

TT No. 173: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 25th February 2012; **Cleethorpes Town** v Hykeham Town; Lincolnshire League; Res: 0-1; Att: 50 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: £1 (12pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Every so often, at various junctures during a season, I jot down the names of small clubs I hear are issuing programmes. The grand design is at some stage in the campaign to visit these hitherto un-hopped grounds and add a few pages of rather more offbeat 'paper' to my ludicrously weighty collection. If the week reaches Friday, and I'm still struggling to think of somewhere appealing (and sensible) to go the following day, I pull out the increasingly tatty sheet of paper and ponder afresh its list of names. What have we got? Ambleside, Blaby & Whetstone Athletic, Desford, Gateshead Leam Rangers, Longridge Town, Lostock St Gerard's, Retford Town, Stretton Eagles, Wollaton. At this point, I should indicate that I don't write them down alphabetically. That really would be anal. No, I'm doing it here simply to emphasise the objective nature of my approach to match selection. Mmm, I think. Don't, for innumerable reasons, really fancy any of those. Ah, how about these fellas? Cleethorpes Town!

In that instant, a few building blocks of grey - and greying - matter fall into place like the clunk-click of a seat belt. I remember the Owls (oh, how I love it when little clubs have nicknames used by professional outfits) are soon to be leaving their ground for the dull-as-Shearer-the-pundit Bradley Community Stadium, home to Grimsby Borough, perennial strugglers of the Northern Counties East League. A little research reveals Cleethorpes play at the Stamford Club and are on a run of 42 Lincolnshire League games without defeat. Wow: the Huddersfield Town of the flatlands. What's more, the opposition will be Hykeham Town, a team who, it transpires, earlier in the season went within a stoppage-time goal of ending that impressive sequence.

I realise also that a trip to north-east Lincolnshire (so much Deliverance country, a canoe might be the most appropriate form of transport across the Humber) and a forecast for a dazzling winter day will permit indulgence of another hobby between sunrise (well, fairly close to it) and kick-off at 2pm. I'll say nowt about this second activity. Some people wear more than one hat. To sport two anoraks might be deemed dangerously freakish. Never, however, has a 6am alarm call been greeted with such throw-back-the-duvet-and-show-me-the-shower enthusiasm.

Suffice to say, a most productive morning and early afternoon were enjoyed before arrival at the Stamford Club. The ground is in Old Clew. Now, having been to this part of the world on sporting business several times previously, I'm almost certain only locals can possibly know where the likes of Grimsby, Cleethorpes, Old Clew, Bradley and Humberston begin and end. To my eyes, it's one indistinguishable (and undistinguished) urban sprawl. Grimthorpes, anyone? Or Old Humberclew? The Stamford Club turns out to be a fairly average Lincolnshire League ground. It's a large site with a bowling green, and the three football pitches clearly give way to

cricket in the summer. The clubhouse (a little nicer inside than its shabby exterior suggests) is a rambling single-storey building next to a fair-sized car park and houses a bar and the dressing rooms. But, sadly, no kitchen dispensing non-alcoholic drinks or hot food. Spectators get to use the same loos as the players. That's the level we're at. The main pitch is about 100 yards away. This is fenced off at each end and along the far (or north) touchline, where there are matching dug-outs either side of the halfway line. A rope (badly in need of the rope version of Viagra) separates players and spectators on the south touchline, nearest the cricket square. There's neither cover (unwelcome on such a chilly, breezy afternoon of fading sunshine) nor floodlights. This is coastal strip, therefore landscape-wise there's nothing to break the featureless monotony of the surroundings. Not as much as a glimpse of the sea (to be pedantic, it's the Humber estuary). Over to the north-west, the floodlights of an athletics stadium puncture the horizon. To the east, a church tower fulfils an identical role.

The Owls, before kick-off a whopping 18 points clear of Grimsby Borough Reserves and seemingly nailed-on champions, have applied for promotion to the Northern Counties East League and will move into the Bradley Community Stadium at the start of next season. Their other teams (they run 30!) will continue to use the Stamford Club, and I did hear it said Cleethorpes, formed as recently as 1998, would prefer eventually to develop a 'proper' ground of their own here. I was also told many of the junior players started out with the defunct LSS Lucarlys, formerly of the Central Midlands League. Their ground was down the road in Humberston. As I recall...

This was, I have to say, an excellent game - spent in the amiable company of fellow FGIF correspondent Gyles Basey-Fisher, who had explored B-road Britain on an epic cross-country journey from Norwich touching three hours. We weren't the only hoppers in a crowd I expected to be rather bigger. I guess Grimsby Town hosting York City in an FA Trophy quarter-final might have lured a few 'floaters'. All together now: Grimsby Town's ground is in Cleethorpes. See what I mean?

A dash, then, through the story of an entertaining match. The Owls were well on top in the first half, but Hykeham keeper James Cooper made three super saves. No goals by half-time. The visitors were impressing me, though. They were well organised. Each player knew his job and, as a team, they (to use that awful expression) kept their shape and discipline. As the minutes ticked by, Cleethorpes became anxious. Then frustrated. And finally, pretty damned annoyed. When you're used to winning comfortably most weeks (sample result: 14-0 against Sleaford Town Reserves), being stifled by a mixture of unambitious opposition and wasteful finishing has to hurt. In the 71st minute, Ricky Belding, four-goal hero of the previous week's romp at Skegness United, kicked out (off the ball) at Hykeham sub Aaron Starbuck's ankles and was quite rightly sent off. The ref (don't know his name; the otherwise excellent programme did not contain line-ups or details of the match officials), I thought, had a great game. Gyles and I dubbed him the 'Lincolnshire Collina'. He didn't take any nonsense from anyone - player or

spectator. He was decisive and stared down all who challenged (or even considered challenging) him.

Jonathan Oglesby squandered a great chance, one of many fluffed by the speedy Owls left winger, in the 75th minute when, through on goal, his lob cleared the stranded Cooper and struck the top of the crossbar. Then, with nine minutes left, burly Tom Cass strode through from midfield, held off three home defenders and beat Scott Drury from outside the box. The Owls keeper got something on the ball, but not enough to prevent it arcing lazily into the back of the net. Three bounces and the ball trickled in. Our tale of the unexpected was complete. Mind you, these unbeaten runs cannot continue indefinitely. Just ask Huddersfield Town. And Lee Clark. I wonder if Cleethorpes boss Andy Liddle is worried about his future after this result?

07/20