

TT No.96: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 2nd February 2013; **Clipstone Welfare v Teversal**; NCEL Division One; Res: 0-2; Att: 60; Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Little changes in Clipstone: least of all the arguments about the former village colliery's Grade II listed headstocks, at 220ft the tallest in Europe. The debate over the hulks' future was raging a decade ago on my last visit to this post-industrial corner of Nottinghamshire - and still the matter is unresolved. Put simply, the heritage lobby wants to retain the gaunt twin towers as a monument (or something) to the county's industrial past, whilst the locals living in their considerable shadow would be thrilled to see them brought crashing to the ground. A recent inspection of the decaying structures indicated almost £10m is required to make them safe. "You can put a fist through the metal it's in such a bad state," one chap told me. Villagers, most of whom voted for demolition on the two occasions their opinion was sought, are understandably aghast.

Surely, in a community as badly hit as Clipstone by our apparently endless recession, a sum of this magnitude could be better spent? Most locals, I was informed, would like the site to be used for the construction of a health centre or new houses. The latter option is especially favoured because it would help breathe fresh life (literally) into an increasingly moribund community. Dreary Clipstone - by that I mean the settlement named 'New' rather than the more affluent neighbouring 'King's' - is on its uppers, struggling to survive in a changing world and desperate to discover the sense of purpose (not to mention up to 1,000 jobs) lost since the last shift trudged away from the pit in 2003. I gather even the miners' welfare faces a battle to keep its head above water: presumably because there are no longer any miners and everyone's on welfare.

I like industrial heritage, but would say this: it is easy to romanticise the coal industry when you haven't spent a lifetime developing emphysema in sweaty semi-darkness deeper below ground than any sensible individual would consider going. You don't come across many miners who miss the old days. Yes, they remember with fondness the esprit de corps, but the work? Absolutely not! Clipstone doesn't need a (so-called) tourist attraction of limited appeal: it needs decent employment opportunities and a future brighter than cradle-to-grave subsistence.

Having stopped off en route to Clipstone Welfare's Lido Ground to photograph the headstocks (impressive, no doubt about that), I mentioned them to the fella manning the pay hut. And stood back as he launched into a ten-minute diatribe about why they had to go. I heard the same thing from the next chap I spoke to. A final decision on the headstocks is to be announced very soon. If the villagers get their way and the wrecking ball swings, I wonder what they'll find to talk about?

I'm rambling on because I haven't got much to say about the game, which was unspeakably dire. Unfortunately, most of the football I've witnessed this season

has been rubbish. Thank goodness I spent the morning and early afternoon indulging one of my other hobbies (more rewarding, frankly, and less expensive), otherwise the day would have been a write-off. Some hoppers are of the view (mistaken, I'd suggest) that there's a vast latent market out there, waiting to discover the joys of non-league football. Any Football League fan, or football first-timer, would have been horrified by this dross - and never seen again.

But let's start with the facilities. The Lido Ground isn't in New Clipstone at all: it's so far west of the centre, it falls into Mansfield, a singularly unpleasant fate as anyone who has been to the town will testify. Located next to the busy main road through the village, the ground, home to Clipstone Welfare since the mid-1950s, is pretty basic and fairly charmless. A bumpy, bendy lane provides access to a compacted paddock behind the west end goal that serves as parking. Alongside the wooden pay hut is an untidy stack of blue and amber seats: late of Field Mill, Mansfield, I imagine. Once he'd finished telling me about the headstocks, the turnstile guy turned his attention to the difficulties of attracting volunteer labour. "Nobody'll, do anything for nothing, these days," he commented, wistfully.

Of course, lack of sufficient willing hands is a major problem for clubs the size of Clipstone: in essence, too few really care, although there's no gainsaying the wholehearted commitment of those who do. A glance at the spectators said it all: getting on a bit and almost half the tiny crowd from Teversal. Having been to the Lido Ground during the club's Central Midlands League days, I was rather surprised 'Clipo' opted to join the higher Northern Counties East League this season. It must be tough for the handful of dedicated officials who keep the show on the road. Their numbers have been swelled, however, by the arrival in the last week of Brett Marshall and Dave Paling, who have agreed, respectively, to take on the role of chairman and vice-chairman. Rather ominously, the duo's most recent port of call was ill-starred Northern Premier Leaguers Hucknall Town.

Half the space at the west end is occupied by an untidy collection of flat-roofed structures housing the dressing rooms, a VIP hospitality area, lounge-cum-kitchen and toilets. Rather good display of team photographs in the lounge. Behind the goal is a simple cover sheltering hardstanding and a solitary line of ex-Mansfield Town seats. Two-thirds of the north side offers covered accommodation and a small stand boasts a couple of rows of white plastic tip-up seats. The club's name is displayed on its fascia. The other third - and the grass bank at the east end - is out of bounds. A cricket pitch, at a slightly higher level, occupies the plot behind the stand. Red-brick council semis loom over the east end goal. The pitch slopes downhill towards the south side, which has a little more space, dug-outs and hardstanding. Netting suspended from poles ensures vigorous clearances do not terrorise passing motorists. The floodlights are mounted on masts, with four strung out along each touchline. From the main stand, a landscaped spoil heap (now a country park) fills the southern horizon.

Back to the game, a Notts derby (if you see what I mean). Here's the equation: bumpy pitch + nagging wind + biting cold + step six players = lousy football. To describe the match as scrappy would be an understatement. Appositely, it was

decided by two scruffy goals, in the 28th and 72nd minutes. They were almost identical. Corners from the left, Clipstone incapable of clearing their lines, and central defender Jamie Goodacre (to his obvious surprise) forcing the ball home from close range amid a melee of arms and legs. With better finishing, Teversal would have won by four or five. I cannot recall Clipstone, six games unbeaten and now nicknamed the Cobras following a recent poll of fans, mustering a single effort on target. To my amazement, Teversal fielded three ludicrously overweight players. Tevie Tubbies, as it were. I've never rated the playing standards in the bottom division of the Northern Counties East League and none of what I witnessed at the Lido Ground did anything to persuade me it's a better competition than I thought.

Spring, thankfully, is on its way. For the first time since mid-November, floodlights were not required for a match kicking-off at 3pm. Already, I'm looking forward to the end of the season and a more productive way of spending my Saturday afternoons. One day, perhaps, I'll return to Clipstone to admire its award-winning colliery museum. Somehow, though, I doubt it will happen - and maybe that is for the best.

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