

TT No.87: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 12th January 2013; **Lostock St Gerards** v Blackpool Wren Rovers; West Lancashire League Prem Division; Res: 3-5; Att: 50; Admission: £1; Programme: 50p (8pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Very few sports stadia are notable for eye-catching structures that lie beyond their boundaries: the Wateringpool Lane home of Lostock St Gerards is a notable example. This otherwise unremarkable venue is transformed by the presence, along its north touchline, of two vast gasometers, rusting leviathans that loom over the club's modest facilities. These gaunt twin towers were part of Lostock Hall Gas Works, which closed during the 1970s and was later demolished. Landowner National Grid plans to build 350 homes and a handful of shops on the resulting brownfield wasteland. The gasometers lived on after the works' closure and were not decommissioned until about three years ago. They now stand a third of their maximum height. Their fate remains undetermined. Apparently, they contain contaminated oil, and water, and Saints officials told me the cost of dismantling them might not be covered by their scrap value. It would be a shame if they disappeared. I'm sure residents (not just hoppers craving the extraordinary) would miss a feature of the district's skyline for decades.

The ground is midway between the Preston area villages of Lostock Hall (to the north) and Tardy Gate (to the south). It is approached via Wateringpool Lane. At least that's how the club spells it. The road sign announces Watering Pool Lane. Mind you, a side street is flagged up as St Gerrard's Road. And yet the football club is known as St Gerards. A conundrum for the local historian! Wateringpool Lane, a narrowing thoroughfare, is a dead end lined with red-brick semis. The ground lies immediately beyond the last of the houses in what, at present, is open country.

It's a tidy little set-up. Saints have played here since their formation shortly after the Second World War and bought the four-acre site in the mid-1980s. All the spectator accommodation is on the near, (south) touchline. This consists of several portable-type buildings set back from flagged hardstanding. Unusually, on match days the groundsman removes his motor mower from its garage so the space can be used to serve refreshments. The scruffy, flat-top buildings won't win any design awards, but painting them dark green lends a degree of uniformity. Trees behind the east end goal are an attractive feature and provide a strong contrast with the hulking gasometers. On the north touchline, there is barely room for a single line of spectators between the pitch barrier and these astonishing industrial relics. Yards of spare turf behind the west end goal leads to a fairly new housing estate. Substantial dug-outs face each other across the halfway line. Wateringpool Lane lacks any further hardstanding, and has neither cover nor floodlights, but is undeniably quirky. So many grounds fade quickly from the hopper's memory. This one will take some forgetting.

To quote club stalwart Tom Watson, a former player who now acts as president, groundsman, collector of gate money and seller of programmes, Lostock St Gerards

are finding this season a struggle. Their manager set the tone by taking himself off on a four-week holiday just as the season began. Players drifted away and defeat followed defeat. Going into this fixture with high-flying Blackpool Wren Rovers, Saints, having to fail to win any of 16 West Lancashire League outings, lay second from bottom of the Premier Division. Not so much flirting with relegation as giving serious consideration to a cohabiting arrangement. Action was taken towards the end of December and Mike Faulkner recruited from the coaching staff at neighbours Bamber Bridge. Having started with a 4-3 defeat at Eagley the previous Saturday, this was the manager's home debut. Quite by accident, we fell into conversation before kick-off as I took photos. He said he'd brought in some new players and seemed confident of turning round the team's fortunes. But, then, he would say that, wouldn't he?

Judging by this performance, his priority must be sorting out the defence. Saints were shambolic at the back. Failing to mark and getting pulled out of position is schoolboy stuff. This wasn't the thriller the score suggests. Wren Rovers led 3-0 at half-time to put the outcome beyond debate. The visitors scored in the 16th, 26th and 41st minutes, with striker Jack Sharples getting the first and third, and Ben Duffield the second. All three goals resulted from abysmal marking. In yards of space, how does one miss? An unmarked Chris Corless made it 4-0 in the 55th minute before an own goal on the hour got Saints on the scoreboard. With 18 minutes left, Tyler Attack moved Wrens out to 5-1. Two goals in the last six minutes, both to impressive Saints winger Danny Gerrard, gave the score a misleading impression. In the 84th minute, Gerrard contributed the goal of the game, firing in from 25 yards after spotting Wrens keeper Kevin Kennerley off his line, and with a minute to go netted again, this time from the penalty spot. But defeat, coupled with Burnley United's 1-0 home win over Tempest United, sent Saints to the foot of the table. Wren Rovers, by contrast, are in a three-way battle for the title with Charnock Richard and Longridge Town.

One other sports stadium close to a prominent gasometer that springs to mind is Blackpool Borough RLFC's old Borough Park ground. Fans of the BBC's defunct Grandstand programme might recall it featuring on Saturday afternoon broadcasts during the Eddie Waring era. Neither ground nor club (or even Eddie) are with us today, but it dawned on me that Blackpool Wren Rovers, then in the North West Counties League, used Borough Park for a single season after the departure of the rugby league club, who were unable to pay for safety improvements deemed necessary by local authority zealots. No wonder the Wrens felt so at home in the shadow of Lostock St Gerards' twin towers!