

TT No.77: Mike Latham - Boxing Day, Wednesday 26 December 2012; **Clipstone Welfare** 2-1 Louth Town; Baris Northern Counties East League Division One, Att: 51; Admission: £4; Programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 5*.

Rain, rain and more rain threatened the Bank Holiday football programme and choosing a fixture was something of a lottery. I abandoned plans to visit a new ground in the Spar Mid Wales League as the forecast for that part of the world was especially unpromising. A good job too, as my intended game was to be postponed. Instead I ventured to Nottinghamshire to visit Clipstone Welfare FC, newcomers to the NCEL this season and was rewarded with a fine game and rich entertainment.

Situated a few miles east of Mansfield, Clipstone is a small former coal mining village on the edge of Sherwood Forest which was built on an old army base. There are two distinct parts, Kings Clipstone (which used to be known as Old Clipstone) and New Clipstone. Like many old mining villages, the area undoubtedly has its social problems but there's also a deep sense of community and a pride in the local football team built around the welfare ground. The club is not short of volunteers who man the gates, sell programmes and operate a fine tea bar. The welfare ground is well maintained and clearly meets the demanding ground grading requirements of the league. Everyone was friendly and welcoming and obviously has a deep passion for football. On a dank, grey and increasingly wet afternoon it proved to be an inspired choice to visit here on a Boxing Day afternoon.

The NCEL, in my experience is superbly run and operates a league website that must rank among the best in the land. Informative, clear to read and navigate and up-to-date, it's a huge asset to the league and its member clubs. It has a link to the league's Twitter feed and is invaluable on days such as this as fixtures fall by the wayside due to the weather. I've visited all but a handful of the clubs in the league and never failed to be impressed by the standards that are set. There are some real hidden gems of grounds in the league, often at places that you would least expect and the league covers a vast geographical area from Bridlington on the North Yorkshire coast, across to West Yorkshire and down to Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Derbyshire.

Clipstone Welfare FC, originally founded in 1928, have played at the Lido Ground to the west of the village since the mid-1950s. The ground has good parking facilities off the main road and towering floodlights. The playing area is in excellent condition and coped well with the deluge we experienced as the afternoon wore on. The main facilities are at the entrance end behind the nearside goal where there is a small tea room, the dressing rooms and a small covered enclosure that includes some bucket seats. A smart shallow covered stand with a covered standing area takes up most of the space on the far-side with the dug-outs opposite adjoining the main road. Behind the far goal is a grassed bank that backs on to houses and this end is out of bounds, so effectively the ground is a three-sided one.

The game promised to be an even and well-contested affair and so it proved. Both sides played neat, constructive football and the game fairly sped along, controlled by an excellent referee and was played in a great spirit. It made for compelling viewing and the Clipstone supporters really enjoy their football and are also full of praise for good play by the opposition.

Clipstone took the lead with a goal scored on the counter-attack midway through the first-half. The visitors, whose manager Daryl Clare was a prolific goals-scorer in non-league football equalised just after the resumption with a fine lob, by their impressive no10, Matt Kennedy. But Clipstone then went back into the lead in their next attack. Though the goals then dried up, the rain came down harder and there were numerous chances at both ends before the referee brought proceedings to an end.

It was good to see the way a number of Clipstone's supporters applauded both sides and the officials from the field and Mr Clare acknowledged one gentleman's commiserations by replying, 'Thanks, it was a very good game in the conditions.'

The tea bar was in good form with hot drinks, Cornish pasties and sausage rolls warding off the winter chill. The dressing rooms are easy to spot, too, marked as they are, 'Home,' 'Away' and 'Ref.' Clipstone Welfare FC is a friendly club to visit, the stranger is made welcome and they clearly have a hard-working committee that takes a real pride in making the best of their facilities. I thought it was a marvellous way to spend my Boxing Day afternoon and would recommend a visit here unreservedly.

04/20