

**TT No.128: Andy Gallon** - Sat 23rd March 2013; Norton & Stockton Ancients v Hebburn Town; Northern League Division 1; Res: 1-0; Att: 31; Admission: £6; Programme: £1 (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*.

Occasionally, I wish I were better at controlling my compulsion to watch football (and other) matches on Saturday afternoons. With hindsight, leaving hearth and home amid another cold snap (when's the next warm snap?) was a daft thing to do. Oh, the benefit of hindsight. The North East, unusually this winter, avoided the worst of the snow that descended upon Britain as the weekend approached.

Knowing rugby had a better chance of beating the weather, I planned a trip to the Darlington Arena, purchased recently for £2m by Darlington Mowden Park RUFC. Mowden Park had an attractive fixture (albeit in the restricted sense that any game of rugby union is attractive) in National League Two North: third versus top, Stourbridge. I'd paid two previous visits to convicted-criminal-turned-football-chairman George Reynolds' 25,000-seat white elephant, both to see Darlington FC - a Football League game then a Conference National encounter. Neither match attracted more than 2,500, which meant an awful lot of empty seats. Soulless venue, soul destroying experiences. However, new owners and a different sport necessitate (as any hopper understands) a revisit.

Darlington, if not the nearby west Durham hills, had escaped snow and the match was given the go-ahead. However, on arrival, I discovered there wouldn't be a programme because the firm that prints Mowden Park's paper is located up in wintry Weardale and - literally - had been unable to deliver on time. Absolutely not prepared to contemplate watching two (this and a future fixture when a programme was available) rugby union games at the Arena, I hastened back along the A66 to Teesside. Another revisit - Norton & Stockton Ancients FC. Only on entering the ground, and seeing the Northern League First Division table in the programme, did I realise the Ancients are bottom and all but relegated. Ho, hum. I really must get myself a mobile phone permitting internet access.

I noted, with some interest, that Norton are managed by Halifax Town old boy Andy Campbell. The Boro lad was largely ineffectual in the Shaymen's colours and it appears swapping, in June last year, the forward line for the manager's chair has not improved his fortunes. Campbell's notes in the programme told of limited expertise. "The fixture congestion is creating a bit of a farce of things but we'll keep trying to win each game. We'll have to wait until the end of the season to see if we've done enough to stay up. It's a massive learning curve for me - very different to being a player - but I'm keeping going." Prior to this scrambled win over mid-table (and disinterested) Hebburn Town, Campbell had masterminded just three league victories all season. Fans, it appears, are voting with their feet. The programme featured a graph indicating that Norton's average home attendance has rocketed from 53 in 2007-08 to 130 in 2011-12. Yet I counted just 31 spectators, including a hopper from Catterick. Where was everyone?

Doubtless a few were dissuaded by the intense cold, whipped up by a bitter east wind sweeping relentlessly across the heavy pitch. Those who did attend cannot have enjoyed what they witnessed. I like the Northern League: it's a great competition. But this was one of the worst games I've ever seen - at any level. It was abysmal. Anthony Hume, catching keeper Dan Regan hopelessly out of position, hit the winner from 20 yards in the 28th minute. As I recall, it was Norton's only effort on target. Hebburn, despite the exhortations of their exasperated supporters, did not summon any urgency until the closing minutes, and saw a shot cleared off the line with virtually the last kick of the contest. Norton's players celebrated enthusiastically at the final whistle: I'm glad someone took something from the proceedings. Twenty points from safety (albeit with games in hand), they'll need several more results like this if they are to avoid a return to Second Division football for the first time since 2009.

Before I get on to the ground, I'll clear up the background to Norton's curious name. Football, offering a winter alternative for unoccupied cricketers, was first played by Norton Cricket Club Trust in 1959. In 1980, when neighbouring Stockton FC faced closure, its remaining assets were transferred to the trust. Members of the Stockton board joined the Norton club and it was agreed to incorporate Stockton's nickname, the Ancients, into a new club name.

The ground, on Station Road, is part of the vast Norton Sports Complex, hemmed in by post-war housing. Cricket, rugby union, hockey and squash also have facilities here. The railway station (to the chagrin of my fellow hopper, relying on public transport) closed in 1960 - predating the Beeching Axe. But the line is still there, linking Stockton and Billingham, and bisects the complex. The football ground occupies a plot between cricket square and rugby pitches. Fully enclosed, it is much improved from my last visit about a decade ago. A low, modern stand, with gold and black seats and khaki cladding, straddles the halfway line on the west touchline. There are dug-outs opposite. The pitch is railed off and hardstanding surrounds it. An impressive new clubhouse has been built at the north end. This two-storey structure contains dressing rooms, toilets and a bar. Flanking it are a small area of cover (rendered useless because it is set back behind the clubhouse) and a portable building in which refreshments can be obtained. A chubby chap behind the counter admitted he'd forgotten the pies. Judging by the extent of his girth, I suspected he might have eaten them all. Station Road is floodlit and there is space along the east side and at the south end to provide additional facilities. A ground long on potential but short on charm.

That's about it. Seldom have I greeted with such relief the sounding of a final whistle. By full-time, my hands were so cold I could barely feel the camera's shutter release beneath my right index finger. Staying at home, hunkering down in the warm with a good film, would have been a far more sensible option.

In case you're wondering, Mowden Park won the rugby 14-9. They attracted crowds of about 300 to their old ground, Yiewsley Drive, whose sale to a housing developer provided the wherewithal to purchase the Darlington Arena. I gather they are budgeting for average attendances of 700. How they'll make the arena pay when

Darlington FC could not, I don't know. There is talk of the stadium hosting everything from international rugby union games to pop concerts. But its running expenses - day-to-day maintenance - must be frighteningly high. Good luck to them. They'll need it. Let's hope it's still around to visit next season!

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