

TT No.221: *Andy Gallon* - Fri 16th April 2010; **Lancashire Amateur Shield Final;** Blackpool Wren Rovers v Garstang (at Leyland); Res: 4-3 (AET); Att: 250 (est.); Admission: £4 (incl. 16pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

County Cup competitions usually pass me by. In the main, I see them as unnecessary fillers further congesting overcrowded fixture lists. But this game, the 101st Lancashire Amateur Shield Final, attracted my attention. It was between two of the top teams in the West Lancashire League, a competition in which I've taken an interest this season, and the match was at a venue I'd never visited - and had on my notional list for some time. The County Ground in Leyland has been the headquarters of the Lancashire Football Association since 1998, and in an earlier guise was the home ground of Leyland Motors FC, a defunct club who rose as high up the pyramid as the North West Counties League. Chuck in the opportunity to while away a few sunny hours striding (and getting lost on, as it turned out!) the pathless wilderness of the West Pennine Moors above Belmont, and I had the makings of a decent day out.

The ground was once part of Leyland Motors' South Works. Football was among more than 20 recreational activities for which the company catered. Much of the site was flattened after Leyland Motors' demise during the Thatcher Years. Bijou semis and a car park (what else?) occupy the site of what used to be a palace of industry. The forbidding red-brick factory building next to the ground is now the British Commercial Vehicle Museum. Judging by the glowing testimonials on the advertising posters, this must be one of the finest tourist destinations in the North West. Or are they over-egging the pudding? There can't be many other reasons to visit Leyland, a town hallmarked by serried ranks of red-brick terraces. When the motor factory, the heartbeat of the community, was in full production, I guess the place must have been livelier. But, on a warm afternoon, Leyland slumbered, mouth open, snoring, dribble oozing from its mouth, head swimming from one too many lunchtime pints. Oblivious to the wider world. The antics of the guests at a chav wedding, complete with hideous stretch limo blocking the pavement outside the parish church, provided a comic diversion. Shop windows, by advertising 'events' (such as American wrestling) at Preston Guildhall, merely emphasised the point there is virtually nothing to do here. An art deco Leyland Motors clock in the middle of a roundabout bears the motto 'For All Time'. A false claim, sadly, for both company and football club.

By football standards, the County Ground is surprisingly central. One can't help wondering what became of the fans who used to walk the short distance from the town to watch their local team in action here. The letters LM on the wrought iron gates leading into the complex give a clue as to the previous owner. The multi-storey - and, in design terms, purely functional - building to the right is the Lancashire FA's nerve centre. Up ahead, beyond acres of car parking, is a gym and the buildings of the Leyland Sports Association. The turnstiles are to the right of

the HQ. They bring the spectator out in the north-east corner of a spotless little set-up. The pitch, given the awful winter, was in beautiful condition. But, then, Bolton Wanderers play their reserve team fixtures here, and I guess it simply wouldn't do to have delicate Premier League orchids turning an ankle on a dodgy surface. With 19 cup finals scheduled for the County Ground, the groundsman has a busy, few weeks ahead tending the pitch, which slopes downhill noticeably from east to west.

I imagine, but cannot say with any certainty, things have changed a bit since Leyland Motors were in residence. The red-brick HQ building, though bland, boasts clean lines, dark green and fawn detailing, and a pleasing central gable. It is set back slightly behind the tarmac hard standing which surrounds the pitch. Two balconies, at different levels, offer the best view in the house. Out of bounds to all but the blazer brigade, I fancy. Perspex dug-outs are positioned either side of the halfway line.

The most striking aspect of the County Ground is the museum's blank red-brick wall which rears up at the north end. A basic cover about 20 yards long is located behind the goal. To its left is a snack bar and the dressing rooms, housed in a lean-to. The toilets, adjacent to the turnstile block, are the cleanest I've ever encountered at football. Splashes of blue paint tie these disparate elements together rather nicely.

A cantilever stand, positioned between the two penalty areas on the west side, provides the main spectator accommodation. It offers 500 mostly red plastic tip-up seats spread over six rows, with LFA picked out in white ones. Houses and their tiny back gardens on Veyvey Street are hard up against the back of the stand, which is fashioned from light grey metal sheeting. The south end is open. A floodlit artificial pitch, something like second generation by the looks of it, sits behind, on top of a small grassy bank. The County Ground's floodlights consist of four masts on each side. The pitch barrier is white concrete posts and blue metal railings, partially obscured by an impressive number of advertising hoardings. It's a lovingly tended enclosure, and perhaps we should be grateful the LFA, based previously in Blackburn, opted to move to this prime spot, a mile from junction 28 of the M6, thereby saving it from a possible date with the demolition man.

Happily, this showpiece, watched by a decent crowd, lived up to expectations. It was one of the best contests I've seen this season. Garstang, fourth in the West Lancs Premier Division table, but winners over likely champions Blackpool Wren Rovers twice in the league, trailed 3-1 with 22 minutes left. They drew level thrillingly to force extra time, and just when a penalty shoot-out appeared inevitable, a goalkeeping error handed Rovers a 114th-minute clincher. I made the Wrens, driven on by powerhouses Pete Taberner and Danny Rowe, marginally the better team, though Garstang never gave up and certainly had their moments.

Nick Greenall lobbed Rovers ahead in the second minute following confusion in the Garstang defence, and the Blackpool lads dominated the opening half-hour. Big centre-forward Rowe, a man seemingly determined to kick the ball as hard as he

could at every opportunity, was a real threat, while Taberner lent a muscular presence in central midfield. But Garstang held firm, and equalised eight minutes before the break. A ricochet off two heads dropped kindly for Niall Cummins, and he found the bottom corner with a sweet strike from 18 yards. Seconds later, Garstang skipper Andrew Kilifin hit the crossbar with an effort from distance which dipped late enough to deceive keeper Ryan Yeomans.

Taberner restored Rovers' lead in the 51st minute, crashing in an unstoppable drive from the edge of the box after keeper Neil Beesley had got in the way of another Rowe howitzer. Wayne Cropper and Cummins went close for Garstang before Beesley saved superbly from Rowe. The Garstang keeper smuggled a Taberner header round a post, and Jamie Hastings cleared off his goal-line as Rovers pressed for a third. This arrived in the 68th minute. Steve Creelman, just on as a substitute, dispossessed a defender and rolled a low shot wide of the advancing Beesley. That looked it, but Garstang staged a tremendous fightback. Within three minutes, substitute Chris Brown netted from close range at the back post when Rovers failed to clear, and in the 78th minute Hastings lifted a sublime 20-yarder over Yeomans having spotted the Rovers keeper had strayed off his line. There was little creative during extra time, though Beesley denied Creelman in a one on one. Then, with just six minutes to go, the Garstang keeper dropped a routine Rowe free-kick from the left, and the alert Creelman tapped the loose ball into an empty net. One really felt for Beesley, who turned in an otherwise faultless shift.

Rovers celebrated their third Lancashire Amateur Shield success - marked, oddly, by two trophies - with real gusto. Given this, and the high quality of the match, perhaps I ought to start taking county cups more seriously.

06/20