

TT No.101: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 30th October 2010; **Rhos Aelwyd** v Rhyl; Cymru Alliance; Res: 2-5; Att: 276; Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

THE PLACE: The hilltop village of Rhosllannechrugog (Rhos for short) is at the heart of what used to be coal mining country. It's an industry more readily associated with South - rather than North - Wales, but the long-gone coalfield in the Wrexham area was once extensive and profitable. Rhos's Hafod Colliery, sunk in 1863, employed almost 18,000 during the 1930s before falling on harder times and eventually closing in 1968. So, it didn't survive long enough to feel the back of Margaret Thatcher's destructive hand. This feels very much like a pit village. Its narrow streets are lined with trademark red-brick cottages, and other signposts to the past abound. The former miners' institute, a grand structure complete with clock tower, is now the Stiwt Theatre, the Hafod Colliery Social Club remains open for business and there's a pub called the Colliers Arms in the middle of the village. Rhos's full name translates as Moor of the Heathery Glade. You're certainly high up here, and the view east is magnificent. Helsby Rock, Bulkeley Hill, the Bonc yr Hafod sculpture and Beeston Castle are all visible across the valley. The obvious civic pride in tidy, orderly Rhos impressed me greatly. Numerous information boards relate, in words and pictures, the village's proud past, and today's streets, free from the muck associated with mining, are as clean as the air caressing these wind-tossed slopes.

THE CLUB: On the up. Everyone at Rhos, where ex-pro Steve Walters occupies the manager's chair, is clearly thrilled to be playing at Cymru Alliance level. This status was secured at the end of last season after clinching the Welsh National League (Wrexham Area) Premier Division title. Rhos previously featured in the Cymru Alliance between 1992 and 1997. The club were founded as a youth team in 1943, and still have a commitment to developing their own talent. The present youth section was set up in 1988 and boasts four junior sides, from under-11 to under-15.

THE GROUND: Rhos's home is unusual in being part of the public Ponciau Banks Park. It's a picturesque setting and the ground is almost certainly seen at its best on a sunny autumn day, when the neighbouring trees are an explosion of russet and gold, and the scenic panorama ranged across the eastern horizon is gloriously lit. Turn the clock back to the 1920s, however, and the Banks looked very different. Striking miners, cold, hungry and penniless, left these slopes a wasteland riddled with holes after sinking shafts in search of coal to keep their home fires burning. In the early 1930s, a decision was taken to create the park. With the help of overseas visitors from the International Voluntary Society for Peace, villagers transformed the scene. The heyday of the park was in the 1950s, and a refurbishment completed in 2008 "recreates the ambience of that iconic era", according to an information board's hyperbole. Marketing jargon aside, it's a lovely park, and as

well as the ground, features a children's play area, a mock circle of standing stones and a bandstand.

Unrestricted access to a park owned by Wrexham Borough Council is Rhos's biggest bugbear. The pitch is in a shocking state already, particularly after a week of half-term kiddie matches gave it a real hammering. Taking a gate is also difficult. Each entrance is manned, but people have the right (legally, if not morally) to wander in without paying. Some do, the young lad, one of just eight stalwarts on the hard-pressed committee, told me. It also means Rhos have to go through the rigmarole of putting up the nets and erecting advertising hoardings every time they play at home.

That said, Ponciau is a smashing venue. The sole stand, a boxy structure topping the tree-fringed grass bank on the western side, has bench seats and an area set aside for standing spectators. Steep and elevated, the bank offers a superb vantage point. Below the stand are two substantial dugouts, either side of the halfway line. The bank curves round behind each goal, giving a slightly enclosed feel to what otherwise would be a very open ground. A collection of portable buildings at the north end houses the dressing rooms, office, kitchen and toilets. Temporary barriers form a 'tunnel' dropping down the bank to the pitch, which is surrounded by white railings. The only hard standing is on the east touchline, beyond which is another pitch. There aren't any floodlights. All the structures are painted dark green, which helps give the ground a sense of unity.

Rhos are keen to develop the facilities, and have applied for grant aid, though one committee member revealed the club would press ahead with improvements only if they avoid relegation from the Cymru Alliance this season.

THE MATCH: A hugely entertaining contest for a bumper crowd to lap up. If the spartan surroundings and ploughed surface came as a culture shock to Rhyl, the visitors gave no indication of being put off their stride. The Lilywhites, helped by a Rhos defence which went AWOL repeatedly, raced into a 3-0 lead in 20 minutes. You'd never imagine a simple ball down the middle would prove such a devastating tactic! Route one led to goals for Scott Beckett (7) and Brad Maylett (12), and when Maylett (20) rounded off a sweet passing movement with a tap-in, the outcome appeared beyond reasonable doubt. By half-time, it should have been. Such was Rhyl's dominance that they could have had seven or eight. Thankfully, at least for the neutral, the second half was a different story. Rhos raised their game, and Rhyl switched off. Crosses from wide out produced headed goals for Jon Rush (52) and Mike Burke (59). If only the hosts could have kept it at 2-3 for a time. But Russ Courtney (60) headed a soft fourth and Paul Mooney (85) volleyed in a spectacular fifth. The crossbar then denied Mooney a second goal as he watched a long-range piledriver rebound to safety. Great effort from Rhos in the first 20 minutes of the second half, but performing for a mere quarter of a match is never going to be enough. They'd talked up this fixture as one of the biggest in their history, and perhaps they were guilty of playing the occasion, rather than the opposition. Many saw as unjust Rhyl's ejection from the Welsh Premier League last season, and on this evidence, it won't be long before they are back among the

Principality's elite. Their squad contains a healthy number of players with Football League experience.

THE PROGRAMME: Poor. Rhos can do much better here. Adverts proliferate, and while that's a sign the community is paying attention to the club, they swamp the sparse and uninspired editorial content. Several obvious items are missing, including the league table and the 2010-11 match statistics. The cover is bland - and things don't improve from this unimpressive start. But when you have only eight on the committee, I guess the programme is the least of your concerns.

THE VERDICT: Fascinating game, appealing ground, friendly club, interesting village. Rhos Aelwyd and Ponciau Banks Park deserve to be on any hopper's 'must do' list, though not, I'd suggest, in the depths of winter when the amount of exposure here might be rather less endearing.

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