

TT No.265: Mike Latham - Evo-Stik League First Division North: **Clitheroe 6-0 Leigh Genesis**; Attendance: 264; Admission: £7; Programme: £1.50; Raffle ticket: £1; Coffee: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

It's funny how things turn out sometimes; Royal Wedding Day dawned dry and bright and I spent the morning walking the dogs in the moors close to Horwich. I saw my wife's friend's Rachael's dad, Peter (if you're still with me) doing his daily constitutional. I've mentioned him before - he was a regular for more years than he cared to remember watching Horwich RMI. Peter and his mates stood under the Scratching Shed at Grundy Hill and delivered their opinion on matters football - the standard of the referee, the opposition, the home team's left-back and the consistency of the world famous Horwich Hotpot, lovingly put together by Ken Whittaker with all the care and knowledge that once characterised the locomotives built on Horwich Railway Works - a concoction far more consistent than the team.

Peter hasn't been to a football match since RMI upped sticks, sold Grundy Hill for housing and moved to Leigh, 16 years ago. It was a move that at the time saved Leigh Rugby League Club, then in administration and on the verge of losing their Hilton Park ground, but spelt the end of senior non-league football in Horwich.

Briefly, Leigh RMI as the new team became known flourished. There were glamour FA Cup ties against Millwall and Kevin Keegan's Fulham and under former RMI defender Steve Waywell Leigh RMI reached fifth spot in the Conference a decade ago - heady days. The 97th best football team in England: even in the 1920s when Jack Keetley and Ernie Mather were banging in the goals RMI could never boast that.

But Leigh is a rugby league town through and through and football was always going to suffer by comparison. Decline set in and here we were, ten years on, watching perhaps the last rites. Relegated four times since those halcyon days under Waywell, Leigh Genesis (as they were ridiculously re-titled) were playing their last game of the season in the Evo-Stik League, bottom of the table and effectively down and out.

Their Hilton Park home had been bulldozed and remains a site waiting to be redeveloped. The brand-new Leigh Sports Village Stadium, perhaps the most depressing spectator experience I've ever had watching football was home for only a fleeting time, and Genesis, or Genocide as they known by cynics in the tap rooms of Horwich had spent the season ground-sharing at Atherton Laburnum Rovers.

I had decided after much soul searching to watch the last rites of Leigh Genesis, certainly in the Evo-Stik, perhaps for ever. Sad to report, they went out with more a whimper than a bang; Clitheroe, who ended the season in a rich vein of form after the Chairman Carl Garner took over from Peter Smith as manager, were 2-0 up at half-time and then scored three times in five minutes in one purple patch.

Two of their goals, the second and the fifth were candidates for goals of the season, even against such a dispirited bunch. They earned five wins and four draws from their last nine games, and conceded only two goals in their last seven games. At least they can look forward to next season with confidence.

The Clitheroe ground is perhaps the last remaining non-league ground as close to Grundy Hill as it can get. It's got a sizeable slope, though more side to side than the notorious 16-foot drop from one corner to the other at Horwich, a hotchpotch collection of stands, some genuinely enthusiastic and decent supporters, a good tea bar and a homespun feel that can never be replicated in sanitised new grounds like the LSV. And whereas Grundy Hill had spectacular views across to Rivington Pike, Shawbridge has Pendle Hill and the castle as a backdrop.

The Clitheroe programme editor was full of praise for the handful of diehards who have kept Leigh going and his prose set the tone for an afternoon of quiet reflection. My friend Matt Lawton was here, as ever, and with his fellow Leigh-supporting mates kept in good spirits; their gallows humour was a reminder that though we all take football seriously it's still a game. Matt has done a simply outstanding job updating the website with information and reports over the years as well as all the other things he has done voluntarily to try to keep the Club going. He'd made a superb general /media manager for any club and his enthusiasm and dedication towards Leigh is deserving of recognition.

I saw a couple of old mates from Horwich RMI days enjoying the sunshine at Shawbridge; we shared knowing glances and kept our feelings to ourselves. If this was the last ever game of the team that was formed as Horwich Railway Mechanics Institute back in 1903 we can at least say we were there. Ashley Parillon, son of a former RMI player scored one of the goals, his 21st of an outstanding season. I thought back to many happy times I watched football at Grundy Hill and had a few tears in my eyes as the final whistle blew. It was certainly the end of an era. Wait till I see Rachael's dad.

07/20