

TT No. 151: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 21st January 2012; **Billingham Synthonia** v Runcorn Town; FA Vase Round Four; Res: 0-0 (AET); Att: 184; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (52pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

One of my favourite football photographs appears on page 228 of *Northern Goalfields*, the official centenary history of the Northern League. This evocative black & white image, taken on September 6th 1958, depicts penalty area action from the opening game (a 2-2 draw) at the Central Avenue ground, with hosts Billingham Synthonia taking on Bishop Auckland. Look beyond the classic strips (green and white quarters for Synners, navy and light blue halves for Bishops) worn by the players to a backdrop comprising a vast grandstand. Then the longest cantilever-type stand in Britain (quite an accolade for a non-league club), its 2,000 seats and terraced paddock are full to bursting. The crowd that day included Lord Derby, who performed the official opening, and Sir Stanley Rous. Fast forward more than fifty years, and that same magnificent stand remains in place, and has lost none of its grandeur.

Waking to hear high wind (the sworn enemy of all decent football) sighing and moaning through the narrow streets of York, I immediately abandoned plans for any sort of long drive and plumped for a revisit to Central Avenue, fifty miles distant and a ground I hadn't been to in twenty years. The lure on this occasion was the FA Vase, a smashing competition. Synners, always one of the stronger clubs in the Northern League, were hosting Runcorn Town, the fairly new incarnation of Mond Rangers and going great guns in the North West Counties League.

Seeing as this fourth-round tie was blown irreparably to smithereens, let's start with a wander round Central Avenue. Known nowadays as the Glamal Engineering Stadium, it is located between the Bedford Terrace ground of Synners' Northern League rivals Billingham Town and the far less developed Greenwood Road home of Billingham RUFC. It boasts the most impressive stand in the Northern League (the characterful edifices at Sildon and Consett run it very close), but is one of the competition's least appealing arenas. The reason for this is the presence of a running track, which is a curious beast. Though an athletics club is based here, its sand-like surface is so soft as to make any form of meaningful exercise impossible. The track has the effect of introducing an intolerable degree of separation between football players and spectators, deadening atmosphere and preventing intimacy. The ground's elliptical shape renders both ends useless to anyone lacking high-powered binoculars.

The grandstand runs the full length of the east touchline. In common with the rest of the ground, it has hardly changed since 1958. There are fewer seats now, but the novelty of elevated terracing more than compensates. The seats, rather basic benches, albeit with backs, are positioned amidships, above the players' tunnel, which boasts some splendid Art Deco features. The paddock, gently sloping

tarmac, is in front, backing on to a plain brick wall broken only by a refreshment hatch and the tunnel. Either side of the tunnel are two pairs of dug-outs - one of brick, the other of plastic. Lashings of green paint, applied to the seats, railings and crush barriers, make more colourful and appealing what is otherwise a fairly utilitarian structure; very much a child of its generation. Deep within the stand's bowels can be found the dressing rooms and a comfortable, if rather gloomy, bar and social club. From the seats, there is no hint of the chemical plants on which the community's prosperity was built, though Billingham Town's floodlights, a mere 200 yards to the west, are clearly visible through the boughs. The remainder of Central Avenue, fringed by trees, consists of hard-to-scale grass banking and is something of an anti-climax. For the energetic, a tarmac path permits circumnavigation of the pitch.

Synners' chief claim to fame (Brian Clough and Gary Pallister once being on the books notwithstanding) is that they are the only football club in Britain to be named after a chemical compound. Synthetic ammonia is an agricultural fertiliser. The club, from formation in 1923, always had a close connection with ICI Billingham, but this link was broken in 1994 when Central Avenue transferred to new owners. The club's previous ground was on the other side of nearby Belasis Lane. Synners also have the distinction of being the only club to go through an entire Northern League season - 1950-51 - without conceding a goal at home. The landmark was secured by a penalty save from goalkeeper Harry Armstrong in the last minute of their final match. You couldn't make it up, eh?

Back to 2012, and the moment I emerged from the cosy warmth of my car, I felt the only winner would be the wind. And so it proved. Central Avenue's relatively open aspect hardly helped, and though both teams did their best, this was a scrappy, scratchy contest with barely a hint of a goal. Add numbing cold to the paucity of entertainment and, frankly, I had lost interest long before extra time was reached. Synners were marginally the better side, but were let down by poor finishing. On occasions, they wanted to walk the ball into the net. Runcorn, who brought about 30 fans with them, were more direct - and no less successful in plotting a route to goal. The visitors did 'score' midway through the first half, but Tom Spearitt was flagged offside as he headed past Josh Moody. Moody and his opposite number Karl Wills made several decent saves. I felt the attendance of 184 was disappointing for a Vase game at the 'going national' stage of the competition, but close examination of the excellent match programme revealed it equalled Synners' best at Central Avenue this season. Billingham Town also being at home doubtless kept the gate down.

I understand fully why many hoppers give a wide berth to stadia featuring athletics (and other) tracks. Indeed, my partner disliked them almost immediately when she began accompanying me to games. She couldn't make this one (redecorating is rearing its ugly head; I'm typing this today with 'Regency White' spattered fingers), and despite her affection for the Northern League wasn't too fussed when I mentioned Central Avenue's track. That said, this is an historic venue occupied by a famous club. And that stand is worth driving some distance for; even on the

windiest of afternoons. Incidentally, if Northern Goalfields (a superlative history of a single league) isn't on your bookshelves, it really should be. Published in 1989, it is now out of print, but can be obtained second hand from the usual sources.

07/20