

**TT No.245: *Andy Gallon*** - Wed 13th April 2011; **Altofts** v Sherburn White Rose; WYL Prem Division; Res: 3-0; Att: 49 (h/c); Admission: £2 (incl. 8pp prog); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

THE GROUND: A fair chunk of my life has been spent motoring along various bits of the M62. For three years, I endured a tedious daily commute between Leeds and Howden - one of this occasionally spectacular motorway's less-appealing stretches. The outward journey was enlivened by a glimpse of a tidy little football ground to the right just after junction 30, north of Wakefield. It was fully enclosed and boasted a small stand and floodlights. I wondered - on numerous occasions - which club played there. Perversely, that question was not answered until I'd relocated to north Lincolnshire. It was the home of West Yorkshire Leaguers Altofts. Now, I generally only do programme-issuing clubs, and when claims that Altofts dabbled in paper were substantiated earlier this season, my sights became firmly trained upon them. I figured they would make a perfect mid-week place to visit once the clocks went forward.

The ground, part of the Altofts Community Sports Club on Lock Lane, did not disappoint. On a site shared with the village's cricket and bowling teams, it is easily the most developed West Yorkshire League set-up I've visited. Altofts have played here since 1894, the year they joined the West Yorkshire League, then a new competition which bore no resemblance to its modern namesake. Previously, Altofts had played friendlies on a pitch behind a colliery school at the top of Silkstone Row. The owners of nearby pits encouraged the footballers to move in with the cricket club on Lock Lane, and local derbies against the likes of Castleford Town, Pontefract Barracks and Hunslet (later Leeds United!) attracted crowds of up to 3,000. Whilst attendances of that magnitude at this level of football belong very much to the dim and distant past, Altofts can still boast a hardy band of vociferous supporters.

Lock Lane, off the village's main drag, is a cul-de-sac which becomes unsurfaced just before the entrance to the sports complex on the right. As you go through a gate, the cricket pitch (Altofts play in the Central Yorkshire League) is to the left, the shared clubhouse (or pavilion) and football ground ahead, and the bowling green to the right. There is a floodlit training area, laid in the late seventies on what used to be tennis courts, between the clubhouse and the bowling green. Beyond the cricket square, the aforementioned M62 buzzes away, though not as intrusively as I feared it might. Fields of oilseed rape add a dash of colour. The clubhouse, opened in 1926 by Yorkshire and England cricketer Herbert Sutcliffe, is an ugly red-brick structure which has been extended more than once. It houses a pleasant bar, a kitchen serving hot drinks (most welcome on this chilly evening), loos and the dressing rooms. Behind it there is a portable building in which the match officials change, and then the pitch, which is positioned at right angles to the clubhouse.

The near (or west) touchline is dominated by a small stand. Offset from the halfway line, this simple brick and steel structure is about 15 yards long by three, deep. It was opened in 1979 and is dedicated to the late Jack Beddows, a former player and club stalwart whose tireless efforts helped keep Altofts alive during darker days in the sixties. Unhelpfully, a whitewashed breeze block dug-out has been plonked directly in front. Its twin is opposite. Tall poplar trees run along the south end in a fashion reminiscent of Alt Park, Huyton. Beyond are bungalows occupied by the retired. Newer semis skirt the east touchline, while the north end abuts the cricket ground, around which once ran an ash track used for cycling and running. There is no hardstanding, but there are floodlights - unusual for the West Yorkshire League. Note how the lamps have been positioned some distance below the top of the masts on which they are mounted. The pitch, turned 180 degrees in 1926, slopes down slightly from south to north and is railed off. From this barrier hangs an impressive number of advertising hoardings.

