

TT No.51: Mike Latham - Sat 28 December 2013; **Blaenau Amateurs 4-3**
Penmaenmawr Phoenix; Lock Stock Welsh Alliance D2; Attendance: 70 (h/c);
Admission: £2; Bacon roll & mug of tea: £1.90; FGIF Match Rating: 5*.

I'd long had a visit Blaenau Ffestiniog inked in on my 'must-do' football grounds and finally managed it. It was wonderful- one of the reasons we all go groundhopping- for, on a glorious afternoon in Snowdonia, I saw a fabulous match amidst stunning scenery and the locals were friendly. After heavy overnight rain locally I 'phoned the home secretary on the morning of the game and he was most pleasant and helpful, confirming the game was definitely on. I must mention, too, Ronald Bridges who runs the league website- a hive of information- so well.

Phoenix were 2-0 up early on but the home side rallied to lead 3-2 at half-time. The visitors levelled 20 minutes from time but the winning goal was fit for a King, a sublime left-footed volley from their no11 to convert a right-wing cross. The referee must have enjoyed the game, as did we all, by playing nearly ten minutes added time, a rare occurrence in Welsh football in my experience but there were no more goals.

Cae Clyd is approached up a narrow road opposite the Wynnes Arms on the A570 going south out of the town. There is a good car park just after the ground on the right-hand side. The long, covered stand that used to dominate the ground has now been demolished and there is a small cover and a tea bar from where fabulous bacon rolls were dispensed. With sweeping views this is as good a reason as any to go groundhopping. I thought it was fantastic.

Blaenau Ffestiniog is a historic slate mining town in Gwynedd though its population has declined from a peak of 12,000 to under 5,000 these days. Tourism now forms an important part of the economy with local attractions such as the Ffestiniog Railway and the Llechwedd Slate Caverns.

Football in these parts dates back to the 1880s with various local sides featuring in the archives. Just after the First World War Blaenau Ffestiniog FC became one of the most powerful clubs in North Wales and other sides known as Town, Blue Stars, Juniors and Athletic have represented the town.

The current Blaenau Amateurs side was formed in 1980 after a reaction by locals against the previous club's policy of hiring semi-professional players from the Liverpool or Wrexham areas to form the basis of their side. Having experienced a few ups and downs since the club entered the Welsh Alliance in 2009.

One of my favourite players of all time was born here; former Bolton Wanderers goalkeeper Dave Felgate won a Welsh cap against Romania but was unlucky to be the understudy to the great Neville Southall for much of his career. Felgate made exactly 300 appearances for Wanderers in league and cup games and also represented Lincoln City and Rochdale amongst others with distinction. In the

twilight of his career in the late 1980s he played for Leigh (formerly Horwich) RMI during their Conference days and famously played a starring role in RMI's draw at Fulham in an FA Cup-tie with then Fulham manager Kevin Keegan describing his display as the best he had ever seen from a goalkeeper.

The Cae Clyd ground must be one of the few flat areas around the town; the playing pitch has clearly been drained and though conditions were heavy after the recent rainfall the conditions were fine. Players from both sides played the game as if their lives depended on it but there was plenty of good humour as well and the bespectacled referee and his two senior linesmen kept a wary eye on proceedings.

The locals, who turned up in good numbers- though the attendance of 125 quoted on the official league website looked a trifle optimistic- and their joy was unconfined when a fiercely fought but hugely enjoyable game came to a conclusion. Visits to clubs such as this are reasons why we become groundhoppers. It was one of my best days out watching football.

04/20