

**TT No.89: *Mike Latham*** - Sat 19th January 2013: West Lancashire League Division 1: **Hawcoat Park** 0-1 Norcross & Warbreck; Attendance: 80 (h/c); No admission or programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

The West Lancashire League has an excellent website and Twitter feed, which was invaluable on a day such as this with widespread postponements due to the snow and ice.

The entire NPL and NCEL fixtures were postponed, evidence of the widespread treacherous conditions throughout the North of England. But, remarkably, two games survived in the West Lancashire League, at Hawcoat Park and Fulwood Amateurs with the league's website and Twitter feed confirming that these were both definitely on.

It was with some trepidation I headed west from J36 of the M6 towards Barrow-in-Furness. After all, if the game was postponed late there was no Plan B, literally no-where else to go. I wrestled with the option of driving farther north to watch Mid-Annandale on the artificial pitch at Annan with Queen of the South as back-up, but as they both would have been re-visits I decided to see if fortune favoured the brave. Luckily, I was vindicated.

Barrow is an incredibly sports-mad town with the town's football club in the Conference, the RL side in the Championship and several rugby league, union and cricket clubs in the vicinity. Cumberland CCC play two county cricket games here during the summer at Barrow CC's Ernest Pass Memorial Ground and at Furness CC's Oxford Street ground, the latter a stone's throw from today's destination. Several Barrow-based clubs compete in the West Lancashire League while Holker Old Boys play in the NWCL. There is also a Furness & District Football League.

Hawcoat Park is a multi-sports complex located on Hawcoat Lane just off Abbey Road, the main road that leads into the centre of Barrow, turning right at the traffic lights opposite the Strawberry, an iconic local pub. The complex was formerly the sports ground for the employees of the Vickers (later BAE) shipyard. These days the site is leased and known as Hawcoat Park Sports and Social Club and is an independent voluntary organization, whose aim is to encourage active participation by local people of all ages in a wide variety of recreational activities.

The 15-acre site provides for a diverse range of team and individual sports including cricket, rugby, football, tennis, bowls, table tennis, archery and rifle/pistol shooting while a junior brass band is also based here. The cricket team have been members of the North Lancashire & Cumbria League since 1931 and the cricket ground has staged several Higson Cup finals in the past, some in the immediate post war years attracting crowds of two or three thousand. The hall and bar areas provide valuable social facilities. The site maintenance is the club's responsibility.

It was dry but bitterly cold in Barrow, a biting wind adding to the chill. The Hawcoat Park complex is an impressive one and it was reassuring to see both teams warming up on the football pitch on the far side of the cricket ground. The ground was firm, hard in places but both sides wanted to play and the referee did well to get the game underway. Yet despite this the rugby team had their game against their Penrith visitors called-off due to the hard ground. I've been at plenty football grounds where games have been called off under similar conditions but the decision to play was a perfectly sensible one. As someone observed, the ground is often harder in early and late season.

Facilities for the spectators were minimal with a small shelter in the corner of the banking behind one goal providing welcome respite from the wind. With no other sports events taking place in the area the crowd swelled to around the 80-mark by kick-off time with more joining the action as the afternoon unfolded. Surprisingly no attempt was made to take a gate or collect a raffle and though a children's party was taking place in the club house the kitchen was shut, so no hot drinks to ward off the cold.

On paper the game looked like being a stroll for the Fylde-based visitors who had won all 13 of their previous league games this season while the home side were third bottom of the table. In the event just one goal separated the sides and that scored in the tenth minute. The home side had arguably the better of the second half and on balance of play deserved a share of the spoils. In truth it was far from a classic and there was an undercurrent of niggles throughout, but those present, especially several groundhoppers, some of whom had travelled even further than me were just glad to get in a game at an interesting venue. Thanks again to the league for providing such a superb information service.

04/20