

**TT No.82: Andy Gallon** - Sat 7th November 2009; **Whickham** v Northallerton Town; Northern League Division Two; Res: 0-1; Att: 56 (h/c); Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

Sniff, cough, sneeze, blow nose. Repeat ad nauseam. Yuk. After two days of being confined to barracks by the witheringly virulent cold virus which had swept through my workplace with the alacrity of a tornado, a dose of autumnal fresh air was suggested by my girlfriend as the ideal tonic. And what better way of blowing the bacteria from those lungs than spending 90 minutes watching football in a breezy spot? Northern League Whickham, whose Glebe Ground is perched high above Gateshead and the Team Valley, have long been down for a revisit. I went to this lofty venue many years ago for an FA Vase tie, which was abandoned during the second half owing to a mixture of mist and low cloud. But, with the weathermen predicting sun - rather than fog - on the Tyne, we headed north for the second consecutive Saturday.

The immaculate Glebe Ground is shared with this well-heeled village's cricket club, and therefore something of an impediment to the footballers. Spectator facilities on the common side, the south touchline, are restricted to grass and removable metal railings. This arrangement inevitably restricts any ambitions to climb the pyramid. Also, Whickham, formed in 1944 as Axwell Park Colliery Welfare, have to start every campaign with a glut of away fixtures. This season, even their mid-August FA Cup home tie, a highlight in any year, had to be played at neighbouring Dunston. It must make building up early momentum very difficult. The two clubs are not, it seems, the happiest of bedfellows, though at least they are still talking to each other.

The awkward lay-out is apparent from the moment you go through a gate in the wooden perimeter fence, pass a pay hut and emerge in the south-east corner of the football ground. To the left is a flat-roofed bar and social club, which also houses changing accommodation for the players of both sports, and to the right, Whickham's sole stand. This has been refurbished recently by employees of Skill Training, sponsors of the Northern League, which Whickham joined in 1988 from the Wearside League. The club provided the materials, the trainees the elbow grease. What a great job they've done. The stand, which is positioned between the edge of the penalty area and the goalmouth at the east end, has been beautifully finished. Nine rows of bench seats have been painted a glossy black, with individual places marked out with white numbers. There is a directors' box in the centre at the back and spotless loos at the near end. Their whitewashed exterior wall is the place to find a board displaying the line-ups. Five bulky columns support a roof pitched unusually steeply and clad in brown corrugated metal. A sign in the middle of the deep fascia carries the club's name. From the stand, built after joining the Northern League, there is an excellent view of the pitch, which slopes downhill markedly from south to north. The cricket pitch, rising to a summit near

the top boundary, stretches away towards the south and west, robbing the football ground of any intimacy. The altitude, denoted by the presence of a mobile phone mast, adds to the feeling of openness. All the fresh air a cold sufferer could need!

Next to the stand, in the space between the goalmouth and the north-east corner, are two low buildings painted cream. These contain a hospitality room for directors and guests, and a kitchen, run by stalwarts Kath and Brenda, who serve up (in mugs) some of the best tea I've tasted at football. Several of the visiting fans were so impressed by the pies, they wolfed down two. Concrete hardstanding runs along the north side and round the west end, with grass leading up to the perimeter fence, hard against which are the gardens of modern houses. This must be a prime site - ripe, one would think, for redevelopment. Dug-outs, smart in dazzling white paint, are positioned either side of the halfway line on the north touchline. Behind them is a single telegraph pole carrying two lamps to supplement the main floodlighting system, which uses traditional corner pylons. These are sturdy and quite low, with four large lamps mounted on each. All but the cricket side of the pitch is surrounded by a barrier of white posts and black railings.

