

TT No.134: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 2nd January 2012; **Thornaby** v Birtley Town; Northern League Division Two; Res: 2-2; Att: 60 (h/c); Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Well, after earlier festive fixtures at Gigg Lane, Valley Parade and Edgeley Park, a trip to humdrum Thornaby-on-Tees threatened anti-climax. Ho, ho, ho. How wrong can you be? I don't exaggerate when admitting to gasping with astonishment at the 'new' Teesdale Park. Since my only previous visit in the early 1990s (when the club played under the name Stockton), the ground has been completely transformed. Formerly a soft target for vandals, it is now one of the nicest enclosures in the Northern League. And that's saying something. Its surprisingly rural setting, on the floor of a shallow, wooded valley, is equally delightful. Most of the work on the ground has been done during the last year. Resourceful Thornaby have capitalised on grants and the availability of free labour from various sources to create a home of which they can be proud. The revamp isn't over, either. The club hope to return to its former glory the original main stand, which is positioned immediately behind the goal at the east end, and put down proper hardstanding.

A secluded location is high on the lengthy list of Teesdale Park's charms. Drivers bounce along a pot-holed track (cost a fortune to surface, I imagine) for a couple of hundred yards. Suddenly, the ground appears below, to the left. It is now fully enclosed, and this alone does much to deter ne'er do wells. Previously, anyone could wander into Teesdale Park at any hour - and, of course, not all visitors were intent on sightseeing. The only minus amid myriad pluses is no longer being able to park on top of the bank which comprises the south side of the ground. This area used to be open. The nesh (a Northern expression meaning lily livered) could stay in their cars whilst enjoying the best seat in the house. Now this area is fenced off and the bank has been seeded. At this time of year, it consists of gelatinous mud. Once the grass has grown, it will look great. The access track drops into a small car park at the east end of the site. There isn't enough space, and despite arriving 45 minutes before an 11am kick-off, we secured one of the few remaining spots. The sky was clear blue and the sun shone. We tried to forget the marrow-numbing cold and admired the facilities.

A pay hut, on which the team line-ups are tacked, is positioned in a corner at this end, to the right of a motley collection of portable buildings huddled alongside the old main stand's forlorn remnants. The latter is now roofless, but its broad, steeply raked steps of terracing provide a superb vantage point. The flat-roofed sheds alongside house a bar and a kitchen, both decked out with numerous football mementoes describing the club's history and recalling past opponents. Everyone was friendly; something I've come to expect (and cherish) when visiting Northern League grounds.

To the right (or north), beyond a stream, is a golf course. There is enough room on this side for a substantial brick stand, with dressing rooms to the rear and a central

players' tunnel. The stand, whose spectator accommodation is divided equally between terracing and seats, is dedicated to Peter Morris, the long-serving former Thornaby secretary who died, aged 59, in 2010 having suffered a massive heart attack while refereeing a five-a-side game. Peter's name is displayed prominently on the fascia. A nice touch. Without his contribution, Thornaby might not have survived the lean years when vandals reigned supreme. The adjacent dugouts appear disproportionately tall, and spoil the view from the seats. A 'tin shed' type cover fills the bulk of the far end. Where this characterful stand ends abruptly, a thick hedge takes over. Beyond is a cricket ground. Inside the stand, building materials are strewn about. We were told construction work takes place every day. The south side, at the foot of the sticky bank, is extremely narrow. There is room merely for a single step of terracing next to the 'soft-standing' path which runs round Teesdale Park. The pitch, heavy and lumpy after days of rain, is enclosed by a post and rail barrier, and there are mast floodlights. All in all, it's a smashing enclosure.

Having seen three excellent games between December 26th and January 1st, it seemed greedy (and excessively optimistic) to consider we might get another. Happily, Thornaby and Birtley Town, near neighbours in mid-table, produced a compelling contest. I should have had more faith. Low-key matches in the Northern League (arguably the best Step Five/Six football in Britain) are few and far between.

There wasn't a great deal to choose between the teams in the first half, which finished with the hosts 2-0 up. Neat passing in the 11th minute gave Graeme Baverstock the opportunity to put Thornaby ahead, with the winger powering an angled 12-yard drive high into the net. In the last minute of the half, Robert Pearson met a corner with a downward header which came back off a post and was then smuggled over the line from close range by Craig Skelton. Between the goals, the aquamarine sky clouded over and a decidedly wintry shower had most of the crowd scurrying for the shelter of the Peter Morris Stand. The immobile WAG sitting next to us looked so cold, she could have passed for a sculpture. It was interesting to see Ian Clark playing in midfield for Thornaby. When I watched the club (several times), in their Stockton guise and during my five years working on Teesside, Clark was a flame-haired teenager operating speedily on the wing. He had the talent to carve out a career as a professional with Hartlepool United and Darlington. It is good that he is winding up his playing days where he began. Encouraging the others, you might say.

Birtley, backed vocally by their infamous Ultras (on this day, three teenage lads and one chilled girlfriend), dominated the second half. A point was the least their fightback deserved. Matthew Hornsby struck the bar in the 55th minute with an effortless 25-yard shot, but the same player hit the net four minutes later. Found in space on the right side of the penalty area, he aimed across Patrick Pisani, and though the keeper got a hand to his floater, he could not prevent it dropping in by the far post. As for an equaliser, it was now a case of 'when' rather than 'if'. Birtley's Ben Johnson saw a 74th minute corner come back off the near post, and

just when it looked as though the visitors would go unrewarded, they made it 2-2. There were three minutes left when substitute Jack Honour got to the right byline and crossed low for James Allsopp, unmarked a yard from goal, to tap into the unguarded net.

The Birtley Ultras looked (and certainly sounded) pleased. Much of their vocal output plumbed the depths of bad taste, I'm sorry to say. As we walked beneath them just before the final whistle, I had to resist the temptation to break into a chant of 'Two of you singing, there's only two of you singing...' Two singing and the rest of us freezing. So much so, we abandoned plans for a rare 'double', opted to give 3pm kick-offs at either Pickering Town or Northallerton Town a miss, and headed back down the A19 to hearth and home. Besides, what would the odds have been on seeing five good games on the bounce? If you, like me, 'ticked' Teesdale Park years ago, give some thought to a revisit. You won't be disappointed.

07/20