

TT No.221: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 2nd April 2011; **Bishop Auckland** v Newcastle Benfield; Northern League Div. One; Res: 3-4; Att: 210; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

THE CLUB: Frequently, and relationship experts would undoubtedly highlight this as a good sign, I forget my girlfriend's football knowledge is not the equal of mine. I began constructing an extensive mental library of fairly useless information by absorbing the Rothman's Football League Yearbook of 1970-71, bought, incidentally, at reduced price thanks to vouchers acquired as a result of my granddad's forty-a-day fag habit. And have continued to be a fact sponge ever since. My girlfriend, on the other hand, did not become intimately acquainted with the Beautiful Game until we met, two and a half years ago. So when, earlier this week, she asked where we'd be heading at the weekend, and I replied with a concise history of Bishop Auckland FC (you can risk being this boring when you've been together a while), I was astonished that the mention of Bob Paisley was returned with a furrowed brow. "You've never heard of Bob Paisley?" The shock, I'm sure, was obvious in my tone. Once we'd established she knew who Bill Shankly was, and I'd recovered enough of my equilibrium to finish knocking out my signature (that is, one of the few dishes I can do) tomato and spinach risotto, I set about explaining the connection between Paisley and the Two Blues. I should say, at this point, lest anyone reading this imagines I do all the work in our house, that my girlfriend had done a day's graft in the office, while I'd been 'fanning' around to no great effect in the study.

Paisley, what used to be called a half-back, played for Bishop Auckland in the late 1930s before going on to find, mostly as a manager, considerable fame and fortune at Liverpool. En route to this Northern League fixture, we called in at the Locomotion railway museum at Shildon and discovered, to our astonishment, the Durham Amateur Football Trust was hosting an exhibition in the main hall. It related to the 'Glory Years' between the Thirties and the Sixties, and featured archive photographs, programmes, tickets and the like. Bishop, 10 times winners of the FA Amateur Cup and beaten finalists on eight occasions, comprised a large part of the content. I pointed out to my girlfriend a Two Blues team group from 1938-39. 'R Paisley', fresh-faced and sporting a Brylcreem-ed centre parting, was extreme right on the front row. If you are going anywhere near Shildon before the season ends, don't miss this excellent exhibition at Locomotion. It's a free museum, so you can't go wrong.

Bishop Auckland, formed in 1882, are rather burdened by their impressive history. Their distinctive dark and light blue halved shirts were chosen by the club's founders, theological students from Oxbridge who were studying at Auckland Castle, home of the Bishop of Durham. The club, long after those heady FA Amateur Cup triumphs in front of full houses at Wembley, moved up to the Northern Premier League in 1988, but left their iconic Kingsway ground in the town

centre in 2002 without having anywhere else to go or planning permission in place for a new stadium. Depressing groundshares at Shildon and Spennymoor Town followed, and with most of the playing budget going on rent, the Two Blues suffered a couple of relegations and in 2006 found themselves back in the Northern League. After almost a decade without a home of their own, Bishop Auckland opened the new Heritage Park stadium in October last year. Brighter times lie ahead, I'm sure, for this most famous and fondly appreciated of non-league clubs.

THE GROUND: An out-of-town new stadium in a retail park doesn't promise much, and Heritage Park won't set your pulse racing. The ground is in Tindale Crescent, closer to St Helen Auckland than Bishop Auckland. North East egomaniac-in-chief Sir John Hall opened it officially last October, with the first game, a friendly against woebegone Middlesbrough, taking place early the following month. It holds 1,994 and offers two areas of cover. The main stand, similar to the one at Nantwich Town and clad stylishly in navy and silver panels, has six rows of blue plastic tip-up seats, a central players' tunnel, a cantilever roof and an extremely pleasant bar behind floor-to-ceiling glass doors which open at the push of a button. With attendances still not what the club would like them to be, this swish facility should at least secure decent income via the wedding reception brigade. A very well-stocked club shop can be found on the ground floor, close to the turnstiles.

