technical area.

The remainder of the ground is mostly open hardstanding. This is tarmac, and the width of the strip leaves plenty of scope for putting in extra facilities if they are needed. Straddling the halfway line on the east side is a bog-standard kit stand, about 20 yards long and sheltering four rows of metal terracing. The 2,848-foot Lakeland peak of Blencathra can be spotted on the western horizon, and the outline will indicate immediately why, its less romantic name, is Saddleback. The ground is enclosed with a wooden fence, light in colour and about three or four feet too low. One bounce and the ball is out of the ground. There are two floodlight masts, each holding four lamps, on either side.

This game was the first competitive fixture at Frenchfield Park. The stadium had been opened a few days before when Scottish League Third Division side Annan Athletic ran out 5-1 winners in a friendly. We were fortunate our Northern League match went ahead. Visitors Morpeth Town are a club in crisis. The Highwaymen have been warned by the league over the summer and fined heavily for incorrectly registering their players. Their Craik Park ground has fallen below the standard required for the First Division and plans for a revamp have been jeopardised by an

athletics club deciding against helping out. The plug has also been pulled on the finance for the scheme. Morpeth will share with Bedlington Terriers this season, but could be relegated at its end, regardless of where they finish, if the FA do not find improvement work acceptable.

My guess, based on this performance, is that Morpeth, who arrived just 40 minutes before the eventually-delayed kick-off because of an accident on the A66, will finish in the relegation positions anyway. Where it not for the saves of keeper Jak Wells, they would have conceded many, more goals.' Having two players sent off didn't help, and completed a thoroughly miserable start to the season for the Northumberland club. Penrith, according to the programme, down to the bare bones because of holidays and a wedding, looked lively enough, but I'd have to see them against stronger opposition before hazarding how their campaign will pan out.

A dizzying first 25 minutes contained chance after chance. Mike Brown drove inches wide and Blues team-mate Dan Robinson was off target in a one-on-one and headed a sitter over, while saves from the exposed Wells denied Martin Coleman (twice) and Robinson. Morpeth had Paul Greenell sent off in the 14th minute for an off-the-ball elbow on home keeper Andrew Wills, who then used a foot to save from James McCleen after the visitors' skipper had raced through from midfield, and the Blues keeper had to dive full length to push aside a 20-yard David Southen free-kick. How we got to half-time goalless, I really don't know.

The second half was a different story. Graham Anthony (49) broke the deadlock with a crashing volley from the edge of the box and, seconds later, Brown saw a spectacular 25-yarder come back off the angle of post and bar. In the 56th minute, Alan Gray rose unmarked 10 yards out to meet a Coleman corner with a thumping header which flew into the net. Wells got down well to keep out a close-range Brown effort before Robinson muscled aside his marker to outwit the Morpeth keeper in a one-on-one with 71 minutes on the clock. McCleen, having appealed strenuously and in vain for what looked a legitimate penalty for a trip on substitute Sean Sweeney, was sent off for dissent with 15 minutes left - and the Highwaymen then fell apart. Blues substitute Karl Jackson (82) slid in a low effort from a tight angle and big defender Phil Thornton (86), a lad with a build better suited to rugby, strolled through the middle of the back four to roll home the fifth.

Penrith were entitled to feel buoyant about their big day. The sun shone, the team eased to a convincing win in an eventful game, and the crowd was well up on their Southend Road average. The Blues will need to maintain this form if their fans are to continue making the lengthy trek from the town centre. But that's for the future. This was a good start for an ambitious club now looking beyond the limited environment of the Northern League. The town markets itself under the puzzling slogan 'Maybe We're Open for Business'. Its football club definitely is. As new stadia go, Frenchfield Park rates pretty highly and is well worth what for most people will be a fair old schlep from home.

