

TT No. 150: Mike Latham - Saturday 8 January 2011: imoSports Midland Football Combination Division Two: **Enville Athletic** 3-2 Henley Forest; Att: 25 (h/c); Admission: donation & raffle ticket; No programme; Match Rating: 4*.

With games falling again to the weather and my original plan of watching Gillford Park play at the Copeland Stadium in Whitehaven being ditched by a Friday night postponement it seemed sensible to head south as Saturday morning dawned bright and clear.

The next plan was to take in the FA Vase tie at Gornal but that fell-foul of a mid-morning pitch inspection. Then inspiration came into my head. A long-standing and respected groundhopping friend of mine had spoken warmly of his trip to Enville Athletic a few years ago and when a check call to the club's secretary/ chairman Dave Birchall got a definite 'yes' it was all systems go for the rural south Staffordshire village a dozen miles or so south-west of Wolverhampton.

Enville is located on the A458 road between Stourbridge and Bridgnorth, its origins dating back to the Domesday Book and beyond. It's a tiny village whose focal point is the Cat Inn public house; there's also a general store, antique shop and around one hundred houses and an ancient church, St Mary's. The Enville Brewery is based here, an award winning concern established in the early 1990s, resurrecting brewing traditions in the village which had ended with the demise of the original brewery located at the Stamford Arms (since demolished but which stood behind the Cat Inn) just after the end of the First World War.

Entrance to the football ground is spectacular, the directions from the excellent Midland Combination website giving a hint of its unique appeal: "At 'The Cat Inn' public house, turn left onto the car park and follow the private drive to Enville Hall, through the large white gates. The clubhouse and ground are 200 yards along the drive on the left-hand side."

The village is dominated by the large 6,500-acre Enville Hall estate, formerly known as the Stamford Estate. The Earls of Stamford lived in Enville Hall which is still owned and lived in by the family though the title is extinct. The Hall once boasted its own private racecourse which is now a forestry track and particularly in Victorian times was noted for its extensive gardens.

The Earl of Stamford was President of the MCC and built a beautiful cricket ground within the estate and turf from Enville was taken to Lord's Cricket Ground. The ground staged some important games in the 1800s, between the Earl's own side and All England XIs when most of the country's top cricketers were on display. One of the most famous games here was in July 1870 when I Zingari defeated a United South England XI by an innings in a three-day game that attracted a total of 30,000 spectators. Several Test cricketers were in the beaten side including WG Grace, Henry Jupp, Fred Grace, James Lillywhite, James Southerton and Henry Charlwood. An under-arm bowler Osbert Mordaunt captured nine wickets for the I

Zingari side who had no less than 18 batsmen including the Earl himself, sadly out for a duck. These days the Enville Cricket Club competes in the more modest surroundings of the Worcestershire County League Division Three.

Lord Stamford was also a keen horseman with a passion for hunting and racing and became Master of the Quorn Hunt in Leicestershire. He also bred racehorses, thus continuing an Enville tradition which was started in the mid-18th century and which continues through to this day.

There can be few more beautiful settings for a game of football, especially on a dry, crisp afternoon with the sun threatening to break out from beneath the clouds. The football ground forms part of the cricket ground, the square where the great WG played now roped-off for winter. Apart from the Perspex dug-outs on the far side the ground must look virtually the same as 140 years ago when the great cricket game took place. The neat wooden pavilion provided a pre-match refuge from the winter chill and freshly drawn pints from the Enville Brewery were available for consumption. Mr Birchall, though busy with a myriad of pre-match tasks still found time to prepare my companion and myself a lovely cup of tea in a china cup and saucer. They do things in style here.

Henley Forest went into the game as favourites, placed second in the league and with two fine forwards so Mr Birchall informed. But Enville stuck to their task well and gradually imposed themselves on a finely contested game that always held the interest. Enville twice led, were twice pegged back before working what proved to be the winning goal with ten minutes remaining.

Spectator facilities are minimal here, a piece of wet grass behind a touchline rope, but the glorious sweeping views coupled with the magnificent backdrop of Enville House made for a unique setting for a fine game. And with the early (2pm) kick-off the game was done and dusted by a quarter to four before the seeping cold began to really bite. It goes without saying that a visit to this unique football setting comes with my highest recommendation.

07/20