**THE CLUB:** Having previously played only friendlies at the inadequate Silkstone Row ground, the modern Altofts club was born in 1894, when it moved to Lock Lane and joined the West Yorkshire League. A hat-trick of County Cups was secured between 1903 and 1905. A change of name to Altofts West Riding Colliery in 1923 coincided with a switch to the Yorkshire League. By 1939, the club's tally of County Cup triumphs had risen to nine, still a record. The 1919 success was noteworthy because all the players lived within a mile of the ground. Altofts were relegated in 1930, but soon returned to the Yorkshire League, only to leave it after the Second World War in favour of the West Yorkshire League because fixtures against the A teams of West Yorkshire's Football League clubs proved simply too demanding. Two titles were secured, only for the closure of the West Riding Colliery in 1961, and the withdrawal of funding from the National Coal Board three years later, to present major financial problems. A familiar tale for clubs based in mining areas. But Altofts survived, and after a stint in the West Riding County Amateur League, are prospering once more in the West Yorkshire League. The club's junior section is also thriving, with more than 300 boys and girls playing under the Altofts banner. Altofts, certainly in the sixties and seventies, had a reputation for producing talent good enough to turn professional, and their present-day youth policy is paying similar dividends. Former Altofts players to feature in the Football League include Jimmy Glazzard, Eddie Dunn, Bobby Webb, Keith Ripley, Dave Fretwell, Ron Measham, Dave Caldwell and Dave Penny. More recent examples of full-timers who began as juniors at Altofts include Lee Crooks, Chris Greenacre, Lee Briscoe and Jamie Price. An U19 academy side was set up in 2007, and the present first team features some of its graduates.

**THE PLACE:** One of several unremarkable villages dotted about the flat landscape fringing Wakefield, Altofts has become cleaner and quieter since the coal industry's demise. Prior to that, most of its working population was made up of miners, with the community dominated by pits, the largest of which was the West Riding Colliery, sunk originally by Pope and Pearson. The first coal dust experiments in Britain took place here in 1908 and 1909, probably because its manager was president of the Mining Association of Great Britain. Until its

demolition in 1974, Silkstone Row was said to be the longest unbroken stretch of terraced houses in Europe. Nowadays, however, there is little to arrest the eye, which is how Altofts must have been before the 1890s, when the sinking of mine shafts transformed a sleepy hamlet. The pits explain why football, rather than the Wakefield area's No 1 sport, rugby league, held sway in Altofts. When its population expanded rapidly, much of the new workforce came from Staffordshire, which is alien territory for the 13-a-side handling code. Having said that, the young lad next to me at this game had one foot perched on a rugby ball!

**THE GAME:** A hugely entertaining contest between two teams in the bottom half of the Premier Division table. I was very impressed with Altofts, whose young side was full of running and enthusiasm. The hosts bossed the first half and led 2-0 at the break thanks to a close-range volley from Joe Ellam (25min) and a confidently-struck penalty from Tom Brook (44min). Sherburn were more in the game during an open second half, and Altofts skipper Chris Collinson had to head an in-swinging Scott Williams corner off the goal-line (61min). But Altofts, committed to a progressive passing game, always looked likely to add to their tally. In stoppage time, Ellam struck the bar from 10 yards before Brook, whose strength in the tackle and classy distribution were highlights of the match, glanced in a header having got the jump on his marker at the near post to ensure the final score was a fair reflection of the play.

This was Altofts' fourth win on the bounce. Given this statistic, and the quality of their football, I pondered why they are they so far down the league table. One of the old timers who had been manning the entrance gate had the answer (or answers). He said the team had lost too many games they really should have won, had been hit badly by injuries and made a wretched start to the season. But, he added, Altofts were finishing the campaign strongly, thanks partly to selecting youngsters from the U19s.

**THE PROGRAMME:** Paper at this level is always welcome, regardless of quality. Altofts' glossy eight-page issue flatters to deceive, however. A bright, colourful cover promises much, but the contents, lacking even the team line-ups, fail to deliver. Still, at least they've made the effort, which is to be applauded.

**THE VERDICT:** If you bother with any West Yorkshire League venue, make sure it's this one. Altofts have a 'proper' ground, a collectable programme and, on the evidence of this performance, a very watchable team. Owing to the awful winter, they still have plenty of home games to play between now and the end of the season. Catch them while you can!

07/20