

**TT No.97: *Mike Latham*** - Sat 21 November 2009: East Midlands Counties League: **Bardon Hill Sports 6-4 Gedling Town**; Attendance: 38; Admission: £4; Programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 5\*.

The weather forecast was dire, with heavy rain sweeping in from the west around midday. So, I quickly abandoned thoughts of another trip to Scotland and sought advice from a fellow groundhopper. We both decided that the eastern part of the country was the place to which to head and thought it might be wise to travel together as one can 'phone ahead and check if games are on while the other is driving.

So, a team effort it was and I left it to my friend to decide the venue for our afternoon's entertainment. He is a big fan of the A50 road east of Stoke, one of the finest dual carriageways in the country- rarely suffering from the kind of delays that blight so many of our major roads. We headed past the Britannia Stadium and in no time were joining up with the M1 southbound, our intended destination somewhere of which I knew little.

I did know that the East Midlands Counties League was formed in 2008 as a new Step 6 league for teams in Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire and that Bardon Hill Sports stepped up out of the Leicestershire Senior League to take their place in the new organisation. But several hopping friends of mine had been less than complimentary about the playing standards and facilities they had encountered on forays into this league and that was weighing on my mind.

With a little more research, I discovered that Bardon Hill is the highest point of Leicestershire, 912 feet above sea level and the village is dominated by a huge quarry that has dug into the side of the hillside. Quarrying has taken place in the region since the early 1600s and the site is currently owned by Aggregate Industries. The summit commands stunning views on a clear day and it has been estimated that the view commands a bigger portion of the area mass of England and Wales than any such viewpoint in the country.

Kev Ward and Malc Coles are the management team at Bardon Hill and they have overseen a dramatic improvement in the side's fortunes after finishing second from bottom last season. After enjoying a good run in the FA Cup, reaching the second qualifying round before eventually losing 8-0 to Northwich Victoria after beating local rivals Coalville Town away along the way, Sports went into this game against mid-table Gedling Town in second place in the table.

Arriving at the ground a good hour before kick-off my heart sank and I must admit that had I been travelling alone I would have re-routed to another fixture. The forecast rain was just beginning to fall, the playing pitch seemed heavy and a downpour would certainly have put the match at risk.

Fortunately, the brisk winds blew much of the rain away and despite the referee and one linesman taking the precaution of kicking a football around the playing area as part of their warm-up routine the match was never seriously in doubt.

Spying two such obvious groundhoppers, two friendly club officials welcomed us and invited us into the social club for a cup of hot soup. The club is shared with the cricket club and a flock of gulls had settled on the cricket square, feeding off the seed that had recently been sown. It was a murky, damp and depressing afternoon but the obvious enthusiasm of our two new found friends lifted our spirits. They spoke with obvious pride in their club, were delighted with their cup run and thoroughly enjoyed their trip to Northwich, where they were royally treated, despite the result, and promised us an entertaining game.

The Bardon Hill Sports Club ground at first sight is less than inspiring but the warmth of the welcome more than atones for any let-down. The club official at the gate bade us another warm welcome, proffered club badges and an excellent 36-page programme and we took up our places in the main stand, a neat structure with two rows of seats offering good shelter from the elements.

The rest of the ground is flat standing behind a post and rail fence though we were told of plans to build two small arena type stands on the far side behind the dug-outs. The players change in temporary buildings behind the nearside goal where the committee room is also housed and warm-up on the club's former first-team pitch behind the far goal, a neat railed-off enclosure.

As for the match itself, well it was just fantastic. The early stages gave a few hints that here were two teams committed to attack and Gedling took a deserved lead after ten minutes. But Bardon Hill then sprung to life, Sam Saunt showing off a deadly left-foot with two clinical strikes and Vernon Hart-Harper adding a superb finish.

As we enjoyed our half-time cuppa in the clubhouse all were agreed that the next goal would be crucial. It fell to Gedling, so quickly after the resumption that many were still making their way back into the ground. Within eleven minutes of the re-start Gedling, astonishingly, were ahead 4-3.

Whereupon Bardon Hill came back to life, Saunt adding two more goals, both again with his left foot and a fierce free-kick deep into injury time sealed the points.

After unpromising beginnings our first trip to Bardon Close produced a game that will live long in the memory- two attack-minded teams throwing caution to the winds to produce a tremendously compelling spectacle that reflected well on this new league controlled expertly by referee D Webb.

Bardon Hill Sports are a friendly, progressive club with developing facilities and offer the warmest of welcomes to the groundhopper. It goes without saying that a visit here comes with my warmest recommendation, though games of the quality we were fortunate enough to witness are few and far between.

