

TT No. 167: Mike Latham - Sat 5 February 2011: Wearside League: **Easington Colliery AFC v Ashbrooke Belford House**; Admission: £2; Result: 3-1; No programme; FGIF Match Rating: 4*Attendance: 30 (h/c).

The north-east was forecast to miss out on the worst of the wet weather sweeping the north of the country and I headed there unsure of my final destination. I had several targets in mind but the lure of an early kick-off, at 2pm, coupled with a stress-free journey up the A19 dictated my visit to Easington Colliery AFC, a ground I had long aimed to visit. It was an inspired decision for the ground is a gem and well worth the long journey.

When Brian Hunt compiled his outstanding history of the Northern Football League, entitled Northern Goalfields Revisited, in 2000 a section included brief histories of current and former clubs. At the time Easington Colliery AFC were members of the league and the description of their ground had stayed in my memory.

“If they come to hand out prizes for the finest views in the Northern League, Easington will be right up there with the best,” Brian Hunt wrote. “Should the quality of football slip, Welfare Park spectators can treat themselves to a panoramic, picture postcard vista of the Durham coastline and the North Sea.”

Formed in 1913 as Easington Colliery Welfare, the club built up gradually before earning success in the Wearside League, winning five championships between 1930 and 1949. Later, on 14 November 1955 a crowd of 4,074 saw the Colliery lose 2-0 to Third Division North Tranmere Rovers in the first round of the FA Cup- the only time that Easington have reached that stage of the competition. But nine years later the club disbanded.

Happily, the club was re-formed in 1973 and in 1980 the Welfare amalgamated with Easington Rangers, a successful team in local football to form Easington Colliery AFC. In 1985 they were elected to the Northern League, winning promotion at their first attempt and remaining in the top flight until 1990. They remained members of the Northern League until 2005 when they dropped into the Northern Football Alliance before moving back to the Wearside League two years later. In 2010 the club lifted the Wearside League Cup and they have enjoyed a successful time so far this season, going into this game against their fourth-placed visitors unbeaten and top of the league with 18 wins and three draws from 21 games.

The club's home ground is at Welfare Park, Paradise Gardens, Easington Colliery and the club colours are green and white striped shirts with green shorts and socks. Not surprisingly there is a long list of players to have moved on from the area to find fame in the top ranks of English football including Newcastle United goalkeeper Steve Harper and Manchester City winger Adam Johnson.

Easington Colliery is reached by going down the B1283 Seaside Road, east of the A19 initially passing through the neighbouring village of Easington. The entrance to the ground is reached by a long walk on foot down a tree-lined lane which provides a lasting and poignant memorial to one of the worst mining disasters in British history.

Easington Colliery was the main employer in the village from late Victorian times and on 29th May 1951 an explosion occurred in an area of the mine known as the 'Duck Bill,' thought to have been caused by sparks from a mechanical coal cutter which ignited a pocket of gas. Thousands of tons of rock and earth came crashing down into the coal seam, trapping the miners some 900 ft below the surface. Many of the casualties died instantly, others from carbon monoxide poisoning and a total of 81 miners lost their lives with the final death toll rising to 83 as two rescuers gave their lives selflessly trying to save others.

A disaster fund was set-up for the widows and children of the deceased and donations poured in from world-wide, the fund total eventually reaching £180,000. A Garden of Remembrance was built in Easington Colliery Cemetery for those who lost their lives in the disaster and a Memorial Lane leading down to the Welfare which remains a well maintained and poignant symbol of remembrance for the village. Singer-songwriter Jez Lowe who was born and brought up in Easington wrote a song entitled Last of the Widows, in 1991 to mark the 40th anniversary of the pit disaster. The Colliery finally closed in 1993, leaving the village to become one of the unemployment black-spots in the UK.

In 2000 Easington Colliery became the setting for an outstanding British made film, Billy Elliot, following the hopes and dreams of an 11-year-old boy and his ambition of becoming a professional ballet dancer. The film is set during the miners' strike in the mid-1980s.

The football ground is lovingly maintained, the terraces along the nearside smart and neat, an immaculate small seated stand and a tea bar with one of the finest views of any in the country looking across to the coastline and the sea. The other three sides of the ground are flat standing and with floodlights and a social club also housing the dressing rooms this is a ground of some stature. After all the trials and tribulations, the area has suffered it is a tribute to the tenacity and pride of the local community that they can maintain a welfare ground in such immaculate condition.

On a bright and mercifully dry afternoon, the high winds had abated and both sides were able to put on a good display of football for the thirty or so diehards on the terraces, just one of that number choosing to sit in the stand. After dominating the first half-hour the visitors took a deserved lead but that merely sparked the table-toppers into life. They equalised soon after, went in at half-time 2-1 up after a disputed penalty and eventually sealed another three points with a late third goal.

I walked back along the memorial tree-lined lane reflecting on the enormous sacrifice made by the miners who lost their lives in that terrible disaster and of how gratifying it was to see their memory was being maintained. Brian Hunt's

brilliant history had led me there but there was so much more to discover. It goes without saying that a visit to Welfare Park comes with my warmest recommendation.

07/20