

**TT No.99: Andy Gallon** - Sat 9th February 2013; Spennymoor Town v Bemerton Heath Harlequins; FA Vase Fifth Rd; Res: 4-2; Att: 398; Admission: £6; Programme: £1 (28pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*\*.

Few issues in non-league football arouse as much emotion as Northern League clubs' unwillingness to accept promotion to the next step of the pyramid. I've never understood this antipathy towards the geographically isolated North East teams because there are two starkly compelling reasons for them staying put.

First: money. It simply doesn't make financial sense for them to join Northern Premier League Division One North, many of whose clubs are very poorly supported. Take, for example, Spennymoor Town, the reigning Northern League champions. Their average gate in the Northern League, noted for its derbies, is about 300. Travelling expenses, incurred by trips no further north than Northumberland and no further south than North Yorkshire, are bearable. What would be the point of Moors saddling themselves with, say, costly away fixtures at faraway clubs such as Cammell Laird, Goole Town, Ossett Albion/Town, Prescot Cables and Wakefield, where the attendances fail frequently to reach three figures? As things stand, Spennymoor's nearest NPL derbies would be Garforth Town (last home attendance: 107) and Harrogate Railway Athletic (last home attendance: 90). You get proportionately fewer coming in the opposite direction, too. The recent experience of my own team, FC Halifax Town, playing NPL football was proof positive that most clubs have, at best, a handful of travelling fans.

Second: playing standards. The First Division of the Northern League produces a far superior quality of football to its Northern Premier League equivalent, which, in my opinion, is Northern Counties East/North West Counties league stuff by another name.

So, if a Northern League club were to join the NPL, the likely outcome would be weaker opposition, poorer games, smaller crowds (both home and away) and hugely increased travelling expenses. Also, and this is a very big also, it would be excluded from the FA Vase and obliged to compete against much bigger clubs in the FA Trophy. I suspect the FA Vase is the root cause of the frustration felt towards Northern League clubs by followers of teams in other competitions. To some extent, I can sympathise. The Northern League has dominated the Vase in recent years. When Whitley Bay, apparently content to keep snubbing promotion to the NPL, lifted the handsome trophy three times on the trot between 2009 and 2011, the bull was given a face full of red rag. You hear comments such as: "They're happy to trail around the country when decent prize money is at stake." My answer would be: "Well, they're not daft, then, are they?"

But is it really sensible for Northern League clubs to put their very existence in jeopardy with over-ambitious attempts to climb the pyramid? Recent history is littered with those who got their fingers burnt trying. Newcastle Blue Star and

Spennymoor United (Town's predecessors) went out of business; Bishop Auckland, Durham City and Whitley Bay soon realised the sums didn't add up; only Blyth Spartans (relatively well supported) and Whitby Town (much closer to the North's central belt) have made a sustained go of it.

It came as a surprise, therefore, to be told Spennymoor Town are giving serious consideration to moving up to the NPL next season - if the opportunity arises. Moors have good financial backing now and their ground, the Brewery Field, has never looked better. It's seven years since my last visit, and the place has been transformed. In recent months, chairman Brad Groves has overseen the spending of £100,000 on improvements. The week before this fifth-round FA Vase tie, new floodlights were erected. The ground is impressively spick and span: terracing and stands revitalised; fresh paint everywhere. In short, an asset to any league.

There's more to come. Planners have given Spennymoor the go-ahead to build a £300,000 community clubhouse. It will replace the original, gutted by fire on Christmas Day, 2003. Located at the south (near) end of the ground, bounded by Wood Vue and Allotment Gardens, the two-storey structure will have a clubroom, kitchen and 150-seat function room. The project includes the provision of terrace cover at this end of the Brewery Field. Chairman Groves is looking to raise the money to pay for the clubhouse through two forms of investment: buying a share (£1,000) or taking out life membership (£300). After an initial two-year period, operating profits from the clubhouse would be split 50/50 between the football club and investor members.

I headed to Spennymoor because (a) I was full of cold and CBA to go far, (b) the weather forecast for County Durham was excellent, and (c) I like the FA Vase. It proved a rewarding decision. The game, taking place on a perfect cool, still and dry afternoon, was a humdinger. Moors played some lovely passing football, and the visitors from the Wessex League were no mugs, either. You can tell the Brewery Field regulars are accustomed to watching decent football by the way, in unison, they tut or mutter 'howay' at the sort of mistakes that wouldn't warrant comment elsewhere because they occur so frequently. Misplaced passes were few and far between - but I cannot recall a single one going unremarked.

Bemerton Heath began like men possessed. Playing down the considerable slope, they forced two quick corners and when the second wasn't cleared Danny Young looped a header over Moors keeper Robert Dean. Just two minutes gone. No panic from Spennymoor, who went about their business with the calm authority of any worker confident in his ability. Superb passing movements enabled Mark Davidson (17min) to equalise and Craig Ruddy (25min) to make it 2-1. Heath weren't finished and Kane O'Keefe smashed in a fine half-volley in the 54th minute. But the hosts were a little more accomplished, and Gavin Cogdon restored their lead on the hour. The visitors continued to look dangerous on the break and a second Davidson goal (87min) was required to kill their challenge.

The quality of the football and the warmth of the welcome make the Northern League an enduring pleasure. And right there is another reason for clubs being

reluctant to leave it. At the risk of sounding cheesy, the Northern League is very much one big family. I'm always impressed by the manner in which its clubs help each other out in moments of crisis or distress. Other leagues, I suspect, do not offer that same closeness - that bond. I well recall how overjoyed Penrith were to return to the Northern League, their spiritual home, after several years' exile in the North West Counties League. Family ties aren't easily broken, are they?

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