

TT No. 120: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 13th November 2010; **Whitkirk Wanderers v Ripon City**; WYL Prem Division; Res: 5-0; Att: 35 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

THE PLACE: An inoffensive suburb four miles east of Leeds city centre, handy for junction 46 of the M1. Such easy access to the outside world has, no doubt, pushed up property prices here. Temple Newsam, a red-brick Tudor-Jacobean mansion set amid 1,500 acres of 'Capability' Brown-designed parkland, is the main attraction locally. The birthplace of Lord Darnley (Mary, Queen of Scots' infamous hubby), the house and estate, now showing distinct signs of wear and tear, have been owned by Leeds City Council since 1922, when Lord Halifax realised that he could no longer pay the bills in a changed, post-war world. I can't help feeling the National Trust would do a much better job in terms of upkeep and presentation. Temple Newsam also features attractive formal gardens and, for those of you with kids, Europe's largest working rare breeds farm, with more than 400 animals.

THE CLUB: I've struggled to unearth anything meaningful about Whitkirk Wanderers, other than their Charter Standard status. There wasn't a single syllable about their history in the programme, the club's website no longer functions and a trawl of the worldly web suggests they are more mysterious than the Bermuda Triangle. Given Whitkirk's location, I'd guess they have been long-term members of the Leeds League, which, as it expanded, became the West Yorkshire League. If anyone out there knows more, I'd be interested to hear from them!

THE GROUND: Wanderers share Whitkirk Sports & Social Club, just off the old Selby Road, with cricket, crown green bowls and tennis. It's an impressive complex, and the fully enclosed football ground offers better than average facilities for the West Yorkshire League. Enter down a lane next to a cemetery, and the surfaced car park by the cricket pitch is available to football punters. Walk past the Whitkirk Club (members only; a plaintive 'Can I help you?' was aimed in my direction the moment I strayed off-piste) and follow the path round the boundary, past the tidy bowling green on the right, bear right down a concrete ramp and pass through gates to reach the football ground. The brick structure, complete with awning, to the right houses the dressing rooms, loos and a kitchen. Refreshments, including tea served in proper mugs, are available here. The pitch, which slopes appreciably downhill from west to east, is beyond. There isn't any cover or floodlights. The pitch barrier is a post and rail affair painted a vivid yellow, and breeze block dugouts, in dazzling blue, face each other across the halfway line. Hardstanding has been laid in the nearest half on the west touchline. A grassy bank rises behind the goal at the north end. A couple of portable buildings, probably used for storing the groundsman's equipment, have been positioned on a shelf cut into the slope. The ground is enclosed with a steel slat fence. Otherwise, it's a very open site (must be worth a fortune), with other pitches to the east, south and west, and mature trees marking the perimeter.

THE GAME: Described in the programme as “must win for both sides”, but not the close encounter I was expecting. Both clubs were in the bottom five before kick-off, with Ripon three points better off than their hosts. But Whitkirk fielded a couple of new signings, and according to the home supporters, were a team transformed from the previous week’s West Riding Challenge Cup debacle against Brighouse Old Boys. Big striker Ryan ‘Boomer’ Robinson scored a hat-trick on his debut, and though tiring towards the end, proved a real handful for City’s overworked defenders. Robinson had just arrived from neighbours and divisional rivals East End Park, where, apparently, he didn’t make the starting XI often enough for his liking.

From the off, it was clear Ripon were in for a testing 90 minutes. Whitkirk were slicker and sharper - and, frankly, a great deal more enthusiastic. Robinson was quick to make his mark, tapping into an empty net from 12 yards in the eighth minute after a howler by left-back Scott McCabe. City keeper Will Wray then clawed away a close-range Robinson header in spectacular fashion, but the Wanderers new-boy picked his spot from 10 yards in the 15th minute after impressive set-up play by Chris Pacievitch and Luke Ullah. Five minutes before the break, Whitkirk were in again. Ripon failed to clear a corner and when a loose ball fell to Dean Dewing just outside the box, he cracked a text book right-foot volley into the bottom corner. Game over.

Robinson completed his treble four minutes after the restart. Ripon’s defenders again failed to cut out a through ball, and ‘Boomer’ raced clear on the right side of the penalty area to roll a shot across and beyond the advancing Wray. Whitkirk then switched off, allowing Ripon, as dangerous as a lamb with a limp, a few excursions over the halfway line. The visitors’ best chance fell to Ben Boothroyd, who sliced tamely wide with the goal at his mercy after good work from Michael Finnigan and Ally Wilson. In the 59th minute, it became 5-0. Spotting Wray off his line, Pacievitch, out near the left touchline, fired an excellent shot over the stranded keeper. An unmarked Dewing should have made it six with five minutes left, but headed over Michael Elliott’s corner to the near post.

THE PROGRAMME: Described by Whitkirk’s chairman as an “amateur production”. It’s ‘nowt special’, but I’ve come across plenty worse. And seeing paper at step seven is always a bonus. The rather plain cover and advertising pages are glossy, the editorial content photocopied. Not a great deal to detain the reader, but it’s nice that Wanderers are issuing again having taken a couple of years off. One chap - inevitably - puts the whole thing together. The chairman told me the programme pulls in a very handy £3-4,000 of income before the season starts, and the 25-30 copies sold on matchdays pay most of the referee’s expenses. So, worth doing then.

THE VERDICT: Another cheap and cheerful excursion into the West Yorkshire League, whose top-flight clubs I’m ‘ticking off’ at the pace of a tortoise with a headache. The quality of the football and the facilities at Whitkirk are pretty much what you’d expect to find at grassroots level. Everyone was very friendly and seemingly pleased to discover a stranger in their midst. To paraphrase former

Halifax Town manager Jim McCalliog, the dourest of Scots, it's heartening to discover there's as much pride in clubs of Whitkirk's size as there is at Liverpool; just fewer people showing it.

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