

TT No.238: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 9th April 2011; **Percy Main Amateurs** v Carlisle City; Northern Alliance Prem Division; Res: 3-0; Att: 44 (h/c); Admission: £2 (incl. 24pp prog); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

THE GROUND: The environment in which Purvis Park is located appears to have changed beyond recognition in recent years. A railway line serving Backworth Colliery used to run behind the trees to the east of the ground, whilst the road on which you're likely to park on the west side was once the track-bed of the Seaton Burn wagonway. Purvis Park, dedicated to the late Alan Purvis, a former player, secretary and chairman who gave 50 years' service to the club, was, until 1996, called Middle Row Park. The name originated from three sets of cottages (for miners and their families, I guess) which were near the site.

Since the demise of heavy industry in and around Percy Main, it's all very different. Modern housing estates, and a network of pleasant footpaths, fringe the ground to west, east and north. The southern boundary is delineated by a simply splendid hedge, which puts to shame the more famous topiary found at Glebe Park, Brechin. Neatly trimmed and shaped, it separates Purvis Park from the adjacent cricket ground, home of Percy Main CC, and features arches through which players and officials can duck speedily to collect footballs which have strayed onto the square.

Entry is via a dark corridor bisecting the clubhouse, the walls of which are dotted with an array of historical ephemera, including numerous photographs and the verdicts of hoppers past. Refreshments are served via a hatch in a side room, and the building also houses the dressing rooms and loos. A veranda propped out from the clubhouse provides the ground's only cover. There is a triangular wedge of hardstanding to the left of the clubhouse. Raised a few feet above pitch level, it provides an excellent vantage point. There isn't much space for spectator accommodation at the south end or the east side, though a sliver of grass has been shoehorned between (respectively) the hedge and a shallow grassy bank. The north end is much more overgrown. To gain any height, you'd need to be up to your shins in nettles! The pitch, wide and flat, is - for the most part - railed off, with a fairly ugly palisade fence enclosing the ground. There aren't any floodlights.

The presence of the grassy banks and the trees give Purvis Park a more compact feel than you'd expect at a venue which lacks hulking great stands. On a gloriously sunny spring afternoon, with the plentiful vegetation's buds at bursting point, it looked picture postcard pretty.

THE CLUB: The Villagers, as they're rather charmingly nicknamed, were formed during the 1919-20 season by servicemen returning from the carnage of the Flanders trenches. A side bearing the name Percy Main AFC did exist before the conflict, but further details (a 1912 team picture aside) have proved impossible to unearth. The new club started out in the Northern Amateur League and had a stint

in the Tyneside Senior League before switching back to the former competition. They joined the Northern Alliance in 1968. After several ups and downs over the years, the Villagers were promoted to the Premier Division for the 2010-11 campaign and also lifted the Combination Cup, beating Hebburn Reyrolle 1-0 in the final at Ponteland. The club has FA Charter Status and, since the summer of 2009, has run a women's team.

You'll be struck by the warmth of the welcome you receive at Purvis Park - and this is part of the reason we enjoy our trips to the North East so much. We were even given complimentary slices of flapjack with the first of many (excellent and paid for!) mugs of tea. Along with the smashing people in this region comes a high standard of non-league football, whether that is in the Northern Alliance, the Northern League or the Wearside League. Given the enthusiasm with which - so clearly - this well organised little club is run, I'd suggest Percy Main Amateurs can look forward to a future full of North Eastern promise.

THE GAME: Much more competitive than the final score suggests. Percy Main lay sixth and Carlisle City third in the Premier Division table at kick-off, and there wasn't much between the teams out on the pitch. The Cumbrians dominated the second half, but never really threatened in front of goal - despite the amount of possession they had - and were hindered by a couple of controversial refereeing decisions.

The first was the award of the 25th-minute penalty which put the Villagers 2-0 up. Initial contact between striker Kevin Westphal and a defender took place outside the box, and the home striker was already halfway to the ground when the two players collided for a second time, this time inside the area. To me, it looked like six of one. The referee was well behind play, too, and cannot have had a good view of the incident, though his near-side assistant did. Not that Main player-manager Jason Ritchie was bothered. He stuck away his spot-kick emphatically.

In the 75th minute, the referee chose to overrule an assistant flagging for offside, and Main substitute Craig 'Ziggy' Ewart, latching on to a Graeme Smith boot upfield having left the bench moments earlier, was allowed to continue and finish coolly. Such was the vehemence of Stephen Bellas's protests, the City goalkeeper (and player-manager) was sent off. The petulant Bellas had been spoiling for a fight ever since the penalty was given in the first half, and his red card was always going to happen. A case of when rather than if. But, when all's said and done, you play to the whistle, and Ewart had the presence of mind to do that. Ziggy stardust indeed!

Percy Main's first goal was scored in the 11th minute by Michael Bowman, who kept his head when found in acres of space by fellow front man Westphal, and beat Bellas in a one-on-one. Carlisle went close on three occasions - when Phil Hetherington (16min) and Craig Cherry (44min) hit the crossbar with free-kicks and Chris Major (88min) sent an 18-yard shot curling fractionally wide after a dazzling run. But the Cumbrians allowed themselves to be put off their game by what they felt were poor refereeing decisions. A bit less moaning, and rather more

application, and they might have got something from a very entertaining encounter. As it was, this was the third occasion on which Percy Main had beaten Carlisle City this season. A telling statistic.

THE PROGRAMME: For this level, a superb effort. The Villagers' Voice (as it's called) has been overhauled recently by a new editor. It boasts a striking cover and, inside, the required elements are present, correct and laid out with minimal fuss and splutter. It's always good to see an issue which puts substance before silly style gimmicks and pointless padding.

THE PLACE: I can't really comment, I'm afraid, because we spent the hours before kick-off in neighbouring Tynemouth, which is all bracing seafront strolls, sumptuous Georgian architecture and café society. There used to be plenty of heavy industry in and around Percy Main. What little of the place we saw appeared now to consist of modern housing estates for the Tyne and Wear Metro-riding Geordie commuter.

THE VERDICT: Well worth a visit. A warm welcome is guaranteed at this friendly club, the appeal of whose attractive ground is greater than the sum of its parts might indicate. Decent paper, too. The Northern Alliance won't be high on the priority list of many hoppers, especially those in the Midlands and the South, but Percy Main Amateurs merit a speedy re-assessment of your travel plans.

07/20