

**TT No.40: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 10th September 2011; **Penycae** v Flint Town United; Cymru Alliance; Res: 2-4; Att: 56 (h/c); Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (28pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*\*.

We took a chance on both game and ground, and got lucky. Afoneitha Road proved to be a picturesque enclosure, while the match, featuring four goals in a helter-skelter last nine minutes, was a belter. At kick-off, Penycae had suffered five straight defeats since returning to the Cymru Alliance, scoring one goal and conceding 26 in the process. Nonetheless, Flint's officials were wary because the hosts had brought in the experienced Simon Sedgwick as manager. Sedgwick had an immediate impact - in more ways than one. His dog slipped its moorings just before the teams took the field, and efforts to catch it delayed the start by five minutes. My girlfriend came to the rescue by offering her chocolate bar as bait. With Fido unceremoniously removed, the action could begin.

Recently, Penycae agreed a lease with the local authority, and emboldened by this security, have made major improvements to their ground. Hardstanding has been laid around most of the pitch, and the dressing rooms, in a separate pavilion, refurbished. The ground is on the edge of the village, one of many former industrial centres in the Wrexham area, and tucked away down an unmade lane. The pavilion, better suited to cricket than football, is next to a small car park. Two adjacent portable buildings house a kitchen, complete with singing chef, and a hospitality area. To the east, the pitch, which slopes in two directions, stretches away towards a grassy sward set aside for pre-match warm-ups. The ground is in a natural valley, and surrounded by trees on three sides. In autumn, it must be as colourful as neighbours Rhos Aelwyd's public park home. Kit stands (one seats; one terracing) on the south touchline provide the main spectator accommodation. Substantial brick dug-outs are also on this side. There is a post and rail barrier round the pitch, and (the sole jarring element) the ground is enclosed by an ugly palisade fence. Penycae do not have any floodlights.

Formed as recently as 1982, Penycae (or Pen-y-cae; even the club don't seem sure which version they prefer) have spent most of their existence in the Welsh National League (Wrexham Area). They won promotion to the Cymru Alliance in 1994, and stayed at that level until 1998. Penycae finished as WNL champions last May to secure a return to the higher grade. With so many rivals locally - and both Cefn Druids and Rhos Aelwyd were also at home on the day of our visit - attracting a decent crowd is a problem. The sparse attendance for this match was swelled by a number of people from Flint.

Penycae played downhill in the first half, and did well. They hassled and harried high-flying Flint out of their stride. The hosts were buoyed by a third-minute goal, Ben Jones forcing the ball over the line from close range in a scramble. In a pattern maintained throughout, there were chances at each end, but Penycae held out to the interval without too many anxious moments.

It was a different story in the second half. Flint pushed the hosts further and further back. In the end, Penrycae adopted the tactics of an away team, playing one up front and defending in numbers. An equaliser was inevitable, and when it arrived, it was a gift. Johnny Hill was unnecessarily shoved in the box at a corner, and with 58 minutes gone, Stewart Carroll scored from the spot. With six minutes left, the visitors got what looked like the winner, Phill Lloyd flicking home a cross from Matty Harvey, who showed great skill in the bottom corner. Celebrations on the voluble (little of it pleasant) Flint bench were silenced within two minutes. Keeper Leon Bimpson made a shocking of error of judgement in coming for a long ball, and Marc Gunther netted from 20 yards. Just to show you don't get any luck when you're struggling, Penrycae let slip what would have been their first point of the season. Jordan Brierley (87min) volleyed in from the right side of the box, and in the second minute of stoppage time, substitute Jamie Hayes, on his senior debut, beat the offside trap to guide the clincher past keeper Mike Platt in a one-on-one.

Flint's relief was apparent. No-one wants to be the first club to lose to Penrycae. Sedgwick, untying his recalcitrant mutt en route to the pavilion, bemoaned the silly penalty conceded and suggested his players had run out of the steam. They're not fit enough, he stormed. Talented enough, though, for this league, I'd suggest. If they can overcome the handicap of their awful start, Penrycae might avoid relegation. As we drove away towards Llangollen and the spectacular Horseshoe Pass, we speculated on both this and the health of Flint skipper Mike Banks, who was helped off with a serious knee injury after being on the wrong end of a 40-60 tackle. It happened right in front of us, and the extent of his agony was obvious. Not a scintilla of simulation to be seen.

All in all, an unexpectedly excellent beginning to our fortnight in North Wales. If our other planned games and grounds are as good, we'll be very pleased.

07/20