

**TT No.79: Andy Gallon** - Sat 29th December 2012; **Frickley Athletic v Kendal Town**; NPL Prem Division; Res: 2-1; Att: 208; Admission: £9; Programme: £1.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

Pondering my Christmases past, I'm starting to believe the sole purpose of festive football fixtures is to provide opportunities to revisit local and semi-local grounds hopped years ago. Unless you're a hopping ultra (and I'm not, frankly), chances are the seasonal triumvirate of having to play nicely with members of one's wider family, dodgy weather and busy motorways ensures 'close to home' is the order of the Yuletide sporting day. And, of course, we've all been to those grounds, haven't we? Every other Christmas (or thereabouts), I visit my partner's parents on the Surrey-Hampshire border. In theory, such trips open up swathes of virgin hopping territory, though invariably wintry weather keeps exploration to a minimum.

Some of which explains why I ended up at Westfield Lane, Frickley Athletic's home ground. I 'ticked' it twenty years ago, incidentally on the occasion Wayne Scargill (Arthur's nephew) made his Blues debut. For the umpteenth Saturday morning this season, I watched our neighbour's vegetable patches (for he has several) disappear inexorably beneath a lengthening row of puddles as the rain teemed down on York. There was never any point going far and I found an oddly perverse pleasure in noting the P-Ps flash up on the websites of the Northern Premier, Northern Counties East and Northern leagues. By noon, the choice had diminished to a handful of games.

I set sail (only just metaphorically) along the A64 and down the A1, targeting Frickley Athletic, with Maltby Main (a very late P-P, it transpired) and AFC Emley as back-ups. Frickley was my top selection because the match, a basement battle, had something on it for both teams. I couldn't get hold of anyone at Westfield Lane but, with the opposition being faraway Kendal Town and a 9.45am pitch inspection having been passed, I figured Frickley wouldn't have given their visitors the green light to travel without good reason. Despite a hiccup - a tense diversion through Pontefract, Badsworth and Upton enforced by a hideous southbound A1 queue near Ferrybridge - I arrived via a bumpy access lane at Westfield Lane with an hour to spare. Definitely on, was the verdict from the club stalwart manning the turnstiles. "It drains well does the pitch," I was informed. "We dunt get many games off 'ere." Hoppers take note.

I should say, at this point, there isn't actually a place called Frickley. The team, who were known until 1974 as Frickley Colliery, play in the former coal mining village of South Elmsall, marooned in a post-industrial no man's land between Wakefield and Doncaster. It's not a pretty place but with Christmas decorations scattered about looked rather less grim than I recalled from two previous visits to Westfield Lane. Frickley, formed in 1910, have an interesting history. When the neighbouring pit was operational, all miners contributed to the club's upkeep through a mandatory deduction from their wages. It meant Frickley had a bit of

money to spend and for seven years the club were members of the Alliance Premier League, predecessor of Conference National. Penury followed the pit's closure and since those halcyon days the 'Super Blues' have tumbled down the non-league pyramid. Margaret Thatcher, still reviled by all right thinkers who grew up (or grew old) in the North during the Seventies and Eighties, is held responsible for the loss of Frickley Colliery. Indeed, I hadn't been in the ground ten minutes before I heard the chap forking the pitch take in vain the name of the former Tory Prime Minister. Mind you, wanton destruction of one's community - and its entire *raison d'être* - is not easily forgotten or forgiven. Anyone care to sign my 'Get Well Slowly' card?

Let's move on to a happier subject: Westfield Lane. What a ground! The moment I pushed my way through the turnstile, I was glad I came. It is a wonderfully old-fashioned venue with a traditional grandstand and a strong sense of place. What Frickley have may not, in some eyes, be all that much but the club's fixtures and fittings are maintained lovingly. I've never seen so much white paint: even on the dullest afternoon, Westfield Lane sparkled like tinsel. In every respect, this bauble of a ground remains a grand stage. Though the official capacity may be less than 2,500 nowadays, it is easy to envisage how top-level non-league football was once played here. Little effort is required to picture the record 5,800 spectators who were shoehorned in for an FA Cup third-round tie against Rotherham United during the 1985-86 season.

