

**TT No.9: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 18th August 2012; **Oxenhope Recreation** v Ripon City; WYL Prem Division; Res: 4-2; Attendance: 80; Admission: Free; Programme: £2 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

Oxenhope Recreation have been on the periphery of my hopping radar for ages. I managed to live three years within a couple of miles of this Bronte Country village without even locating their ground. At the time, the late Nineties, the club were in the Craven League, then a competition beneath my notice. I had plenty of grounds to be 'ticking' without dropping to such depths! Four years ago, Oxenhope secured a place in the West Yorkshire League (very much among my 'target' leagues) and in 2011 won promotion to its Premier Division. They finished mid-table last season and lifted the Keighley Cup for the first time in 46 years, beating Cross Hills in a final yielding 11 goals. Unfortunately, Oxenhope's time in the WYL has been spent exiled at Marley Playing Fields in nearby Keighley because the Recreation Ground's 'Top Pitch', with its eye-popping end-to-end slope, did not meet the league's requirements.

Well, the long exile is over. A fantastic effort has seen the 'Bottom Pitch' transformed. Its surface was flattened (though not completely) and widened, and new drains installed. Dug-outs and perimeter fencing were erected. The clubhouse and dressing rooms also got a makeover, with a new hot water system, heating and lighting. A bill of £35,000 was met by the club, with assistance from the Football Foundation, Bradford Metropolitan District Council and Oxenhope Parish Council. WYL inspectors gave the revamped facilities the thumbs-up and Manchester United and England midfielder Tom Cleverley, a Bradford resident, officially opened them in June. He spent two hours posing for photographs and signing autographs. Good lad!

All this activity, I'm afraid, passed me by. But I learned, a couple of days before the weekend, that Oxenhope were playing their first competitive game on the ground - and producing a special programme to mark the occasion. Regular issues are planned. It was too good an opportunity to miss. So, armed with directions from Keighley football expert Rob Grillo, I headed for the Recreation Ground and the re-named Centenary Pitch. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the club's formation.

I was not disappointed. The ground, in a gloriously scenic setting, looks a picture. Villagers responded, too, and the crowd (swelled by several familiar faces from the hopping fraternity) was more than double Oxenhope's attendances at Marley. The ground is accessed by a hard-to-spot tarmac drive off the A6033, just before the back road (Shaw Lane) to Stanbury. I approached the junction, braked and cast a quizzical glance over my options. In the direction of my open window, a woman with a dog interjected: "Before you ask, it's down there." Smiling at my surprised expression, she added: "The football. You're the sixth person in the last 15 minutes to ask where it is!" The drive leads to a car park alongside the 'Top

Pitch', whose slope is believed only when seen. A cricket ground, a picturesque enclosure, is adjacent. Further along the drive, the clubhouse (complete with archive photographs) and dressing rooms can be found in a substantial stone building. Keep descending, and the Centenary Pitch comes into view. Highlight of its enormously attractive setting in the valley of the Bridgehouse Beck is a backdrop of Penistone Hill and the hamlet of Marsh.

Three key points to make. Spectator accommodation is limited. The north end and west side are virtually out of bounds. To access the latter requires crossing the pitch. Having obtained permission to do so, I was astonished by how sodden the surface was. I fear Oxenhope could suffer numerous postponements once the winter weather arrives. The drains may be new, but I guess the natural flow of water will always be down the hill and onto the Centenary Pitch. Despite the club, after much negotiation, having bought some land from a farmer, the pitch is very small. I was told its dimensions are the minimum allowed by the WYL. But let's not be churlish. This is a great place to watch football (especially on a sunny summer afternoon) and Oxenhope are rightly proud of what has been achieved.

Best vantage point, to observe both action and scenery is the banking at the south end. Its height provides an indication of how much levelling work was required. Most spectators used (and will use) the east side, where there is a strip of hardstanding with a bowling green beyond. The sturdy perimeter fence features an ornate 1912-2012 centenary gate, allowing access to the pitch. The stone dug-outs are opposite, in the centre of a west touchline fringed with trees. Look through the foliage for a glimpse of the valley tapering towards its head. The Lancashire border is just out of sight.

An exciting game ensued and provided me with another glut of goals. Oxenhope led twice during the first half, but Ripon pegged them back for a 2-2 interval score. The hosts edged ahead soon after the restart from the penalty spot and, despite having a player sent off for a second bookable offence, made it 4-2 with 19 minutes remaining. Ripon had plenty of chances to close the gap, but lacked composure when it was needed most. In common with many WYL games, it was a fiercely competitive encounter, featuring several rather reckless challenges.

At the start of the second half, Rob Grillo, having tracked me down, introduced himself and inadvertently provided a highlight of the day. He has detailed the history of Keighley football in several excellent books, and I happened to mention my late father played for a team in the Craven League near the end of his career. We lived in Keighley from 1963 to 1969, and I was born there in 1965. Rob asked which team, and - conjuror fashion - flicked through the pages of his latest book to reveal a 1966 team photograph of Prince Smiths. Dad was the team's captain and star performer, and there he was, in the middle of the front row, proudly displaying three trophies. Rob agreed to email a scan of the shot and it was waiting for me on returning home to York. Super service!

The Centenary Pitch should be on every hopper's radar this season. Just make sure you visit on a clear, dry day to avoid those dreaded postponement anxieties and guarantee witnessing the Bronte Country landscape at its finest.

04/20