

TT No.10: Andy Gallon - Tue 16th August 2011; **Blyth Spartans** v FC Halifax Town; Conference North; Res: 2-3; Att: 736; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Blyth bears the scars (and I use the term advisedly) of regeneration. Road signs might proclaim the town to be 'Northumberland's Premier Port', but you don't need 20/20 vision to appreciate its heyday has been, gone and almost vanished from memory. Said regenerators are working hard. Unfortunately, their cosmetic input has seen ugly modern architecture and baffling sculpture foisted on the locals. Jobs! Hope! That's what's needed. Instead, tourists (and, with Alnwick, Dunstanburgh and Bamburgh just up the road, there surely can't be many) can wander along the redeveloped Quayside and learn that, where there are now over-designed benches, twee paving and marine logos, some real work once got done. Coal trains by the hundred from the region's pits pulled up on wooden staithes to have their cargo of black gold loaded onto waiting ships. The fading black & white pictures reveal (in a way words cannot) just how busy this place used to be. Now, well, they've got a few wind turbines down at the slimmer, trimmer, quieter docks. Bloomin' pointless eyesores, I say. A sign reads: 'Growing the Green Economy. Be Part of Blyth's Future'. Oh, and there's a daft 'Spirit of the Staithes' sculpture by an artist born in Sunderland. That's all right, then.

It's nice down on the Quayside, mind. There's a pleasant breeze coming off the sea, the sky is Mediterranean blue and there's a wonderful sensation of space. The rest of Blyth's very different. A few hundred yards inland, and the grim town centre is comatose; on life support. There's hardly a soul about - and this on the most glorious of late summer afternoons. Women (didn't see any blokes) drift languidly towards their parked cars after, the uniforms they're wearing suggest, a day toiling in travel agencies, nail bars, beauticians and the like. Welcome to post-industrial Britain, a land of consumers rather than manufacturers. Poor Blyth, off everyone's beaten track, sums it all up. 'Depressed' scarcely begins to encapsulate how it makes me feel.

The 10-minute walk to the football ground, hemmed in on three sides by cheap red-brick houses, does not improve my mood. Grubby back-to-backs, slum flats, grotty takeaways and a pub where misery is probably served in pint glasses. Friday night's live act is advertised as Repertoire Dogs. Croft Park, home to Blyth Spartans since 1909, is on Plessey Road. Plessey was where the town's first pits were sunk and it had an inclined tramway to help ferry coal about. This is my third time at this venue, so I know what to expect, right? Wrong! Well, well. Things have changed in tandem with Blyth's impressive rise from Northern League to Conference North. The whole set-up looks much more professional, but the ground has lost a lot of its character. In the club's Northern League days, there was Health & Safety unconscious grass banking all over the place, a generally ramshackle, small-time atmosphere and then-trendy satirical comic (or some such) Viz

sponsored the first team strip. I recall Northern League bosses refusing to allow Spartans permission to feature The Fat Slags on their programme cover. And that was before political correctness was invented!

These days, both ends have acquired proper terracing and simple covers, so you can get out of the rain on all four sides of Croft Park. A load of ghastly palisade fencing has been erected, leaving the social club (built with the profits of 1970s FA Cup heroics) marooned beyond the perimeter. The club shop has had a makeover, every stand is sponsored and there's now more than one turnstile. The small, boxy main stand, a utilitarian thing of little beauty, has had its paddock converted into seats. No-one, though, thought to extend the roof to keep the rain off punters who tonight are forced to squint painfully into the setting sun. Partly owing to this elemental discomfort (but mostly because I'm too tight to fork out an extra quid to sit), I opt for the dilapidated stand on the popular side. An ancient propped cover shelters a decent amount of terracing, which is too shallow to make for good viewing and does not feature a single crush barrier. From the top step, I can see what few operational cranes remain in the docks, thus preserving a pleasing sense of place. The floodlights are mounted on what I always think of as 'non-league pylons' (you know the sort I mean) and, joy of joys, the wooden picket fence around the pitch has survived the 'improvement'. Blyth operate a belt-and-braces policy to encroachment because the fence, painted a rather dull shade of green, is augmented by a post and rail barrier. Despite my misgivings, I'll admit Croft Park is a very tidy little ground. The visiting Halifax fans, happy to have moved on from trips to dumps like Prescott Cables, were so effusive in their compliments they clearly expected wattle and daub.

I'm looking forward to the match for two reasons. Firstly, Halifax are my team. I saw them only once last season, and can barely recognise more than a couple of the players warming up. Secondly, Blyth were my pet Northern League club when I worked in the North East. I tried to catch them on their travels when 'ticking' new grounds. This was down to their eye-catching brand of football, but mainly because they were the only team in the league who took fans to away games. Usually, I recall, a mini-bus packed with what one might describe diplomatically as, 'characters'.

What a pulsating game it turns out to be, ensuring even hard-to-please types like me have no room for complaint. Halifax, still in shock after Saturday's home defeat by Corby Town (Ouch! Didn't see that coming, was the opening line of the local paper's match report), set off at a tempo which suggests manager Neil Aspin has vented his displeasure in no uncertain terms. Blyth defenders throw themselves into the path of shots and headers, and James Dean has a 'goal' ruled out for offside. The unmarked Glen Taylor, Spartans' new signing from neighbours Ashington, then wastes a great chance, heading tamely at Simon Eastwood from 10 yards with only the Halifax keeper to beat. Tom Baker is more assertive when a loose ball drops to him 30 yards out. First-time shot and he finds the top corner. "That's miss of the season and goal of the season," says one of a knot of forty-something Blyth regulars stationed to my right. Before kick-off, one of them

related, in excruciating detail, the gruesome story of his wife's in-growing toe nail. Just before half-time, Halifax concede a daft penalty. Norman Wisdom silliness. One for Mr Grimsdale to shake his head over. The middle three of the Shaymen's back five have been all over the place, therefore it's no surprise when Scott McManus climbs on Graeme Armstrong in an aerial duel joined at a distant extremity of the area. Armstrong's well-struck spot-kick is blocked by Eastwood, and the Spartans skipper unaccountably volleys the rebound over the bar.

My money is on a tense second half, and so it proves. Blyth are level within four minutes of the restart, capitalising on Halifax losing possession to break quickly and score through a cool-headed Dan Groves. The visitors regain the lead 11 minutes later thanks to a sharp-eyed linesman. Danny Lowe does really well to screw back a cross from the left, and Dean gets the jump on his marker to prod past Max Johnson. The keeper gets a hand on the ball, but the flag-marshal indicates it crossed the line. No let-up, and Spartans make it 2-2 on the hour. The Town centre-backs go AWOL again, and Taylor crashes a 12-yard volley into the roof of the net. With 14 minutes left, Halifax secure three points they just about deserve. Baker breaks strongly from midfield, and though I think he's holding on to the ball too long, his delayed pass finds the speedy Jamie Vardy in space and the man for whom Stockport County bid £50,000 during the close-season outpaces the cover and hammers a delicious shot across the advancing Johnson into the far top corner. Blyth finally run out of ideas and Halifax run down the clock meticulously.

For the disappointed Spartans fans, they've got Repertoire Dogs and a weekend visit from that well-known Northern outfit Bishop's Stortford to look forward to. For me, it's a return to the hellish roadworks associated with the new Tyne crossing. When finished, it will enable tourists to reach Northumberland, one of Britain's last true wildernesses, with greater rapidity. Are they likely to bear east off the A1 and visit Blyth, though? No. In a word. It's a wilderness too far.

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