The main stand is a sight for sore eyes. Opened by the president of the Midland League in September 1929, it was constructed by striking colliers and paid for using the Miners' Welfare Fund. A press cutting in the souvenir shop (run by an exiled Luton Town fan!) gives a fascinating account of the official opening. Its delightfully classical layout features numerous covered rows of bench seats above a terraced paddock, with a central players' tunnel protruding beyond a pitched roof supported by a spider's web of ironmongery. The view of the action from the seats is simply glorious. To the left of the main stand, past the turnstiles, is the ground's lively social club, whose outer wall is adorned with a colourful mural celebrating Frickley's 2010 centenary. Good to see miners playing a prominent role in the montage. The social club's exterior, along with the wall around the pitch and the ground's perimeter fence, is painted white.

For decades (likely since the club first played here), Westfield Lane has been dominated by a vast spoil heap towering over the popular side. It was the final resting place of any useless stuff spat out by the colliery, which rose equally majestically behind the right-hand goal, an area now given over to allotments. Since the pit's closure, the spoil heap has been landscaped and transformed into Frickley Country Park. "Lovely," according to the chap on the turnstile. The perspective of Westfield Lane from its grassy summit must be quite something. One day (one sunnier day), I shall take my camera for a walk up there. Cover on the popular side is provided by the rickety Frank Hill (a former groundsman) Stand. This timeworn structure deflects, bends and sways like a Friday night drunk staggering home with fish & chips from a heavy session in the miners' welfare.

Hopping porn, in other words. Both ends of the ground are open and exposed, with much of their extensive grass banking fenced off.

The area behind the Town End is to be transformed by the construction of new changing facilities and a function room, each intended for community use. Check out the details on [www.fafcredevelopment.weebly.com](http://www.fafcredevelopment.weebly.com). Frickley are busy raising their £50,000 share of the bill. A bucket collection (always rather forlorn, to my eyes) was made during the second half. It reminded me of a funny tale involving my Dad when we were regular attendees at Halifax Town home games. Bucket rattlers were a familiar sight inside The Shay and, at the start of one new season, Dad enquired: "Are we collecting for a new striker this year?" "No," came the poker-faced reply. "It's for a new bucket: this one's knackered."

I enjoyed this six-pointer as much as the surroundings: a welcome occurrence because, for whatever reason, I've witnessed some poor games this season. Frickley were fortunate to win on a pitch that became increasingly heavy during the second half. The writer of the match programme's 'Bluescene' notes remarked: "The second half of 2012 has been more enjoyable for Blues fans than the first six months, which included a budget cut, very few wins and a close shave with relegation, when only a last day win over Stafford Rangers saved our bacon. Since then we've seen some excellent performances at home. We just need to pick up points away from home now!" I'll say. Prior to kick-off, all twenty of Frickley's points had been secured at Westfield Lane. The team's travel sickness is so acute, their away record reads nine games, nine defeats.

Persistent morning rain ceased before kick-off and the surface, used also on Boxing Day for a last-gasp 3-2 defeat by high-flying North Ferriby United, was playable, if soft. Kendal went ahead in the 27th minute when Mason McGeechan raced onto a Tom Berwick long ball down the left channel and beat Tom Woodhead confidently in a one-on-one. Four minutes later, Frickley were level. Visiting keeper and skipper Craig Dootson was pulled up for a clumsy challenge on Gavin Allott and the big home striker banged in a well-hit penalty. Kendal missed a great chance to regain the lead in the 35th minute when Zach Clark's angled shot struck the inside of a post and rolled along the goal-line. A tight second half of markedly less quality ensued. The decisive goal came in the 70th minute. Allott, having been denied by Dootson when through, regained possession and gave impressive Jake Picton an opportunity to curl an 18-yard beauty into the top corner. Kendal pressed hard in the closing stages and squandered three good opportunities to equalise.

It's not often I recommend places to hoppers but Westfield Lane is a must-see. If every ground still looked like this, our hobby would be much more satisfying. Frickley, perennial strugglers in the Premier Division of the Northern Prem, appear to have the knack, year on year, of avoiding relegation. Let's hope they do so again this season. Westfield Lane does not deserve to drop any further.