

TT No.142: Mike Latham - Sat 13 April 2013: Welsh National League (Wrexham Area) Division One: **CPD Llanuwchllyn** 7-1 Johnstown Youth; Att: 10 (h/c); No admission/prog (gave donation); FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

The Welsh National League (Wrexham Area) operates at levels three and four of the Welsh Pyramid, and, in my experience usually provides good, competitive football, often in some quite stunning locations. Phil Jones of the Wrexham Leader does a brilliant job updating the news items on the league website.

When people talk about footballing hotbeds, they rarely mention Wrexham; but the number, and diversity of football clubs in this area is amazing. Nearly every town or village in the area seems to have a team.

On a grey, drizzly afternoon I decided to visit the outpost club of this particular league. It was a path I'd followed before, twice visiting Llanuwchllyn only to discover the game had been postponed. Llanuwchllyn is 40 miles from Wrexham, a small village near the southern end of Bala Lake (Llyn Tegid) with a population of around 900, of whom four-fifths are reckoned to be Welsh speaking.

I must admit to being a little worried as I journeyed south of Broughton towards Corwen. There was still plenty of snow on the hills and the skies were darkening, bringing the threat of rain. I paused awhile at the farm shop on the Rhug Estate near Corwen on the A5: (<http://www.rhug.co.uk/estate/the-farm-shop/52>).

The wonderful Café Ariete in Moffat remains my favourite groundhopping stop-off point but the Rhug Estate was good enough to win several major awards in 2012. I enjoyed a bacon and egg barm and a freshly prepared coffee in the company of many visitors, not one of whom appeared to be a groundhopper.

The main street of Bala was busy with visitors and in no time after journeying along Bala Lake I reached Llanuwchllyn with just under an hour to kick-off. The football ground is situated behind the village hall on the main road through the village. With some relief I saw some of the home players warming up and after those fruitless trips for me it was a case of third time lucky.

For rail enthusiasts, there is a railway station at Llanuwchllyn; headquarters of the narrow gauge Bala Lake Railway, which is centred on the former Great Western Railway station on the standard-gauge line from Ruabon to Barmouth.

Other points of interest are a nearby Roman fort, Caer-gai while the village was the birthplace of the Welsh language author and educationalist Owen Morgan Edwards.

The football ground, as are many in this league, is basic but with sensational views that more than atone for the lack of spectator facilities. The players changed in the village hall but sadly there was no tea bar in operation. In fact, there seemed

a distinct lack of home officials, though one of the team managers was extremely welcoming and friendly and I also had a chat with several home players.

Llanuwchllyn have struggled in recent seasons but their fortunes have been transformed this season. After the reserve team of neighbouring Bala Town was disbanded during the close season after their intended move from the reserves league of the Welsh National League to a North Wales Premier Reserves League was controversially blocked the Llanuwchllyn side now comprises most of those players.

They have enjoyed a fine season, winning one league game 21-0 and reaching the first round of the Welsh Cup for the first time in the club's 56-year history. Their first league defeat of the season was suffered only the previous week at the hands of leaders Borras Park Albion, a highly impressive footballing side I've seen several times in recent seasons. Llanuwchllyn lost 6-1 and one of their players admitted to me that they had been taught a footballing lesson.

With ten league games still to play Llanuwchllyn were still in contention and they fancied their chances against a Johnstown Youth side still regrouping after last season's relegation from the Premier Division.

The playing area was surrounded by a wooden and mesh fence with the area behind the far goal backing on to a farmer's field full of grazing sheep. With distant views of Bala Lake, rolling hills and some striking houses in the vicinity this was a most pleasing place to watch a game. A recently constructed tea bar (sadly not open) with bench seating and overhanging roof provided some welcome respite from the elements and at most ten spectators, including three from the visitors watched the game.

The pitch looked in good condition despite the recent bad weather, but undulates remarkably on the side nearest the home dug-out. Llanuwchllyn were quickly into their stride, scoring after five minutes and dominating the first-half. By half-time they were 3-0 to the good and had also hit the woodwork several times.

To their credit the visitors regrouped well, never stopped trying to play constructively and had a good spirit among their players. Within four minutes of the re-start they pulled back a goal, their captain scoring directly from a corner. For a long spell either side of half-time the play had been evenly fought but when Llanuwchllyn went further ahead the floodgates threatened to open.

Llanuwchllyn added three more goals, including a penalty and another goal scored directly from an in-swinging corner. With the icy rain continuing to fall both teams were probably relieved to hear the blast of the referee's final whistle.

Llanuwchllyn is an outpost location for sure but a visit here was rewarding, not least because of the friendly welcome and the glorious scenery. I hope they manage to keep this side together as they look a redoubtable outfit at this level of football. Another hugely enjoyable day out in Wales, highly recommended.

04/20

