

TT No. 133: Mike Latham - Wednesday 3 April 2013: Bridgwater Office Supplies Manchester League Premier Division; **Walshaw Sports** 1-2 Prestwich Heys; Kick-Off: 18-15; Attendance: 140 (h/c); FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

It's the start of what the football groundhoppers call the 'Silly Season'; signified by the turning of the clocks. The effect is noticed especially on occasions such as this year, after all the postponements caused by the weather, suddenly there are many early evening matches to visit, and some really tasty games to enjoy.

This game was a classic example; a really competitive and enjoyable local derby on a very dry pitch that started soon after the advertised 6-15pm kick-off and finished in the gloaming after 8pm. The visitors led 2-0 at half-time but Walshaw never looked out of the contest and pulled a goal back with 13 minutes remaining to set up a grandstand finish.

Walshaw Sports play at the Geoff Ormerod Sports Ground down Sycamore Road in the village of Tottington, near Bury. The venue is shared with cricket; Walshaw CC founded in the 1880s play in the Bolton & District Cricket Association and I was able to pick up a league handbook from the well-appointed cricket pavilion where hot drinks and food were served.

Tottington has long held an interest for me. The village was once known for its prowess at rugby football and one of its most famous players was a fullback by the name of Tom Coop. In the late Victorian era Coop, who starred for Tottington at their Woolfold ground was enticed to move to Leigh, just before the Northern Union (as the rugby league was then known) was formed in 1895. Coop was a classic fullback, safe, dependable and a fine kicker of the old leather balls. He thrived at Leigh and played for Lancashire and the North of England before being selected to represent England against Scotland in Edinburgh in 1892. I can see his face now, looking at me from the classic sporting photographs taken at that time - a neatly trimmed moustache, calm, determined, the epitome of the Victorian sporting hero.

The game that Coop featured for England was played on a pitch adjoining the Grange cricket ground. I recall once being shown a painting of the game with the old sandstone Victorian tenement blocks in the background. When I visited the site recently the view was virtually unchanged from more than a century before.

Another Tottington player, three-quarter Doc Worthington also played for Leigh in the 1880s and early 1890s. Worthington and Coop both played for Leigh when they famously vanquished the touring Maori rugby team in 1889. That game was a story on its own; the Maoris arriving at the old Leigh ground behind the Three Crowns pub in a horse-drawn wagonette from the railway station and a crowd of over 6,000 seeing a game that forms part of the town's sporting heritage.

Strangely, if you Google 'Tottington' and 'Tom Coop' there are only vague references to a player who was a sporting icon of the time. Safe, dependable,

reliable are the usual descriptions of his play but I suspect he was even better than that. Sadly, his rugby career was ended prematurely after he was the victim of rough play in a Leigh game at Widnes in 1898. By then Worthington had long retired though he was also a formidable sportsman, a tricky, dodging rugby back who had also played the association code.

Back to 2013 and the Manchester League; there was a good-sized crowd for the game and it was a fine advert for the league, competitive, skilful and always holding the interest. There are no spectator facilities as such but on a cold but bright evening everyone wrapped up and enjoyed being out of doors, though the council wagons out gritting the nearby streets were a reminder that winter has not let slip its icy grip.

Bizarrely early in the first half a number of old LPs were skimmed over a fence from a nearby garden and I helped retrieve them from the pitch. Inevitably there was a Max Bygraves LP and also one from Kenny Ball; Acker Bilk also featured and there were some Mowtown albums in there. A reminder that time never stands still, even in Tottington.

I hung around, hoping for a Billy Joel or a Lisa Stansfield. But after Chicago's Greatest Hits just before half-time I decided to concentrate on the football.

04/20