

TT No.212: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 5th April 2010; **Ryhope CW** v Cleator Moor Celtic; **Monkwearmouth Charity Cup Final**; Res: 1-0; Att: 350 (est.); Admission: £2; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

I don't like to see a club miss out on promotion after winning a championship - and Ryhope Colliery Welfare are in danger of doing exactly that. They are contesting the Wearside League title with Scarborough Town, but their ground at Ryhope Recreation Park, three miles south of Sunderland's centre and in a lofty location, does not meet the grading requirements of the higher Northern League. Ryhope, formed by miners in 1892, have opened talks with their landlord, Sunderland City Council, about the work that needs to be done, and feel the local authority has given their case a decent hearing. At present, the club are not the sole tenants of the ground, but hope their commitment to the community (they run junior teams for youngsters aged eight to 18, as well as a Veteran's side) might help secure a unilateral lease. Lifting the historic Monkwearmouth Charity Cup, an ornate trophy which dates from 1889, for the first time in 44 years won't do Ryhope's case any harm. This deserved success over a shot-shy Cleator Moor Celtic in front of an excellent crowd ended a long wait for silverware going back to 1978.

Ryhope (from the Old English, meaning 'rough valley') Recreation Park was a much better set-up than I expected, and scarcely any more or less developed than some you find at the bottom end of the Northern League. The ground, fully enclosed and boasting floodlights, is part of an impressive multi-sport complex offering, in addition, cricket, tennis and bowling. The dressing rooms (so we were told) need to be razed and rebuilt, while there is no cover, and hardstanding along just one side. On all but the cricket ground side, there is plenty of room to expand amid yards of spare turf, though the encroachment of new housing estates, particularly towards the south-east, suggests this is a prime site.

Access is either via the park gates or through the new-looking bar and lounge. Whatever selection you make, you must skirt the boundary of the cricket pitch (which has a remarkable crown) to reach the football ground. The most unusual feature is the dug-outs, which share the north-eastern touchline with the red-brick dressing rooms, the entrance gate and flagged hardstanding. In a vandal-proof arrangement, the dug-outs are made usable by unbolting and swinging back the doors of a metal container. It's a great idea I haven't seen used anywhere else. A white metal post and rail fence surrounds the grassy pitch, which for our visit was sticky, but in good condition considering the dreadful winter the region has endured. Wire mesh on a giant metal frame protects the bungalows cowering behind the goal at the north-west end. The presence of the neighbouring houses lends the ground an intimacy it would otherwise lack.

We'd spent an entertaining pre-match hour or so on the neighbouring beach at Seaham, watching actor Martin Shaw going through his paces during filming for an episode of the *George Gently* detective series, set in the 1960s. Alan Hunter's

novels, on which the series is based, had Norfolk locations. For some reason, the TV people decided to move the good Inspector to Northumberland and County Durham. To confuse even further, the first two series were filmed in Ireland. The latest is using North East settings as a result of grant aid from a region which clearly appreciates the value of free publicity.

Commensurate with the huge popularity of football on Wearside, there were more people at Ryhope Recreation Park than on Seaham Beach for an absorbing, rather than exciting, contest played out in a strong wind. The host club don't usually issue programmes, but had produced a tidy one-off production for the big occasion. The Monkwearmouth Charity Cup was the first major honour won, back in 1928, by Ryhope. An especially nice touch was inviting as special guests five stalwarts of their successful squad of the 1960s. Highlight of that decade was a run to the first round proper of the FA Cup, which saw a record 4,000 crowd flock to the ground to watch a 1-0 defeat on a snow-covered surface by Workington, then in the Fourth Division of the Football League.

There was little to choose between the teams, who were committed to a passing style of football, and I'm very pleased to say, prepared in the main to accept the decisions of the match officials without demur. It made a striking contrast with the constant carping, from players and the occupants of both technical areas, shown during the East Midlands Counties League game we'd seen at St Andrews two days earlier. Perhaps the simple truth is good players are too busy concentrating on the job in hand to waste energy taking out on the referee frustration borne of their own limitations.

Not much goalmouth action to report during a tight, tense first half. Ryhope skipper Phil Hall headed a Jonathan Davis corner wide, and Celtic's Leigh Dunn was equally close with a similar effort. The deadlock was broken two minutes before the break. The Cumbrians failed to clear their lines, and Richard Jordan smashed a volley into the top left-hand corner of Craig Devine's net from the edge of the penalty area.

Inevitably, the game opened up in the second period. Pony-tailed Celtic striker Barry Irving glanced a header fractionally off target, and Ryhope's Martin Metcalfe somehow sliced wide from inside the six-yard box with the goal at his mercy. The visitors, who seemed terrified to shoot, wasted a great chance on the hour when a break saw them two against one, only for Chris Thornton to misplace his pass to the unmarked Glynn Edwards. James Farrell almost doubled Ryhope's lead with a thumping 16-yard drive which hit the underside of the bar and bounced down just the wrong side of the goal-line. Celtic replied with another breakaway, but again Edwards and Thornton (this time with roles reversed) failed to capitalise on a two-on-one situation. Ryhope, who looked the steadier throughout, finished strongly. Jordan crashed a shot on the turn from the edge of the box against the inside of a post, and was later denied a penalty after tumbling in the box twice in quick succession.

The Wearside League may not be the most prestigious in the country, but boy, do they have nice trophies. The Monkwearmouth Charity Cup is a beauty, though Ryhope's players, unused to dealing with success, needed a bit of persuading from fans and photographers before celebrating their victory with any animation. Still, the practice could come in handy because they are in pole position in the race for the league crown. A visit to rivals Scarborough Town, where they won 4-3 in the second round of the Monkwearmouth Charity Cup, on May 8th might prove decisive. A treble is on, with a home tie against Easington Colliery Welfare to come in the semi-finals of the League Cup. Quite a debut season for new manager Martin Swales. What a shame Ryhope, come what may, will not be joining the Northern League for 2010-11.

06/20