

**TT No.78: Andy Gallon** - Wed 26th December 2012; **Goole AFC** v Harrogate Railway; NPL Division One North; Res: 1-0; Att: 91; Admission: £7; Programme: £1.50 (28pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

Well, this turned out to be some Boxing Day: memorable, though not for any particularly good reasons! I cannot recall attempting a December 26th 'double'. Generally, owing to family commitments of various kinds, one game is both desirable and sufficient. However, this year was slightly different and I resolved to watch an 11am kick-off in the Northern League followed (if I still felt like it) by a 3pm start in either the Northern Premier or Northern Counties East leagues.

Northern League options (all revisits) boiled down to Billingham Town, Marske United, Norton & Stockton Ancients and Thornaby. I opted for Marske and a check call to chairman Peter Collinson secured a confident 'game on' response. Peter qualified this by adding: "There's a damp patch in one goalmouth but I can't see the referee calling it off for that." As a back-up, I tried Billingham Town, where no-one came to the phone. Full steam ahead for Marske, then.

Sped up the A19 and along the A174 to reach the outskirts of Redcar with a good forty minutes to spare, only to hit the back of a long queue leading to the Wilton roundabout. I've never seen so many flashing lights: ambulances, police cars and fire engines arriving from every point of the compass. Looked serious! Following the locals' lead, I cut across the grassy central reservation, doubled back laboriously through Redcar town centre, picked my way along the crowded sea front, trundled up Marske high street and finally turned left into the Mount Pleasant car park, pulling my handbrake up at 10.56. Result! However, any smugness on my part was wiped out instantly by the news, delivered by incredulous Marske fans, that the referee had called the match off.

Making allowances for the possible presence of fiction as well as fact, this is how I believe the story unfolded: Marske inspect at 8am and are happy with the pitch. The surface is better than for their previous home game with Bedlington Terriers, and that went ahead. On arrival, the match referee expresses concern over one goalmouth. Marske's band of helpers moves two tons of sand, lays it and rolls the offending goalmouth. At 10.20am, the referee suggests it's 50/50. In the meantime, the opposition (Guisborough Town) manager is bending the official's ear, saying the pitch isn't fit. The referee, seemingly not strong enough to say 'it's fine: get out there!', calls the match off about 10.30am.

Frustrating for me, and other spectators, but doubtless doubly irritating for the Marske people who had done so much work in anticipation of their highest attendance of the season. Hundreds of free tickets had been distributed to local schools and a big charity fundraising event was planned.

What really ticks me off is the failure by certain parties to see the bigger picture. The Northern League frequently bemoans the low crowds attracted by many of its

clubs. This derby would have enticed from the Redcar-Marske-Saltburn area a number of casual fans, keen to emerge from their festive food comas. Such a late (and puzzling) postponement looks decidedly amateurish and certainly isn't good PR! The crowning irony came much later when I learned that the Guisborough secretary had emailed the league chairman to request a conversation in which he would express concerns about so many games being lost to 'soft' pitches! You couldn't make it up.

Hey, ho. So, about turn and retrace tyre tracks to York. A quick lunch and I'd recovered sufficiently to consider a semi-local 3pm kick-off. Goole AFC (another revisit) were among the contenders and their match with Harrogate Railway got the nod when Vikings secretary Andy Morris predicted it would go ahead - absolutely no problem. I couldn't suppress a wry smile. On, however, it was.

The Victoria Pleasure Grounds, bleak, exposed and windswept, isn't pretty but it does have a pleasing sense of place. Visually, Goole, built as a company town to serve the Aire & Calder Navigation and Britain's largest inland port, is noted for three things: two 'salt & pepper pot' water towers, numerous dock cranes and several long rows of red-brick terraced houses. All can be seen from the football ground, which lies at the foot of Carter Street, one of the seemingly endless terraces. The 'salt & pepper pots', as different as chalk and cheese, tower attractively over the main stand. The VPG's Achilles heel is its elliptical shape. A four-lane tartan track (life-expired, to my eyes) surrounds the pitch and serves only to distance spectators from the action and rob the venue of any atmosphere.

The main stand, a substantial structure with a bright red roof, is a curious beast. Its accommodation comprises a peculiar mixture of plastic tip-up seats, wooden bench seats and terracing. An off-centre press box and players' tunnel add to the aesthetic chaos. Sadly, the most interesting aspect of the VPG - an archaic wooden stand on the west side - has been demolished since my last visit. Its replacement, a bog-standard cantilever cover over a few steps of terracing, is more sow's ear than silk purse. Hardstanding extends right the way round, though watching from the open ends is surely the preserve of masochists. Binoculars and brollies, anyone? Entry to the ground is via a sizeable turnstile block in the north-east corner, where Carter Street bends sharply right. Adjacent buildings house a well-stocked souvenir shop and a kitchen-cum-refreshment-hatch. All red-brick, naturally.

Originally, the VPG was home to Goole Rugby Club, formed in 1879. The Seaporters joined the Northern Union (later the Rugby Football League) in 1898, three years after it was set up by breakaway clubs, and secured senior status for the 1901-02 season. But, having failed to win a place in the new Second Division for 1902-03, Goole disbanded. Rugby (albeit of the union variety) is still played in Goole, with the local club based at Westfield Banks, on the northern edge of the town, close to the mighty Ouse. The site is shared with Goole Tennis Club.

Back we go to the Beautiful Game. This Northern Premier League fixture wasn't from the starry end of the football firmament. Goole AFC (successors to Goole FC,

who folded in 1996) lay second-bottom with just seven points from 20 games and Harrogate Railway, in sixteenth, were scarcely much better off. Andy Morris, Goole's programme editor as well as secretary, noted in his scene-setting column: "We have only four months to sort out where we are going to become the final day of the season. Whilst it doesn't look pretty, we are where we are and we are down there in a relegation scrap with half a dozen other sides. We are going to have to look for points where we can."

I must say I was impressed with Goole's commitment. They looked a better team than their points tally suggested. For 20 minutes, a decent contest seemed likely: not brimming with skill but closely fought. Then the rain arrived. A few spots gave way to a torrential downpour that never ceased. Luckily, the pitch held up magnificently, though it became impossible to play watchable football. What few chances were created fell to Goole, who contrived some agonising near-misses. Just when I feared a goalless draw was inevitable, the hosts deservedly broke the deadlock. With 14 minutes left, striker Bill Law pounced on a parry from Railway keeper Sam Dobbs and slid the ball into an empty net. One goal always looked like being enough to win the game, though Railway should have equalised in the 89th minute. A long ball put Danny Hull in the clear, Goole keeper Lee Appleby blocked brilliantly with his legs and Railway's elusive winger Robert Youhill, 12 yards out, sent the rebound a foot wide.

Not, then, a great day. On returning home, however, footballing frustrations were put into perspective by news that two young twins had been seriously hurt in the multi-vehicle pile-up at Wilton roundabout. Here's wishing them a full and speedy recovery.

04/20