

TT No.216: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 10th April 2010; **Hesketh Bank** v Slyne-with-Hest; West Lancs League Division One; Res: 4-0; Att: 40 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: Donation (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Scratching an itch, in the hopping sense, is always pleasurable - and occasionally a huge relief. It was our third attempt this season to see a game at the Centenary Sports Ground on Station Road. The lousy winter weather resulted in earlier bids being abandoned in favour of hastily conceived diversions to first Fleetwood Town and then Chorley. No meteorological concerns for this fixture - and how long is it since that's been the case? The sun shone for most of the day, and it was warm enough to enjoy the action wearing shorts. Not for the first time since mid-December, we pondered the merits of summer football.

Hesketh Bank, close to the southerly banks of the Ribble estuary and marooned amid that flat expanse of fertile farming country between Preston and Southport, isn't the easiest place to reach. Certainly not from York. It's a quiet, upmarket community with the atmosphere of a place very much in the middle of nowhere. The Station Road site, impressive for such a small and isolated village, appears to be at the heart of things. In addition to the football club, there is a lively pub-cum-eaterie, a floodlit 3G pitch used by local youngsters, a cricket ground, and a bowling green of the crown variety.

The main entrance off Station Road (Hesketh Bank was once a stop on the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway's Preston to Southport line, which closed in 1964) leads directly into a car park which had been surfaced since our last visit here in February. The modern pub, Boots Barred, is to the left of the football pitch, and the access road bisects them as it continues towards the bowling and cricket clubs at the far (east) end. The 3G pitch, enclosed and floodlit, fills the gap between the pub and the bowling green. The latter, complete with lights and tiny stands, is a charming enclosure. I really must think about having a bash at bowls when I get too old for much else. The cricket ground, used by the Hesketh Bank club, who play in the Southport and District Amateur League, is beyond a car park adjacent to the bowling green. A game had begun on a surface which was noticeably soft. The football pitch and its surrounds were the same. Given the proximity of the Ribble, and the amount of precipitation we've had, the water table here must be very high.

The footballers share changing rooms with the cricketers, whose pavilion is alongside. This facility dates to the late 1970s/early 1980s, when Hesketh Bank embarked on a planned programme of improvements, which also included new drains, enclosing the pitch with a post and rail barrier, erecting a small cantilever stand, and opening a kitchen/refreshments counter. The club, formed in 1922 and graduates 65 years later of the Southport and District League, recently secured FA Charter Standard status. Having merged with Hesketh Bank Boys in 1995, they now

run teams from under-eight to veterans, and have designs on progressing to the North West Counties League.

The footy element of the complex is basic, but tidy - and perfect for a lovely afternoon. The little stand, a 10-yard long structure fashioned from green metal sheets, straddles the halfway line on the south side, and shelters a couple of steps of what might loosely be described as terracing. Opposite, and next to the access road, are two neat dug-outs. White paint tarts up breeze block a treat, and they boast natty wooden roofs, too. A fence of black posts and white rails surrounds the pitch. There aren't any floodlights. Not much room for further development here, and this could hamper the club's hopes of playing at a higher level. Best bet could be the Station Road (or west) end, where there is a broad expanse of turf between the goal and a concrete panel perimeter fence. Be sure to check out the Centenary Sports Ground sign set into the wall outside the ground at this end. Nice work by a local stonemason, I fancy.

We arrived to find Hesketh Bank chairman and general secretary Paul Sergeant looking hot and bothered, and with scarcely time to shake hands and say hello - despite our extensive email correspondence over recent weeks. The hosts were missing several players (mostly because of a stag do), and were having a job sorting out their line-up. In the event, five irregulars started the match. Perhaps they ought to play every week with a depleted side! This routine drubbing of the intriguingly named Slyne-with-Hest (locations just north-west of Lancaster) ended the visitors' promotion hopes, avenged a 6-1 away reverse earlier in the season, and was the ideal boost for Hesketh Bank ahead of the rivals' rematch in the semi-finals of the West Lancashire League's President's Cup competition. It was only Slyne's fourth defeat in 21 league fixtures, and means Thornton Cleveleys and Fleetwood Hesketh go up to the Premier Division.

My attention, I'll admit, kept wandering from this game owing to constant text updates from my two younger brothers over at The Shay. Our team, FC Halifax Town, were busy gubbing Lancaster City 4-0 in front of an astonishing crowd of 3,152 in what had been billed as the UniBond League Division One North title decider. I'm afraid I took rather too much pleasure in relaying what was happening in West Yorkshire to the Lancaster contingent at Station Road. Bizarrely, each time Town scored, Hesketh Bank, who looked a very big side to me, did the same.

Jordan Smethurst embarked on a storming burst down the middle to set up the opener in the 10th minute. He laid the ball off left to Dan Birkby, who cut inside his marker and unleashed a tremendous shot which flew across the Slyne keeper and into the far corner. Considering their promotion hopes were at stake, the visitors, who used to be known as Trimpell Slyne, looked markedly disinterested, and a scrappy half ended without further addition to the score. Unusually, a truncated interval break was taken out on the pitch.

Smethurst capitalised on a stroke of luck to double the lead in the 67th minute. The Slyne keeper whacked a clearance against the back of one of his defenders, and the Hesketh Bank man stroked the ball casually into an unguarded net. Six

minutes later, it was 3-0. A deep cross from the right was only partially cleared, and Steven Greenwood drilled home a low effort from 10 yards. The hosts rubbed it in with a fourth in the 87th minute. Smethurst showed great strength to muscle past two defenders, and then lifted a cool finish over the advancing keeper to complete what the Hesketh Bank website report described as a "well earned, if surprising, score-line".

Programmes in the West Lancashire League are becoming harder and harder to find, but Hesketh Bank have been issuing for a number of years - and their production for this game did not disappoint. Very stylish indeed - in common with their appealing retro black and amber quartered shirts. Everyone we spoke to was extremely friendly, and it would be nice to see this go-ahead community club win promotion to the top division next season - and then begin thinking seriously about the North West Counties League.

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