

TT No.68: Mike Latham - Sunday 25 October 2009: Radnorshire Cup Second Round; **Builth Wells** 2-0 Llandrindod Wells; Admission: £2; No programme; Attendance: 105 (h/c).

Putting the clocks back is a bad day for groundhoppers and generally heralds the start of winter. Freezing or waterlogged pitches and travelling difficulties caused by weather seem just around the corner for the next few months at least. Those sunny evenings watching early season midweek games seem a fading memory.

But the weather is playing tricks- it's a glorious autumnal afternoon, the sun is shining and it's unseasonably mild. What better way, then, to defer the start of winter than a leisurely journey through mid-Wales with a tempting derby cup-tie waiting at the journey's end?

I know the A483 road from Chester through the heart of Wales as well as anyone; the good bits and the bad stretches; places to stop for a meal or a drink or just to admire the view. For the football fan the number of grounds within easy reach of this road is quite incredible and, on the journey south, mentally you tick them off, starting with Gresford of Cymru Alliance, then Lex XI, then Wrexham's famous Racecourse Ground. In no time at all you are into double figures and counting.

Past the turn-off for Cefn Druids, still one of my favourite grounds, and Chirk- home of the late, great Billy Meredith- John Harding's biography remains one of the best soccer books of its type ever written, heading south by-passing Oswestry, home now to the New Saints at the Park Hall complex. That reminds me, I must visit the site of the old Oswestry racecourse one day- with time ticking on it will have to wait.

The sign off to the right says 'Guilsfield 4'- another favourite club of mine- then Waterloo Rovers' ground at Welshpool looks a picture in the sunlight- how I enjoyed my visit last season. Through Newtown, for once not succumbing to the lure of a Morrisons' breakfast- for the next 20 miles are hard going and the worst stretch of the road, winding, narrow and undulating.

Through Llandrindod Wells, today's visitors and another ground on the radar to visit. Riding high at the top of the Mid Wales South League they look a team on the up. Finally, three hours into the journey the ancient town of Builth Wells is reached, passing the showground and the rugby club, over the stone river bridge and through the one-way streets of the town centre. The football club is situated to the west of the town in a quiet, residential area and is not that easy to find. A small sign shows the road to the ground is for football club business only- that'll be me then.

The players are already warming up for the 2-30pm kick-off as I arrive an hour beforehand. The ground is simply lovely and typical of many in this area. There is a small stand with bench seating straddling the half-way line and the immaculate

flat pitch is surrounded by a neat metal fence, with plaques denoting the names of donations received for the cost of its construction.

Tree-lined on three sides, the fourth side backing onto another football pitch and with a rugby pitch adjoining, there is a feeling of space and tranquillity. The views are breath-taking, the distant mountains simply stunning in the bright sunlight with their distinctive colours.

It's clear from watching the warm-ups of the two teams that though they are at level four of the Welsh pyramid they both aspire to higher things. Both teams are smartly attired and their preparations are thorough and deadly serious. By kick-off time a decent crowd has gathered, many spectators taking advantage of being able to park their cars inside the ground. The tea bar is up and running and a club official walks around the perimeter of the ground collecting the modest entrance money.

The game is hard-fought, skilful and fast-moving and superbly refereed. A local derby it may be but both sides are well disciplined and respectful. The standard of play is high- in fact it wouldn't have looked out of place in many a Cymru Alliance game I've witnessed.

With just 11 minutes remaining the deadlock is broken- a glorious, angled through ball beats the defence and one of the home substitutes applies an expert finish. As injury time beckons the homesters seal the game with a second. Great game, in idyllic conditions in a lovely, scenic setting watched by an attentive and appreciative crowd- as the chap leaning on the fence murmured contentedly while handing over his £2 admission- 'this must be the best value sport on the planet.'

I wouldn't disagree and with Builth Wells now in the last four of the Radnorshire Cup I'll be watching their progress with interest. And I've a feeling that their opponents from just nine miles up the road, are a team we'll hear plenty more from in the seasons to come.

The light fades quickly as I wend my way homewards, again counting off the football grounds on the way. Three hours after the final whistle I'm walking the dogs in the dark around Rivington (head torches are a wonderful invention) and reflecting on another great trip to Wales.

It goes without saying that a visit to the Lant Field, Pendre, Builth Wells comes with my strongest recommendation.

06/20