

TT No. 113: *Mike Latham* - Tues 26 February 2013, Northern League Division 2: **Alnwick Town 2-2 Brandon United**; Attendance: 80 (est.); Admission: £4; Programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

It was cold, bitterly cold in Northumberland but mercifully dry and the sunshine earlier in the day had done its job and dispersed the frost; I called into St James' Park several hours before kick-off to find the groundsman marking out the pitch, the corner flags and goal nets already in place. There is no finer sight for a groundhopper.

Time then to explore Alnwick, described by Country Life ten years or so ago as the best place to live in Britain. It's certainly a fine town, steeped in history with a magnificent castle and gardens and a distinctive main street. The most northerly Northern League club, Alnwick Town's ground is located south-east of the town centre close to the A1 and adjoins the town's rugby club, while a sports centre is nearby. Alnwick is 30-odd miles north of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and an equal distance south of the Scottish border. Tonight's kick-off has been put back fifteen minutes from the usual 7-30pm because of the distance, the visiting team have had to travel.

Once often the scene of bloody battles usually featuring the dominant Percy family and Scottish raiders, Alnwick is now a peaceful, picturesque market town. It is home to many commuters and has many interesting shops, the most interesting from my point of view being Barter Books, one of the largest second hand bookshops in the country. Located in the old railway station building it is a vast place with a decent holding of sports books. I picked up two cricket history books but the football stock was disappointingly sparse.

Alnwick Castle has been the setting of several films including Blackadder and Harry Potter. It is one of the homes of the Duke of Northumberland who is also a big supporter of the town's football club. He writes an introduction to the programme and shows his commitment to the club maintaining its large junior set-up and providing opportunities for youngsters to play active sports.

Alnwick Town FC date back to 1879 and football has been played at St James' Park since 1900. The ground is an impressive one, lovingly maintained with an excellent playing surface. There is a feeling of space and some great sight-lines behind the near-side goal with the steep grass banking down to the pitch providing a fine vantage point. There is a neat club house and small covered area down one side, a small seated stand opposite while several locals spent the evening huddled on a bench set in the banking; they breed them tough around here. There is also a small cover along the far side which backs onto the rugby pitch.

Considering the game featured two of the struggling sides in the Northern League second tier the game was hugely entertaining and contained some good football. The visitors took a two-goal lead thanks to the opportunism of their flame-haired

striker Mooney and looked good value for a valuable three points. But Alnwick, who began the game rock bottom of the league, never stopped trying to play neat, constructive football and in the closing stages they finally found a cutting edge.

Just ten minutes remained when Alnwick pulled back a goal and in a grandstand finish, deep into injury-time they equalized. There was even time for one last desperate attack, a header going agonizingly wide.

For a town with a population of over ten thousand Alnwick should be able to support a football club in the Northern League. They clearly have a committed set of club officials who work hard for the club. After first entering the Northern League in 1982, Alnwick Town resigned in 2007 after failing ground criteria. Any visitor to St James' Park would find this hard to believe, its current state is testimony to the hard work behind the scenes. Having regained Northern League membership in 2011 it would be a huge shame if Town were relegated once again. They are a friendly club, produce a fine programme and the catering wagon behind the goal purveys world-class Bovril with a sprinkling of pepper. What's not to like?

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