From the seats, the view is dominated by a Sainsbury's megastore. Sharp-eyed retail outlet enthusiasts will also spot a Tesco Extra and a Lidl. A car showroom completes a humdrum scene. Welcome to Britain, 2011. The stand behind the goal at the north-west end is about the width of the penalty area. It is a simple propped cantilever over a handful of steps of terracing. Perspex dug-outs are positioned either side of the main stand, and the floodlights are of the mast variety. A hardstanding path runs round the pitch, which is separated from spectators by a post, rail and mesh barrier. Shallow grassy (at least once the seeds get a firm hold) banks run up to the wooden fence which encloses the ground. Overall, it's not a patch on characterful Kingsway, whose three-sided nature rendered it useless in the face of ground grading zealots.

I can't talk about Heritage Park without mentioning the pitch in detail. Part mud, part loose turf, part sand; it is appalling. Somebody - the contractors who built the stadium, it appears - has messed up big time, and the Two Blues will almost certainly have to spend the summer sorting it out. Neither easy nor cheap, according to the locals.

THE GAME: You can always rely on the Northern League to come up trumps. After enduring some right old tripe in the Southern and Northern Premier Leagues during the preceding seven days, I needed a tonic. This full-blooded, high-speed goal-fest supplied it in spades. What thrills might the teams have provided on a decent surface?

Bishop Auckland had a stiff breeze at their backs in the first half and soon went 2-0 up against a Newcastle Benfield side still with an outside chance of winning the title. Home skipper Stephen Salvin had already hit the underside of the bar with a

back header by the time Chris Bell (24min) toe-poked a Wayne Gredziak cross into the net from close range. Gredziak (29min) then ran on to a long ball from the back by sometime Darlington defender Phil Brumwell, and lobbed Andrew Grainger from 20 yards after the Benfield keeper had blundered badly by racing off his line and getting marooned in no man's land. Grainger made amends with a superb one-handed save to push away a fierce Gredziak drive as the hosts threatened to run riot. Crucially, however, Bishop conceded four minutes before the break when Scott Fenwick capitalised on the defence's failure to clear by slotting a low shot past keeper Peter Jeffries.

That goal set the pattern for the second half. Benfield, whose away record this season is bettered only by leaders Spennymoor Town, dominated proceedings. Skipper Kevin Leighton (54min) tapped them level from close range at the back post after a low Brian Dodsworth cross from the right evaded everyone in the six-yard box. Leighton was then extremely lucky not to be sent off (he wasn't even booked by the unimpressive referee) for blatantly aiming an elbow at an opponent's face, and the burly centre-back rubbed in the sense of injustice by heading the visitors in front in the 78th minute. Team-mate Chris Feasey smashed a 20-yard free-kick into the top corner with four minutes left, and that looked like it. But in the 90th minute Darren Richardson rammed the ball into the net from 10 yards as Benfield struggled to clear their lines, and the Tynesiders survived a strong appeal for handball in the penalty area in the third (and final) minute of stoppage time as Bishop threw everyone forward in search of an equaliser.

THE PLACE: I didn't call in on Bishop Auckland this time. Having been to Kingsway (a site now covered by apartments) on several occasions, I knew there wasn't much worth seeing in the town centre, so spared my girlfriend the pointlessness of reaching the same conclusion herself. It's a rather sad place, in the fashion of neighbouring Shildon, Crook and Willington. These used to be busy industrial centres, far noisier and dirtier than they are today. All the inhabitants have left is the memory of how things used to be, and the knowledge that the hurly-burly of modern life is happening elsewhere. However, the Bishop Brandon Trail, one of several footpaths in County Durham on disused railways, made for a lovely post-match stroll in glorious early-evening sunshine. It starts at the west end of the Newton Cap Viaduct and runs high above the River Wear.

THE PROGRAMME: A reasonable effort, despite being laden with unnecessary padding. Judging by the presence on the centre spread of bar charts and graphs, the editor is something of a 'statto'. The cover would benefit from the attention of a designer, but the Two Blues' issue is a cut above the average Northern League programme, and pretty reasonable value for £1.

THE VERDICT: Heritage Park, shiny and new, is certain to be on most hoppers' 'must do' list. Prepare to be underwhelmed - and consider delaying your visit until next season, when the pitch might have been sorted out.