

**TT No.56: *Mike Latham*** - Sat 11 January 2014: Northern League Division 1: **Billingham Town 0-7 Spennymoor Town**; Attendance: 250 (est.); Admission: £6; Programme: £1; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match rating: 4\*.

It's never nice to visit a club down on their luck and Billingham Town certainly fit that category at the present time. Formed in 1967 and members of the Northern League since 1982 they've been in the top flight since 1998, but this season has been one long problem after another.

They went into this game, against the current FA Vase holders and title challengers on the back of a 9-0 home defeat in midweek and with one win and three points from 29 league games and a goals difference of minus 121.

Their most famous ex-player is the former Middlesbrough and Manchester United defender Gary Pallister who went on to win many England caps. How they could do with someone of Pallister's defensive abilities just now.

But first sight doesn't give the impression of a club at its lowest ebb. They clearly have a hard-working committee who keep the ground and infrastructure around the club in good order, despite happenings on the pitch. Their Bedford Terrace ground is well maintained, looks neat and tidy and is a classic Northern League ground, with lots of room to walk around and boasts a superbly maintained playing area- one of the best in the league.

There's a smart cantilevered main stand which helps shelters the spectators from the increasing winter chill and a neat covered standing area opposite. The tea bar is up and running and there's an excellent programme. The tannoy announcer goes about his business efficiently and the team themselves go about their pre-match warm-up in a disciplined fashion and look smart and presentable.

Then the game starts and the visitors- a superbly organized and ruthless-looking side, even though they're attired in an unusual pink strip- go about their task in a fashion that suggests the home side could be in for a hard afternoon- again. Moors pass the ball crisply on the immaculate playing surface and the home side is soon chasing shadows. Moors supporters form the vast bulk of the attendance on a gloriously bright, but cold afternoon and the strong setting sun causes viewing problems for those who have chosen to stand on the far side, backing on to the railway track.

In no time at all Moors are two-up and their swift pass and move style of football exposes flaws in the home defence. By half-time it's 6-0 with two separate players having achieved hat-tricks.

But there's no crowing from the visiting fans- they watch the game intently, give encouragement to their favourites but to the home side as well when the 'keeper makes a fine save or one of their hard-pressed centre-backs makes a good challenge or interception. It reminds me that no matter how hard and competitive

the Northern League is, it's still a family league where the league is only as strong as its member parts, including the weaker parts. It wasn't long ago that Moors went into abeyance, leaving the Northern Premier League and regrouping in the Northern League. Maybe because of this their fans are reflective, non-demonstrative and respectful, a credit to their club and the league.

When two corner floodlight pylons fail to flicker into life in the gathering gloom on the resumption the Moors faithful are briefly worried- but just as darkness deepens the panic is over and full light restored. When Moors go 7-0 up early in the second half a calamitous home defeat looks on the cards. But Billy Town keep on playing, the visitors miss a penalty and despite creating a host more chances- ironically more than in the first-half- the score stays at seven. Without meaning to appear condescending the home side earns plenty of plaudits for keep playing football. Their young no6 in particular makes several fine defensive contributions and the referee compliments the action with a sensible display, leaving his yellow cards in his pocket.

Billingham is an industrial town, dominated by the local chemical industry. Their local rivals are located nearby, Billingham Synthonia's floodlights easily visible in the near distance. Town's ground is not the easiest to locate, being at the far end of a housing estate with the narrow roads crammed by parked cars. But once the maze of narrow residential streets is negotiated the reward is to find a lovely ground where the heartbeat of football still beats strongly despite poor current results.

The Northern League is celebrating its 125th year- they have several celebrations in progress including the issue of a simply marvellous full-colour brochure, Northern Conquest, masterminded by Chairman Mike Amos and his son Owen. They have the Northern League Club, the best value subscription for football information around- a modest £10 contribution opening the door to a regular influx of top quality reading material from the prolific pens and keyboards of the brilliantly-gifted Amos and his trusty helpers Martin and Denise Haworth, who are unsung heroes of the highest order.

At first sight a 0-7 home defeat sounds a pretty depressing and routine game for a team down on its luck. Far from it- Billingham Town, I'm sure will bounce back and the Northern League will continue to go from strength to strength. As I drove home I reflected that this was level 5 of the non-League pyramid- hard to imagine as the standard of play seems far higher than that.

04/20