

**TT No.76: Andy Gallon** - Sat 31st October 2009; **Ashington** v Shildon; Northern League Division One; Res: 2-1; Att: 210; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (60pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*\*.

Sometimes things work out just as you expect. Having seen a few pictures of the place, I didn't think Ashington's characterless new Woodhorn Lane ground was going to appeal. And I wasn't wrong. The game, between the form teams in the Northern League's top flight, I'd hoped would be a high-quality contest. And I was right again. Fast, skilful, physical and in the balance until the final kick, this was my best match of the season so far. A noisy crowd and some crunching tackles gave it a real edge. As a bonus, it was played on a simply glorious late autumn day, so mild that we had earlier seen people paddling in the shallows on a sun-kissed beach at Tynemouth. Nearly November, and some observers still claim climate change is a fiction dreamt up by batty boffins!

Portland Park, Ashington's former ground in the town centre, was one of my favourites in the Northern League. Of a size and scale redolent of past glories, its demolition was a crying shame. The Colliers may now have a home fit for the modern game, and are clearly pleased with what has been achieved at the site, but for the ground's enthusiast, there is little to savour. Woodhorn Lane, opened in August 2008, is on the east side of Ashington, well away from the centre and close to the suburb of Hirst and Wansbeck General Hospital. Approaching via the A189 'Spine Road', the easiest method of access, there is no need to enter Ashington at all. And, surely, that cannot be a good thing, even if only because you miss sculptor John W Mills' bronze of local legend Jackie Milburn on the high street.

There's relatively little to say about Woodhorn Lane, which is surrounded, but not hemmed in, by modern houses. The main entrance is on the east side (you cannot get in from Hirst Welfare), and leads into a small, tarmac car park, which is floodlit. Additional spaces are available on grass to the north if the weather is amenable. If not, you're out on the street, which seems safe enough. Opposite the entrance gates is a flat-roofed block, as grey in colour as it is in design. This houses the club's offices, a bar, kitchen, the hospitality areas and the dressing rooms. Bright signage helps to lift things, but the interior, as bland as an Ann Maurice makeover, is badly in need of something like action and/or team photographs to inject a bit of life and individuality. That said, it's spotlessly clean.

The turnstiles are to the right of this main block and bring the spectator out close to the north-east corner. On the right, a metal container is home to the club shop. This is a great place to linger. Ashington, for their size, offer an excellent range of souvenirs, and the walls of the container are covered with photocopies of newspaper articles and programme covers detailing the club's proud history. Sadly, it's downhill from here. Literally, in the case of the pitch, which slopes from north to south. How odd that the site wasn't levelled when the ground was built. Picnic

tables are scattered in front of the main building in an area which is a mixture of grass and paving. The players' 'tunnel' is an open-air structure, with a wooden fence keeping the teams apart from the fans as they make their way to the arena from a door on the bottom side of the main building. Netting suspended from poles ensures balls don't end up on the flat roof. Don't these always leak?

The main stand, a 20-yard kit construction, straddles the halfway line on the north touchline. This offers four rows of black and white plastic tip-up seats. One could be anywhere. Wasteland is on the other side of the eight-foot wooden fence which encloses the ground, and beyond that are red-brick semis. Opposite is a newly extended kit stand which runs between the two 18-yard lines. The locals have nicknamed it the 'bus stop stand', and a sign reveals its capacity is 495. This has four steps of metal terracing, and was opened in its entirety for the previous Tuesday's 1-1 draw against Penrith. Perspex dugouts are positioned in front, either side of the halfway line. Dull, dull, dull. There is more waste ground to the rear. The North Sea is close, but you can't see it, and landmarks are few and far between. The modern buildings to the south-east are part of the hospital, and there is a wind turbine close to the ground. Yep. It's that exciting.

The west end consists of open hardstanding, with floodlit five-a-side pitches behind for use by the community. More houses are visible beyond these. The layout of Woodhorn Lane is puzzling because, on a day as sunny as this, the goalkeeper at the east end is dazzled, and punters in the main stand find themselves in a similar position. Equally oddly, for a new ground, there isn't a public address system, though the team-sheet is taped up helpfully outside the shop. The floodlights are masts, with three on each side. The pitch is surrounded by one of those bulky, plastic post and rail barriers (or, more accurately, water pipes) which, unnervingly, feel as though they could collapse at any time.

In a league of improving issues, Ashington's programme was impressive, and let down only by an unimaginative cover. Its 60 bulging pages included Steve Land's 'Five Ways to Beat the Credit Crunch'. One method was washing your underpants after been worn twice rather than once. Throw them at the wall, Steve suggested, and if they don't stick, they're good for another go. Straight out of the region's 'Viz' stable. The programme editor had less luck with his 'Three to Watch' in the opposition line-up - just one of his selections made the Shildon line-up, and he was on the bench.

What a game this was. A draw would have been a fair result because Shildon, employing a delightful passing game, were at least the equal of their hosts. They lost to a dodgy penalty decision in the second half, with the award made on the intervention of a linesman who was further away from the incident than referee Paul Keogh. Not that the man in the middle, a character of advancing years, could manage without help. He had such a poor game in the first half, his confidence seemed shot to pieces during the second 45 minutes.

Shildon's slick style ensured they dominated the opening 25 minutes - and then, typically, Ashington scored. It was beautifully worked goal, mind. Keith Douglas

played a low ball in from the right flank, Lee Hamilton's 10-yard shot was pushed aside by keeper Phil Aisbett, and Andrew Johnson swept the rebound into an empty net. The Railwaymen then got back on track with a 32nd-minute equaliser. John Butler was given the space to cross deep to the back post, and Daniel Moore, jumping alone, guided an angled header over and beyond keeper Karl Dryden. The crowd, wound up by a drummer and getting on the hesitant referee's back at every opportunity, howled in anguish when, three minutes later, Johnson went down in the box under a stiff shove - and play was allowed to continue. By now, the tackles were flying in, and Shildon skipper Justin Keegan could count himself lucky to escape with a yellow card after a particularly wild challenge on the stroke of half-time.

The golden sun faded before the teams ran out for the second half, but the drama continued unabated under the lights. Ashington were now having the better of things, and Scott Blandford almost caught out Aisbett with a 45-yard free-kick. But the Shildon keeper made a stunning double save on the hour. He denied Hamilton in a one-on-one before smothering Blandford's fierce follow-up. The turning point came in the 62nd minute. Johnson went down in the penalty area when Keegan appeared to clip him, and a spot-kick was awarded by the whistler after a linesman had flagged. Keegan, already booked, had to walk, and Douglas thumped his effort high to Aisbett's right. As so often happens when playing 10 men, the Colliers lost their way, and Shildon seemed to have an extra player on each flank. Despite some lovely football, the nearest the visitors went to scoring again was through Gary Brown, whose crisp drive was parried by Dryden. Ashington could have spared themselves a nervous finish during five minutes of stoppage time, but Douglas was twice too high in the closing stages. What a shame, though, that the Woodhorn Lane backdrop was not as compelling as the end-to-end tussle on the pitch.

06/20