

**TT No.157: *Mike Latham*** - Sat 15 January 2011: STL Northern Football League Division 1: **South Shields** v Esh Winning; Result: 1-0; Att: 100 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £1; Match abandoned after 57 minutes (floodlight failure).

I am an avid reader of football club histories and one of the finest books of its genre still occupies a prominent place on my groaning book-shelves despite being published eleven years ago. *South Shields FC, the Football League Years, A Complete Record of a forgotten club* (George Thompson, Yore Publications, 2000) is a fabulous account of the short and chequered history of South Shields' time in the Football League from 1919 to 1930.

The player profiles make particularly interesting reading, including as they do a county cricketer, a cattle rancher in Argentina, players who played in cup finals and internationals and some who falsified their age and perhaps even their identity. Their ground, Horsley Hill, was once home to South Shields Northern Union team who played in the formative years of the rugby league and is now buried under a housing estate. Thompson has a light touch, a huge sense of irony and a good humour; his history is a masterpiece and deserves a wider audience.

South Shields is a substantial town in its own right, located on the south of the Tyne, about five miles east of Newcastle, known for its ship-building and coal-mining and with a population of around 80,000. These days, service industries form the major component of local employers and many residents commute elsewhere in search of work. The town has made a name as something of a tourist destination, has an award-winning fish and chip shop, some fine beaches and is the finishing post of the Great North Run. A number of famous people are associated with the town including the actress Dame Flora Robson, the novelist Catherine Cookson, the X Factor 2009 winner Joe McElderry, Monty Python member Eric Idle and one of my favourite Bolton Wanderers footballers, Phil Brown, the new manager of Preston North End.

Football in the town has had a chequered history and can be divided into three main chapters. The first South Shields team played in the 1890s but soon folded. South Shields Adelaide, nicknamed the Laddies, was formed in 1899 and turned professional in 1908 when they joined the North Eastern League, by which time the Adelaide tag was dropped. In 1913 the club applied to join the Football League but not one solitary vote was forthcoming. But after the First World War was over South Shields had immediate success and when the number of League clubs was extended from 40 to 44, they succeeded in being elected at a meeting in Manchester held in March 1919. Also joining the league were Coventry City, West Ham United and Rotherham County; Port Vale, Rochdale and Southport lagged behind in the voting.

In 1919-20 South Shields finished ninth in Division Two and had an average home attendance of around 15,000. By 1929-30 they averaged 3,300, the lowest in the Third Division North and the club folded, being taken over by Gateshead.

A second South Shield FC emerged in 1936, playing initially at Horsley Hill (then also used as a greyhound stadium) and then Simonside Hall and reached the Northern Premier League until folding in 1974 after a second 'defection' to Gateshead to become Gateshead United and the sale of the ground. The present South Shields FC was then born, based a council-owned pitch at Jack Clark Park until the present Filtrona Park ground was inaugurated in 1992.

Located on an industrial estate, the other end of a long road with a huge Tesco supermarket at the other end, the South Shields ground, actually in Jarrow is not the most scenic but after all the travails of the past it is a home of which to be proud. The club almost folded again in 2006 but a group of local people banded together to form a committee and ensure survival.

A large social club, a smart seated stand and a substantial cover, all on the far side from the approach road form the major parts of the ground which is hemmed in by a large factory behind a nearside goal and the Metro railway line behind the far side. The rest of the ground is flat standing with the dug-outs opposite the main stand. An informative match-day programme sold for £1 and the tea bar, well frequented on a chilly and windy afternoon offered good value fayre.

On a heavy pitch, just about playable, South Shields went one-up with a goal after a defensive mistake midway through the first-half. The floodlights were switched on at half-time but flickered only briefly into life. Just twelve minutes of the second half were played in the gathering gloom before the referee led the players from the field. After an unsuccessful attempt to rectify the problem the game was postponed at about half-past four.

Football supporters in these parts are realistic, phlegmatic, good humoured and largely undemonstrative. Their side might have been well on the way to three points, their first home game for two months had been cruelly cut short but there were no demonstrations, no recriminations. News of the abandonment filtered through to the gathering outside the club house and people just accepted it, many drifting away into the gathering gloom, others retiring to the club house to watch the final scores come in; after all, after twice losing their ground and seeing their team fold, setbacks such as this were hardly as serious, however disappointing. And George Thompson, I suspect, would have found it highly amusing. He might even have been there.

07/20