

TT No.5: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 10th August 2013; **Shaw Lane Aquaforce** v Appleby Frodingham; NCEL Div. One; Res: 2-0; Att: 198; Admission: £4; Programme: £1.50 (12pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

THE HOP: Barnsley is nobody's idea of a must-see destination, especially in summer, but I like to keep up with comings and goings in the Northern Counties East League and this was the earliest opportunity to tick off newcomers Shaw Lane Aquaforce. At least the ground's location, close to junction 37 of the M1, means there is no requirement for drivers to visit the notoriously ghastly town centre. Barnsley, ever forlorn, would run close in an Armpit of Yorkshire ugliness contest similarly dreary dumps such as Batley, Doncaster, Middlesbrough and Rotherham.

THE CLUB: Going places. Shaw Lane, the 2012-13 Sheffield County Senior League champions, are extremely well funded. By NCEL standards, the Ducks have assembled an expensive team under new manager Simon Houghton, who was in charge at this level last season with Athersley Recreation. More than 20 teams, serving men, women, boys and girls, play under the Shaw Lane banner. The club were set up in 2008 by chairman Craig Wood, owner of Barnsley firm Aquaforce Plumbing Solutions. Incidentally, the fairly recent use of 'Solutions' in this context is one of the most ridiculous aspects of the modern English language and gets right up my nose. Such daftness could easily result in a water supplier being dubbed Solution Solutions. It's plumbing, for heaven's sake! Nothing more and nothing less. Shaw Lane played initially in the South Yorkshire Amateur League. Progress into - and through - the Sheffield County Senior League was rapid. This season, after losing just one league game during 2012-13, they've joined the big boys. Wood concluded his programme notes by outlining an ambitious vision. "We are a non-league football club and six promotions from the Football League, but with your help and support, who knows where we can take it."

THE GROUND: Shaw Lane Stadium is actually home to Barnsley RUFC, a venue I visited a couple of seasons ago for a kick-and-clap derby fixture of mind-numbing tedium. The football club are tenants and had to move here during the summer because their own ground nearby failed to meet NCEL requirements. The hopping cognoscenti will tell you that Shaw Lane should have been denied promotion, because they did not have the necessary facilities in place before the grading deadline, and neighbours Penistone Church promoted in their place. I asked the gateman about this and he suggested Penistone's unsuccessful appeal to the FA over Shaw Lane's elevation was based purely on jealousy. Whatever its rights and wrongs, the argument has left a bad taste in some mouths.

It's not really a stadium, though the facilities are well above average for NCEL Division One. The sole stand, a modern cantilever-type structure, is on the west touchline and won't win any design awards; or many accolades for functionality. Its roof is too shallow to provide proper protection from the elements for those perched on four rows of red and blue (the rugby union club's colours) plastic tip-up

seats. Behind the seats is a hospitality room, which though amply glazed is rather spartan and could be used much better. Opposite is a long, low building housing the dressing rooms. This area, along with the north end of the ground, redeveloped since my previous visit, is out of bounds. The rest of the spectator accommodation is uncovered hardstanding. Unusually for a club at this level of rugby union (Barnsley play in Yorkshire Two), the ground has floodlights.

Shaw Lane Stadium is part of a 15-acre multi-sport complex for community use. Coming up the access drive towards the car park, one passes the well-appointed ground of Barnsley Cricket Club. A second XI match was in progress when I arrived. It being cricket, scarcely anybody was watching. The handful of spectators appeared to be dozing in the humid weather. Even in Barnsley, hometown of umpiring legend Dickie 'Blub on Demand' Bird, the dullest of sports is incapable of enticing an audience. It's strange that I used to enjoy playing cricket (not to any great standard) but cannot watch more than three or four overs at one sitting. Shaw Lane Community Sports Association has transformed the site over the last decade, and it also now caters for athletics, squash and tennis. A £1.2m community room, where football attendees can obtain refreshments, is the jewel in the complex's crown.

THE PEOPLE: Even fellow Yorkshiremen regard Barnsley-ites as a bit odd. The accent is as impenetrable and baffling as the local culture. Judging by the crowd at the game, producing children during one's teenage years is de rigueur in this neck of the woods. Along with tattoos and obesity. I cannot imagine two words less likely to be conjoined than 'cosmopolitan' and 'Barnsley'. Thank goodness my parents came from Sheffield, by comparison a haven of sophistication.

THE GAME: Not great. To be honest, I was bored by half-time. Shaw Lane were several classes above Scunthorpe-based Appleby Frodingham, who's recent on-the-field struggles look likely to continue. Sadly, the inept visitors were typical of the hoof-ball teams that populate the lower reaches of the NCEL. After a while, even their frustrated technical area dwellers lapsed into embarrassed silence. Advice was futile. The goals, both superb, seemed out of place amid the frenetic shapelessness of this opening-day contest. Ashley Flynn crashed home the opener from 25 yards after seven minutes and shortly before the half-hour an unmarked Danny Frost found the top corner with a shot on the turn inside the box. Shaw Lane later hit crossbar and post whilst App-Frod mustered just one real chance, fluffed badly by a substitute. I'll be surprised if Shaw Lane do not earn promotion to the Premier Division at the first time of asking.

THE PROGRAMME: A slim offering representing poor value for money. Glossy and colourful, yes, but short on interesting content. Perhaps the editor will find more to insert as the season progresses and there is something to reflect upon.

THE VERDICT: Always glad to leave Barnsley. This occasion was no exception.