Whickham's programme, an excellent effort, contained much to amuse before the teams ran out. The pen pics of their own players provoked plenty of guffaws. It was noted that goalkeeper Stephen Robinson had been a builder before joining the Navy and then the Police. "He just needs jobs as a cowboy and a Red Indian to be a fully-fledged member of The Village People". Midfielder Paul Cavanagh was described as Danny Hen's minder. "Two numpties together, although their women have curtailed their heavy drinking stupidity". Paul Andison, apparently, had been mistaken recently for younger brother and fellow defender Gary's twin, "so he must be looking bloody old for his age".

Whickham's distinctive badge features a character by the name of Lang Jack, known as the 'Tyneside Samson', who died in 1860 at the age of 60. This turns out to be John English, a stonemason, who stood 6ft 4in, played a major role in many local construction projects, and was feted for his extraordinary feats of strength. A prodigious drinker of ill temper, he fathered 13 children, and was said to have had a stride of more than three feet. A pub in the village bears his name. As do a lot of ancestors in these parts, no doubt.

Neither Whickham, FA Vase winners at Wembley in 1981, nor Northallerton Town have distinguished themselves this season, and both lie in the bottom half of the Northern League's Second Division. The quality of the football in this fixture wasn't helped by the weather. Surprisingly, shortly before kick-off, a wind sprang up and storm clouds obliterated both sun and blue sky. Rain sheeted down, leaving most of the crowd huddled in the stand at the near end. Northallerton had much the better of the first half. They moved the ball about sweetly and with purpose, while Whickham, wearing their 2009-10 strip for the first time after supply problems, struggled to put together anything telling.

A couple of neat one-twos ended with Martin Butterworth having a first-time shot deflected over, and the Town skipper saw a penalty appeal turned down when he appeared to be caught by Graeme King. More thoughtful Northallerton passing ended with the ball breaking to an unmarked Grant Hickman on the right side of the box, but his angled drive clipped the top of the crossbar. Team-mate Richard Dacombe took far too long to pull the trigger with home keeper Robinson exposed, and Andrew Ramsbottom volleyed wide of an empty goal from 20 yards after Robinson had miscued a clearance. The best Whickham could manage by way of a response was an easily-dealt-with shot on the run from King, and a Chris Laws effort on the turn which struck a defender's leg before whizzing the wrong side of a post.

Unexpectedly, Whickham were the stronger after the break. Thankfully, the rain stopped, allowing fans to leave the sanctuary of the stand and venture out into unsheltered territory. A single goal looked increasingly like being enough to settle the issue, and both teams pushed to find it. A 20-yard drive from Chris Bowman whistled across Robinson and a foot wide, and Whickham's Kris Holmes replied from the edge of the box, Alex Kell parrying well. Whickham substitute Scott Palmer volleyed agonisingly wide when positioned in front of goal before the contest's outcome turned on two incidents between the 83rd and 84th minutes. Goalkeeper Kell pulled off a stunning reaction save to claw away King's six-yard header, and Northallerton went up the other end and won a penalty when Robinson rather needlessly brought down an opposition player impossible to make out in the murk when he was going nowhere on the left side of the box. Ian Smurthwaite made the most of the opportunity by ramming his penalty low to the Whickham keeper's left and into the bottom corner. And that was that, though even the Town fans admitted the winner had come out of the blue.

The 1980-81 season, when Whickham took 5,000 fans to Wembley for their thrilling FA Vase final victory over Willenhall, must seem a distant memory. The Northern Leaguers were 2-0 down early in the match, but hit back to win 3-2 after extra-time. Attracting a decent crowd to the Glebe Ground these days is hard work. On the day of our visit, down the bank Gateshead were hosting Brentford in an intriguing FA Cup first-round tie and, across the Tyne, Newcastle United entertained Peterborough United in a rather less enticing Championship fixture. Whickham claim to have one of the smallest budgets in the Northern League. But, their programme states, they aim to be one of its friendliest clubs. That is certainly true, and special thanks to secretary Paul Nicholson for the warmth of his welcome. I just hope I didn't pass on any germs. Football needs grassroots clubs such as Whickham to survive and prosper because they represent the very heart and soul of the game.