

TT No.9: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 13th August 2011; **Annfield Plain** v Kirkbymoorside; Wearside League; Res: 1-1; Att: 45 (h/c); Admission: £2; Programme: 50p (12pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Big grounds that have fallen on hard times are fascinating to explore. Annfield Plain, formed in 1890, used to attract crowds of up to 3,000 during their halcyon days in the old North Eastern League. Today, their Derwent Park home is in an advanced (but delightful) state of decay. Rust and weeds are taking over. Average attendances for Wearside League matches are well below three figures. But the club, marooned mournfully in one of County Durham's many bereft former coal mining villages, soldier on thanks to the efforts of a handful of never-say-die stalwarts. You wonder why they bother. The community doesn't appear to know or care about Annfield Plain FC. Not being entirely sure where the ground was, we decided to ask for directions on arrival. Risk-takers. That's us. The first four people (selected entirely at random) we collared had little more than a vague idea. I'm being generous. Three of them had no idea at all. Finally, with our (OK, mine) desperation increasing, a young lad waiting for a bus pointed across the road, and said he thought there was a football ground behind the houses. "It's the only one I can think of round here," he added, shrugging in a manner that suggested my question was the last one he'd expected to field.

He was right, mind. Though we were on the brink of giving up and U-turning to Coxhoe Athletic when I spotted, through trees, a flash of claret and sky blue. It was a faded sign bearing the club's name. An elderly chap, flicking through the programme with nicotine-stained fingers, manned the one turnstile open in an impressive red-brick block containing five. Our first indication Plain were not always so unloved. "Is it your first time here?" he enquired, understatedly overjoyed to see unfamiliar faces. "You can park inside if you want." That invitation was gratefully accepted because at that same moment a noisy, swearing argument was breaking out between three chavs on the grass by the nearby houses. The merits of a sizeable dog ("he's bloody nasty, man") seemed to be at issue. Not, it transpired, our first canine encounter of the day.

Spacious Derwent Park, a cut above anything else I've seen in the Wearside League, brought to mind Belle Vue, home of Plain's neighbours Consett. Both grounds are forlorn, rambling entities, built for an era when all the male members of every community would have described watching the local football team as their main leisure interest. Today, most of Annfield Plain's blokes seemed to be in the village's Tesco store. Usual story: thriving supermarket; boarded-up shops. Will we ever learn? High banks of terracing - now reduced to grassy slopes - run round three sides of Derwent Park. The far side and bottom end have flimsy covers along the top of the banking, though these 'stands' are succumbing steadily to dilapidation. When it comes to providing shelter from rain, they're unfit for

purpose. I don't think I've ever seen rosebay willow herb growing in such profusion inside a football ground.

A rickety main stand (patched up many times) straddles the halfway line on the near side. The dressing rooms, social club (a gloomy, humid bunker) and toilets are housed in a red-brick building to the rear. This also bears the scars of countless, tinkering here and there to keep it watertight. A single row of seats is positioned on the top step of terracing. If you don't beat the rush, you've got 90 minutes of numbing your backside on concrete to look forward to. An impressive, if bashed, players' tunnel separates the stand from a substantial area of terracing. On the turnstile block side of the stand there is more grass banking, though this does not reach the heights of that in use elsewhere in the ground. I was quite taken by the general atmosphere of dereliction and hopelessness, and couldn't help pondering the difference between Annfield Plain and Anfield. How can it be right that the big clubs, with the FA's blessing, pocket virtually all the cash generated by lucrative television deals, and the minnows are left to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence? Plain are now part of football's underclass. Perhaps they might consider looting as a way of augmenting their sparse material resources?

The home team went into this game as the Wearside League's early leaders. With a two-point advantage after a couple of fixtures, and everyone else playing in the Sunderland Shipowners' Cup today, Plain would remain at the summit, whatever the outcome. How they didn't win by at least five clear goals, only they can explain. Kirkbymoorside were battered from start to finish, but Plain's dreadful finishing prevented the visitors from being on the wrong end (India fashion) of a cricket score. Paul Henderson-Reay was as culpable as anyone in front of goal, but did manage eventually to find the net. You couldn't knock him for trying. With 14 minutes left, the workaholic centre-forward held off several defenders on the edge of the box and drilled a low shot past keeper Adam Magson. Kirkbymoorside had taken in the lead (if I say 'against the run of play', consider that an early contender for understatement of my season) in the 24th minute when Danny Barwick slid in a Johnny Brown cross.

We had a particular reason to keep a close eye on Henderson-Reay's contribution because his spaniel puppy became my girlfriend's constant companion for the whole 90 minutes. The striker's mate, sitting next to us, was looking after Oscar. Now, I don't much care for dogs, but even I had to admit this bright-eyed pooch was seriously cute. Parting (at the final whistle) was such sweet sorrow. The small crowd dispersed in about two minutes flat, leaving Derwent Park to lapse back into slumber, dreaming of the Good Old Days, and half-heartedly fighting off an advancing tide of rust and foliage. But are we Annfield Plain or Anfield? It's the socio-economic wasteland of the former west Durham coalfield for me every time!

07/20