

TT No. 150: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 20th April 2013; **Alnwick Town v Whitehaven**; Northern League Division Two; Res: 2-4; Att: 70; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

On the face of it, this defeat dooms Alnwick Town to an enforced departure from the Northern League, a competition in which (ironically enough) they play their 1,000th match next Saturday. A gala occasion is planned, with even the Duke of Northumberland, who owns everything for miles around this hugely attractive community and is the football club's patron/president, agreeing to grace St James' Park with his presence. Despite being losers on the field, however, Alnwick could be spared a return to the Northern Alliance by events off it.

Ground grading (surprise, surprise) is at the heart of the uncertainty. Alnwick, a club of relatively limited means, have spent a considerable amount getting St James' Park up to the standard required by the Northern League. They've done a great job: it's an impressive set-up and much improved from my only other visit 15 years ago. But inevitably it meant nothing was left over to pay squad members either wages or expenses. Result? Any decent players developed through Alnwick's numerous junior teams head off down the A1 to join rival clubs that can reward their skills with a few notes. Town have the pick of what talent remains - and the club's older supporters will tell you that rump simply isn't good enough to compete in the Northern League.

A few miles south, Amble United and Heaton Stannington are the two clubs most likely to secure a promotion position in the Northern Alliance. Neither has facilities of Northern League standard and, according to the gossip at Alnwick, Amble cannot afford to go up. Ryhope Colliery Welfare could also offer Alnwick a lifeline. The Sunderland club were promoted to the Northern League from the Wearside League last season on the understanding they provided, by March 31st 2013, some spectator cover (offering a minimum 50 seats) at their rather sparsely appointed Recreation Park ground. The work, it appears, has not been done. Ryhope, irrespective of whether they are Division Two title contenders, should be booted out of the Northern League. At the very least, their ground is likely to cost them promotion to Division One. Alnwick, not unreasonably, complain that, unlike them, Ryhope have been splashing cash on player wages rather than funding ground development. It is, to the hopper (and doubtless many other football followers), a wearying tale. I'd much prefer issues of promotion and relegation to be decided where it really matters - on the pitch.

Michael Cook, who edits Alnwick's excellent programme (they didn't issue on my previous visit), had this to say in his 'Ramblings' column when mulling over a 1-1 midweek draw at Ryhope CW: "The main talking point during the night was the current ground situation. Well, Ryhope still don't have the stand in place, and should find out before the end of the month (April) what their fate is. As harsh as it may sound, they should be down. We've spent a small fortune bringing the

ground up to the standard within the required time, so why should others be able to get away with it? I won't hold my breath, though."

Alnwick Town, formed in 1879, are the Duke's tenants. St James' Park dates from circa 1900. Previously, the club used an adjacent pitch, now a cricket ground. Alnwick may be a lovely town, replete with glorious architecture, but the footballers are cast adrift amid grim pebbledash council semis, uninspiring brick new-builds and a bleak industrial estate. T'was ever thus for the Beautiful Game! This spotless enclosure's main feature, an interesting gabled structure housing the bar and dressing rooms, is located on the west touchline. Originally also a grandstand, it was erected during the early Fifties. Its form and function have altered over the years. I was told the bar, whose windows offer a wonderful view of the prodigiously sloping pitch, used to be the dressing rooms. There is a fascinating display of archive team photographs. Opposite, a delightfully rickety cover (much more recent than it looks) offers a couple of rows of bench seats. The positioning, immediately in front, of bulky dug-outs is not terribly helpful. There is also a simple cover at the south end, where the pitch barrier is cranked around the goal. Hardstanding has been laid around the pitch, which for this match was in quite superb condition. A good view of the action can be obtained from the large car park at the north end, raised on a grassy bank behind the goal. The floodlights, a mast system, were installed and first switched on in 1987.

St James' Park is set in a spacious location. Immediately behind the clubhouse is the aforementioned Weavers Way ground of Alnwick Cricket Club, who were established in 1837 and play in the Northumberland & Tyneside Senior League's Division A Two. A characteristic cure-for-insomnia cricket match was in progress when I arrived via a guided tour of the Aln Valley Railway Project. At the prospect of something actually happening (ie. a wicket falling), the players appealed to the umpires so noisily, I suspected they were merely attempting to compensate for a lack of spectators. Apologies to any devotees of the flannel and willow sport reading this but as a young child I had to endure watching my father play cricket - and it bored me witless. Even now, I cannot bear more than two or three overs at a single sitting. Cheek by jowl to the south is the Greensfield ground of Alnwick Rugby Union Club, whose home games in Durham & Northumberland Division One are probably rather better supported than the cricket. Their bland set-up boasts a small cantilever stand on the west touchline. The area beyond the cricket ground is to be transformed by the construction of a new school, 200 houses and several artificial multi-sport pitches.

Pre-match chat in the bar indicated only a win would do for Alnwick in this battle of two Northern League outpost clubs. The chap in the burger van (located next to the pay hut, complete with flag, in the car park) asked about the opposition and, when I said it was Whitehaven, he smiled and responded: "They've had a canny run out here, then!" Alnwick, I'm afraid to say, were very poor. Considering how much was at stake, Town's performance was limp. Whitehaven, mid-table and with nothing to play for, scored well-taken goals through their roving No 11 in the seventh and 21st minutes. Alnwick replied through Ben Keenan's 34th-minute

penalty and felt the visiting player who committed the foul should have been shown a red (rather than yellow) card. The west Cumbrians made it 3-1 five minutes into the second half. Within three minutes, Alnwick netted again, an unmarked Tony Brown side-footing home from 12 yards, but Whitehaven eased clear with another soft goal soon after the hour. The home team's naïve display summed up neatly why they are bottom of the table.

Most Alnwick fans think being relegated once again from the Northern League would be a disaster. It took several seasons to get back when they went down last time and losing status just two years after regaining it is a potentially cruel blow. Not all felt that way, though. One old-timer suggested to me that, given Alnwick's population of just 8,000 and the town's geographical isolation between Newcastle and Berwick, the club's natural home is the Northern Alliance. Opinion aside, in every respect, what happens next is out of Town's hands.

04/20