

TT No.240: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 28th April 2012; **Ambleside United** v Todmorden Borough; West Lancashire League Div. 2; Res: 2-3; Att: 50 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: £1 (12pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Having lived in Cumbria during the second half of the Eighties, I always find it odd to return as a visitor. Whilst resident in the county, I only ever passed through Ambleside. It is a twee village at the beck and call of tourists, and to be avoided if one's idea of a good time is seeking the wildness and solitude of the high fells. Trippers flock on coaches to congested Ambleside with the sole aim of wandering idly through its narrow streets, spending too much on over-priced gift shop tat and glimpsing the mountains from the sanctuary of the valley floor before heading home thinking they've 'done' the Lakes. I just don't get it - and thank goodness for that.

Surprisingly, Ambleside, with an ageing population and a housing stock dominated by holiday lets and second homes, boasts a progressive football club. Ambleside United, having won the Westmorland League title three years in a row, joined the West Lancashire League last season, missing out by a point on promotion from the Second Division. This term, the Lakelanders, a year older and wiser, have improved and went into this match needing two points to secure the championship. Thanks to mid-table visitors Todmorden Borough scoring twice in the last five minutes, they had to wait three more days, finally securing the silverware with a 6-2 stroll at Furness Cavaliers. The Todmorden setback was United's first defeat in 15 months: quite a record.

Given the spectacular scenery, a hop to Ambleside United is really all about the ground. Craggy fells rear up on all sides of Hillard Park, a supremely appealing enclosure on a rare level parcel of land not far from the banks of the vivid River Rothay. The only cover is in the south-east corner. Opened in August 1995, this tidy structure, with parking alongside, houses the dressing rooms, toilets and clubhouse, and features a covered area for standing spectators. Mugs of steaming tea are served with complementary cakes and ready smiles. As you sip and chew, take the opportunity to admire, adorning the walls, a magnificent collection of historic team and action photographs. Tiny dugouts are positioned on the opposite touchline. Stiles in the surrounding fences, giving access to adjacent fields populated by ewes and their cute lambs, merely add to the ground's considerable charm. The rather bumpy pitch is railed off, though there aren't any floodlights. United bought the site in 1980, a canny move. Unusually, it includes an area at the south end which is used by caravans: a handy source of income. There is a children's playground, part of a pleasant public park, abutting the north-west corner.

A plaque by the entrance to the clubhouse reveals it was opened by Ada Hillard and Graham Kelly, then chief executive of the Football Association. Kelly, as we all know, was amiable, but largely ineffective, and as blind as anyone at the FA to the

direction in which the game was heading. Ms Hillard played a rather more influential role in the wider history of Ambleside United, who were formed as Ambleside in 1896. Ambleside merged with Ambleside YMCA in 1960; hence the 'United' suffix. Those who (like me) grew up in West Yorkshire during the Seventies will be familiar with the Hillards chain of supermarkets. They were bought out by Tesco (who else?) and their name vanished from the high street. Ms Hillard subsequently fell out with the rest of the family and left Yorkshire to spend her declining years in Ambleside. Upon falling ill, having heard the football club were busy raising money for a new clubhouse, she summoned a United official to her home and coolly handed over £8,000 in £20 notes. Touched (and slightly bewildered) by the old woman's generosity, the club decided to change the ground's name from Miller Field to Hillard Park. Ms Hillard, now dead, gifted more money to United, and later gave them a further £10,000. How most clubs of this size could do with stumbling upon such a munificent benefactor!

Cumbria (of all places) bucked the trend of a hideously wet April by providing plenty of sunshine in the month's final week. It meant we saw Hillard Park at its best. The temperature was low enough to ensure the fell tops, both near and far, were pin sharp and the sun's welcome rays ignited the glorious spring colours in the foliage around the ground. Those days of rain at least made the greens appear very lush.

The match turned out to be a cracker, too. We feared a one-sided stroll when Ambleside went ahead in the fourth minute through a soft free header by Mike Barron. But after the hosts had struck the crossbar and the inside of an upright, Todmorden steadied themselves and saw a header bounce off a post and into the United keeper's arms. The visitors equalised on the hour through a Dean Farry tap-in past a stranded keeper and, moments after again hitting a post through Lee Earnshaw, Tod watched in horror as Ambleside swept upfield for unmarked substitute Zach Clark to slide in what looked like being a 76th-minute winner. Borough weren't finished, though, and an Oliver Wood cross-cum-shot from the left flank in the 85th minute found the far top corner of the net as the home keeper struggled to make up his ground. The poor lad's embarrassment was complete a minute from the end when he allowed a well-struck 20-yarder from Wood to squirm from his grasp and trickle across the line.

Ambleside, who had hoisted the Westmorland Senior Cup the previous week having beaten Kendal County at Netherfield, were not best pleased. When you're accustomed to winning, defeat is hard to stomach. But they bounced back quickly in Furness and will doubtless feel all's well that ends well. I daresay Cumbria has numerous football grounds even lower down the pyramid with scenic settings to match Hillard Park. Here, however, a programme is available. The chap selling them advised it wasn't very good, but for this level we rated it decent enough. All that remained at the final whistle was a sprint to the car to catch the football results courtesy of JAG (James Alexander Gordon) and a sunlit traverse of the breath-taking Kirkstone Pass followed by a superb chicken tikka dansak, plus

numerous side dishes, in Penrith at Cumbria's premier curry house: a mouth-watering way to end a memorable afternoon!

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