

**TT No.213: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 7th April 2012; **Swallownest Miners' Welfare v Everest**; Sheffield & Hallamshire County Senior League Premier Division; Res: 3-1; Att: 45; Admn: Free; Programme: 50p (12pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

Well, I thought I knew Yorkshire pretty well, but Swallownest was entirely new to me. The village, once populated by coal miners and their families, made an appearance on my radar earlier this season when I learned its football club were issuing programmes. This is a pretty rare occurrence in the Sheffield & Hallamshire County Senior League, and I resolved to get there before the end of the campaign. An Easter Bank Holiday Weekend visit to York from my girlfriend's brother (and family) meant I had instructions not to stray too far, but - ideally - the southern tip of Rotherham just crept into the permitted range of operations.

Swallownest is one of three contiguous villages (the others are Aston and Aughton) in what used to be the South Yorkshire coalfield. It did not have a pit of its own, but was surrounded by collieries, including Beighton, Brookhouse, Orgreave (of coking plant and 1984 miners' strike 'battle of' fame), Treeton and Waleswood. A reporter from the Leeds Mercury (a publication which merged in 1939 with the Yorkshire Post) visited Swallownest in 1900 and was not impressed. He saw "all that could not be desired", remarked upon a "wretchedly built street" and claimed the village had "demoralised into a very sordid place indeed". Now, former pit villages are not generally marketed as tourist destinations by Welcome to Yorkshire, and I'd be lying if I said the thought of living in Swallownest held any sort of appeal. But - and this is a big but - I found the people there uniformly friendly. I lost count of the number of residents, at the game and in the village beforehand, who were moved to smile, nod and say hello (or the broad Rotherham equivalent) to a complete stranger. Swallownestites, none of whom can have all that many reasons to be full of the joys, could certainly teach the rest of us a thing or two about cheerfulness.

Try as I might, I have not been able to unearth anything about the history of Swallownest Miners' Welfare FC. Bell pits dating from medieval times have been found in the area during comparatively recent opencast excavations and, though the footballers won't have been around that long, I can hazard with a fair amount of confidence the sport has been played in the village for a good century or more. The football ground is on Rotherham Road, behind the miners' welfare, a utilitarian, single-storey structure typical of the breed. In a semi-rural setting, the ground is little more than a roped-off pitch, but along the west touchline traces of a more substantial barrier and fragments of terracing are visible. The ground is laid out on a grassy shelf, fringed by trees on the west side and at the north end. To the north, in the direction of Rotherham town centre, the land falls away pretty steeply, offering resolutely industrial views across to Treeton and Orgreave. Entry is through a gate and along a concrete path at the south end, where welfare punters share a large car park with football players and spectators. Portable

buildings behind the goal here contain the dressing rooms and toilets. There is neither cover nor floodlights.

Reigning champions Swallownest went into this fixture unbeaten since November 26th in the Premier Division of the Sheffield & Hallamshire County Senior League, for 2011-12 officially a Step Seven competition. To retain the title, they needed to win their last four games, and hope leaders Athersley Recreation slipped up in their final match. As it turned out, Athersley romped to a 5-1 victory at High Green Villa, rendering meaningless Swallownest's success against Everest, who were promoted from the First Division last season. Second place, a point behind Athersley, is now the best finish Swallownest can aspire to, although, having reached the final of the Rotherham Charity Cup against either Joker or AFP at Parkgate FC on May 2nd, they can still pick up some silverware before heading for the beach.

Though keenly contested, this match wasn't the greatest spectacle. The game at this level, akin to pinball, is generally played at 100mph and cries out for someone with a bit of class and composure to linger in possession and deliver a considered pass. Everest's recent record was not terribly sparkling, but they made Swallownest work hard for the points. The visitors went ahead through their number four in the 22nd minute, a 16-yard volley finding the bottom corner of the net. Swallownest hit back to lead at half-time. An Everest midfield blunder allowed striker Chris Esberger to race clear in the 35th minute, and he finished coolly in a one-on-one. A minute before the break, the best move of the match was climaxed by speedy right-winger Michael Briggs angling a low shot past the Everest keeper. The second half was just as even. Swallownest survived several almighty scares before breaking upfield three minutes into stoppage time to clinch victory when Esberger tapped into an empty net after Everest appeals for offside were ignored by referee Paul Saunders.

The promised programme duly materialised, although copies had to be sought out. I appreciate at this level club officials have many tasks to perform on matchday, but if I'd gone to the trouble of putting together a programme (a decent one, too), I'd make damn sure I sold every copy. If you do attend a match here, ask about programmes in the dressing rooms. As elsewhere in Swallownest, you're assured of a warm welcome.

07/20