

**TT No. 179: Mike Latham** - Sat 19 February 2011: The West Lancashire Football League (sponsored by Sports 360): **Millom** 3-2 Turton; Attendance: 20 (h/c); Admission and programme: n/a.

There are few small towns in England that can match Millom for the sporting prowess of its inhabitants and on a cold February afternoon with snow on the distant fells it was as good a time as any to check if the traditions were being maintained.

Happily, they were and a trip to this remote but beautiful part of South-West Cumbria revealed that sport in the town continues to thrive.

Though Millom is mentioned in the Domesday Book it was still a small hamlet in the mid-19th century though a railway station had opened here as part of the Whitehaven & Furness Junction Railway. The most southerly town in the old county of Cumberland, Millom was an important staging post for travellers who crossed the Duddon Estuary from Barrow-in-Furness to go further up the coast. Once known as Holborn Hill, the hamlet was re-named Millom due to Arthur de Millom, who came to reside and lend his name to Millom castle, first built in the 12th century; now a ruin it is in the grounds of a farmhouse.

The discovery of deposits of haematite between Millom and the seashore near Haverigg changed the landscape. Millom grew into a small industrial town based around its iron ore mines and furnaces. Shafts were sunk in the area, furnaces constructed and by 1881 there were seven pits operated by the Hodbarrow Mining Company. Millom now had a population of around 10,000 and terraced streets had been built either side of the railway. The ironworks finally closed in 1968. These days there are few reminders of what was once one of the largest industrial sites of its type in the world and the area, near Hodbarrow, is now an important RSPB nature reserve.

Sport played a major part in the lives of the industrial workers and Millom Rugby Club, formed in 1873 was a prominent institution in the area. In the 1890s two Millom players, Edward Knowles and Sam Northmore were selected to play for the England Rugby union international team.

After the Northern Union (later to become known as the Rugby Football League) was formed by a breakaway from the rugby union in 1895, primarily on the issue of paying players for broken-time, established clubs such as Millom faced a dilemma. Highly successful in the union game, with three North-Western league titles and three Cumberland Challenge Cup victories, they switched codes in 1897 and were a senior club in the Northern Union until 1906.

Like many towns of a similar size Millom struggled to sustain a club that, to all intents and purposes was a professional outfit; coupled with the reluctance of

many clubs to accommodate Millom's geographical isolation the club left the senior ranks and reverted to being an amateur organisation.

The old Millom club played at the long defunct Salthouse ground on the outskirts of town; these days Millom RL Club plays at the splendidly appointed Coronation Field on Devonshire Road a few hundred yards out of the town centre. They play in the National Conference Division One and since the last war have produced over 50 amateur internationals. There is also another Millom rugby union club whose ground is at Haverigg.

Millom also produced an England international soccer player, Jimmy Settle. A speedy winger or inside-forward he went on to play for Bolton Wanderers, Bury and Everton with whom he played in two FA Cup finals, earning a winner's medal in 1906 before finishing his career with Stockport County. He represented England six times against the other home nations between 1899 and 1903, scoring six goals, including four goals in England's 13-2 victory against Ireland at Roker Park, Sunderland in February 1899. In the 1901-02 season Settle, playing inside-left for Everton was the highest goal-scorer in Division One with 18 goals.

Millom Cricket Club has also produced many fine players over the years and their well-appointed ground on St George's Road has staged many Cumberland county cricket games. The cricket ground is close to St George's Church whose distinctive steeple is one of two significant landmarks of the town being visible from some distance; the other is the brooding summit of Black Combe standing 1970ft (600m) above sea level and today part shrouded in mist, its upper slopes covered by snow.

One of the best cricketers Millom produced was batsman Steve Sharp who scored a magnificent unbeaten century to lead Cumberland to victory in the 1989 Minor Counties Knock-Out Trophy over Hertfordshire at Lord's. These days Sharp is the director of cricket for the county.

Despite heavy rain and snow showers overnight Millom FC's secretary Steve Allington was happy to confirm the game against Turton was definitely on. I knew that Millom FC had the reputation of having one of the best pitches in the West Lancashire League and after a trouble-free and scenic journey I journeyed down Devonshire Road. The town's rugby league and football clubs share facilities at Coronation Park but it's easy to see that the former is the dominant football code in the town.

Millom RL were at home to Stanningley with a 2-30pm kick-off, half an hour before their soccer neighbours whose pitch runs at right angles behind the far corner of the rugby field to the side of the well-appointed club house.

At least two hundred supporters had turned out to watch the rugby game, many gathered on the Devonshire Road side where the dug-outs are situated; about the same number on the club house side. They witnessed intently what looked a thrilling and hard-fought contest on what became a very muddy pitch, Millom eventually prevailing 12-10 thanks to a late penalty-goal.

By contrast the soccer club, playing at Division One of the West Lancashire League (level 8 of the non-league pyramid) had around twenty spectators when their game kicked-off a few minutes late. Numbers swelled, however, at half-time during the rugby game and after the rugby match was over.

The soccer club pitch looked immaculate despite the rain, just a few puddles along one touchline betraying signs of the ravages of winter. The pitch is enclosed by a sturdy wooden fence on two sides, the far goal backs onto fields. The dug-outs are situated along the far side with what looked to be allotments behind. There were some buildings used for storing machinery behind the nearside goal and what appeared to be old changing rooms but these days the players change in the main club-house.

Millom's opponents were Turton, a club with a rich history of their own. The original Turton FC was formed in 1871, and lays claim to being one of the oldest football clubs in the world; in the early 1870's they were one of the leading clubs in Lancashire and one of the entrants in the first Lancashire Cup competition. As with Millom rugby club, the growth of professionalism led to the club quickly becoming less prominent though they did lift the Lancashire Junior Cup on four occasions between 1900 and 1905. Though currently playing at neighbouring Edgworth, the original Turton FC ground in Chapeltown remains in use; Old Boltonians FC (Lancashire Amateur League) play there and the ground has a claim to being the oldest remaining football ground in the world.

Turton had been relegated from the Premier Division last season and began this game bottom of Division One. They quickly fell behind as Millom's smart and thoughtful build-up play impressed. Though Millom added a second just before half-time Turton had found their feet by then and contributed to an interesting game which was well refereed by the young official.

The second half saw Turton pull a goal back before Millom scored again; but as the light faded the visitors scored again to set up a tense finish extended by several minutes of added time. Millom's 3-2 victory was every bit as hard-fought as that of their rugby neighbours.

The club house was busy and well frequented; as well as the bar area there is also a serving hatch where hot drinks and food was available, welcome on such a cold day. It was great to see the important role that sport still plays in the town of Millom and I would thoroughly recommend a visit here, particularly if you can combine it with a rugby league match as well.

07/20