

TT No.21: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 14th August 2010; **Silsden** v Crook Town; FA Cup EPQR; Res: 2-2; Att: 228; Admission: £5; Programme: £1.50 (52pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

The day football came home. To Silsden, that is. The North West Counties League Premier Division club capped a frenetic summer of hard graft by unveiling their new-look set-up at Keighley Road for this FA Cup tie, thereby ending a seven and a half-year exile at the Keighley RLFC ground. Crucial financial assistance came from various sources, including a giant of the retail world, hence the new name - the Asda Foundation Stadium. Every little (£25,000, in their case) helps. Local footy anorak Rob Grillo pitched in with more than £1,000 having run the 270-mile Pennine Way in a nine-day mega-marathon. The amount of work done is certainly impressive. Floodlights, hardstanding, a perimeter fence and a turnstile have been installed, and the original wooden stand refurbished. I hardly recognised the place from my only other visit, on a snowy afternoon in December 2001, during the Cobbydalers' days in the West Riding County Amateur League.

I'd love it (just love it) if I could tell you the game was worthy of an occasion so momentous, even the local mayor turned up wearing his chain. Must be a 'ball and chain' pun in there somewhere. Unfortunately, this was no white-knuckle ride. The contest was, for long periods, scrappy and shapeless. A strong wind blowing up Airedale didn't help. Three of the four goals were, directly or indirectly, from penalties. Only in the last 15 minutes was any real urgency shown. Suddenly, neither team fancied the idea of a Wednesday night replay!

Crook, who had begun the Northern League Second Division season with two straight wins, went ahead in the 23rd minute. Silsden's Damien Whiteoak handled an Andrew Appleby shot on the goal-line, was efficiently sent off and Martin O'Riordan drove the resulting spot-kick into the roof of the net. The visitors, more brawn than brain, promptly sat back on their slender lead. Silsden, with the wind behind them in the first half, frequently looked as if they had the extra man.

Ian Myers, the Crook keeper, saved well from Sam Heap and Lee Reilly before O'Riordan's obvious push on Darren Munday in the 65th minute gave Silsden a chance to equalise from the spot. Reilly's penalty was tentative, but Myers' parry fell kindly for the alert Heap, who sidefooted home the loose ball. Five minutes later, the Yorkshire side had the lead. Another penalty! Paul Moss, a juggernaut at the back, clumsily tripped Reilly, and Heap comprehensively beat Myers in the head-to-head.

Finally, Crook showed some ambition. Home keeper Chris Thompson saved superbly from substitute Chris Wallace, but could do nothing about the leveller in the 85th minute. Wallace drove a free-kick low and hard into the box, and Appleby stuck out a hopeful boot to wrongfoot Thompson and divert the ball past him. Cue

frantic phone calls from both sets of players anxious to take unscheduled time off work.

So, what of the ground? If approaching from the Aire Valley trunk road, the A629, there's no need to go into Silsden. That's no loss, I have to say. And that's from someone who lived in the village for 12 months. The ground is also handy for rail-riding hoppers because Steeton & Silsden station is a mere five-minute walk. The site is shared with a cricket club and a golf driving range. To reach the turnstile, you walk along the cricket boundary and past their impressive new pavilion. Once past the pay box (cheery welcome; lapel badges and programmes on sale), you emerge near the ground's south-west corner. A shiny new clubhouse, built for £1m, dominates the area behind the southerly goal and houses the bar, toilets and dressing rooms. The remainder of the facilities are along the near - west - touchline. Looking north, these consist of the revamped old wooden stand, a museum piece which has low headroom, clench-your-buttocks bench seats and restricted viewing. Then comes a portable building serving refreshments. I got the impression we were the only members of the crowd not tempted by pies, mushy peas and a toxic paste of raw onions and mint sauce. Snog, anyone? Ooh, go on, then. The final piece in the jigsaw is a kit stand with four steps of terracing and a cutaway section for those using wheelchairs. A post and rail fence, along with concrete hardstanding, surrounds a flat, lush pitch and the floodlights are of the mast variety. Tumbledown wooden dugouts are positioned near the halfway line on the eastern side.

As ever with small venues, setting plays a huge part in one's overall impression. Silsden score highly. Airedale, in its post-Skipton, pre-Keighley phase, is green and pleasant; a landscape dotted with farms and a patchwork quilt of meadows. Nubile girls, barefoot and lightly clad, luxuriate amid gently waving fronds, suggestively consuming flaked chocolate, eyes dripping with lust. OK, maybe not the last bit. On the hillside - Earl Crag - beyond the main stand can be glimpsed the Salt and Pepper Pots, two notable landmarks in the direction of Cowling. Their posh names are Lund's Tower (pepper) and Wainman's Pinnacle (salt). The former has a spiral staircase leading to a platform with a vista extending to the Yorkshire Dales (t'Dales).

Bravo Silsden for effecting an impressive relocation in double-quick time. Phil and Kirsty would be proud. Let's hope the locals in this rugby league-minded area respond in a way they never seemed to at Lawkholme Lane, Keighley. The Cobbydalers, like so many clubs at this level, deserve and would benefit enormously from greater support. Maybe the comforts of home can produce a winning team.

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