

TT No.138: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 6th April 2013; **Consett** v Ashington; Northern League Division One; Res: 2-2; Att: 120; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Belle Vue is to close with two big games (Consett parties, I guess), though the dates for both, at this stage of a weather-ruined season, are very much provisional. A friendly against a Sunderland XI has been scheduled for May 6th and the Northern League Cup Final for May 11th. Consett, understandably, are keen to make a bit of money from the demise of their historic home. A North Eastern League semi-professional match against Sunderland Reserves in August 1950 opened Belle Vue, and facing opposition from the same club would be a very neat and tidy way of helping to bring down the curtain. That first match attracted 7,000 (still the record attendance) and, though there won't be anything like that for Belle Vue's grand farewells, it would be lovely if the ground drew sizeable crowds for the two games. Northern League officials - equally understandably - want to pull in a decent attendance for their Cup Final, hence the selection of crumbling Belle Vue as venue for the showpiece occasion.

The place takes some filling. For this level of football, it is vast: a spacious, airy bowl. Belle Vue's existence owes everything to a post-war boom in steel manufacture. The Consett Iron Company extended its premises in 1948 and swamped the Vicarage Field ground used for half a century by Consett, who were formed in 1899 as Consett Celtic. Volunteers built its replacement, Belle Vue, using cinders from local mine workings to create its signature grass-covered banks. An impressive main stand, flanked by terracing, is the ground's keynote feature. Filling much of the west touchline, it is a child of its generation: utilitarian in design, red brick in construction. It was paid for with the proceeds of Tommy Lumley's £1,150 transfer to First Division Charlton Athletic. One of the great structures of non-league football: what a shame it has to go.

Sentiment apart, probe around inside and out, and one realises very quickly the stand has reached the end of its useful life. It is falling apart. Damp is taking over as the fabric fails. On the morning of this game, the obliging ground-staff very kindly allowed me the run of Belle Vue. My tour included what effectively is the basement, where the dressing rooms are located. It is dark, dank and cavernous down there. The visitors' dressing room is especially vile. I'd rather get changed on the bus! Twin flights of steps allow both sets of players to reach the tunnel, which is positioned in the centre of the stand. A traditional (for the Fifties) layout sees this bisect a terraced paddock, behind which the covered seating tier rises impressively. Shabby chic would be a generous description of this stand. Even the Consett secretary, David Pyke, says the facilities are embarrassing.

There used to be a cover opposite but this was reduced in length some years ago before disappearing altogether. The now-grassy banks comprise the remainder of Belle Vue's spectator accommodation. Few however, venture out onto them, with

most punters preferring to stick to the 'terra firma' of the hardstanding that surrounds the pitch. The playing surface is commensurately huge - and, with yards of spare turf on both sides and at each end, it could be even bigger. A refreshment hut, red brick, naturally, can be found in the ground's north-west corner.

All is forlorn, nothing (ample parking aside) twenty-first century. Consett run 30 youth teams, and they are forced to play on two scrappy pitches at the east side of the site, beyond Belle Vue's imposing perimeter fence and adjacent to fields used by Consett RUFC. The first team pitch, I was told, can cope with only so many games, especially after 12 months of absolutely rotten weather. The town, a thriving steel centre until the myopic Margaret Thatcher came along, is high in the west Durham hills, and on Easter Monday three feet of snow covered the pitch. If Community Service 'bad lads' (as they were described to me) hadn't been seconded to shovel it away, this fixture would have been added to the alarming number of postponements suffered by Consett during 2012-13. Indeed, this was the Steelmen's first home outing in a month. There was, mind, plenty of snow on the terracing. And, despite the sun, it remained distinctly chilly.

I understand work on the new stadium, at nearby Crookhall, is to start in three weeks. The £3m development will feature an artificial pitch - a real boon for Consett's youth teams and an opportunity to forge closer links with the community. A 'cutting the first sod' ceremony took place on March 14th. It is hoped the stadium will be finished and ready by October. Consett, whose crowds have fallen steadily over the years, believe the move could prompt an overdue rise in attendances. A state-of-the-art leisure centre will rise on the site of the Belle Vue football ground. The rugby union club is to stay at its Belle Vue pitches, but secure enhanced facilities. Durham County Council is ploughing £43m into a major project also to feature new buildings for Consett's academy school.

Neither team had much to play for: Consett (despite concerns expressed by manager Kenny Lindoe in his extensive programme notes) won't go down and Ashington aren't in a position to trouble the leaders. The contest, on a pudding of a pitch, took a long time to reach boiling point but the visitors battling back to draw level from 2-0 down made for an interesting last quarter as both teams went for victory. Another two of many points dropped this season, was the verdict of the Belle Vue stalwarts. Consett fielded new recruit Aristote Guerin-Lokonga, a lanky striker who has had trials with Sunderland and Torquay United, and arrived before the transfer deadline from Northern League rivals Sunderland Ryhope Community Association.

Hartlepool United reject Michael Mackay drove the Steelmen ahead inside 90 seconds. Allowed far too much space, the striker simply picked his spot from 20 yards. Nine minutes before the break, an unmarked Ryan Bell (once at the Sunderland Academy) nodded in a deflected Mackay cross for Consett's second. Ashington, who brought a decent number of supporters with them, were much improved in the second half, and scored twice in three minutes through ex-Consett forward Marc Walton. With 68 minutes on the clock, Walton displayed determination and composure in shaking off a defender and slipping a low shot

past keeper Chris Elliott before glancing in a 71st-minute header from six yards. There were clear chances at both ends after that but neither side could find a winner. A draw was probably the fairest outcome.

A word about Consett's match programme - excellent! Forty-four pages packed with reading, stats and photographs for the bargain price of £1. Congratulations to editor Gary Welford and his fellow contributors Andy Ball, John Paul Hardy (website editor) and Andrew Pearson (treasurer/press officer).

Potentially, 11 opportunities remain to visit Belle Vue before the bulldozers arrive. Consett have nine Northern League fixtures outstanding, along with the Sunderland swansong and the League Cup Final. For most, Consett is a long haul but this is a ground that merits the effort. The phrase 'not to be missed' is frequently over-used by hoppers. It is entirely correct, however, for Belle Vue.

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