

TT No.69: *Mike Latham* - Sat 15 February 2014: Welsh Trophy Round 6: **Chirk AAA** 9-0 Penlan Club (Swansea); Attendance: 140 (est.); Admission: £1 including 24pp programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

On the day that English football bade farewell to an icon, after the passing of Preston North End and England great Tom Finney (and what a superb job BBC5Live did on covering the emotional events at Deepdale) I journeyed to the home of a Welsh footballing great.

Billy Meredith was born in Chirk in 1874 and worked as a miner when he was just twelve years old. His breath-taking skills soon attracted the attention of leading English clubs and he went on to enjoy an honour-laden and controversy-filled 30-year career, making over 300 appearances for both Manchester City and United and inspiring both clubs to their first League and Cup successes.

Unlike Finney, Meredith courted controversy- he was suspended for alleged bribery, was instrumental in founding the Players' Union and led the first players' strike in 1909. He finished his career at the age of 50 after playing in an FA Cup semi-final and died just weeks after the Munich air disaster in 1958.

John Harding's biography of Meredith, 'Football Wizard' (1998) ranks among the finest ever written, detailing the life and times of a man regarded a football's 'first superstar.'

If you travel just a few hundred yards of the village centre of Chirk you are in Shropshire, but Meredith, Harding relates, was a fervent Welsh patriot. Chirk, even on a day of low, scudding clouds and driving rain, appears at first sight to be an idyllic rural setting, but as Harding explains, this first impression can be deceptive. The area was once the heart of an important coal-mining area, with two pits operating behind the rolling green hills that overlooked the village.

Meredith first worked alongside his father at Black Pit, one of the oldest pits in Wales and the experience shaped his approach to life for the rest of his days. The struggles and hardships he witnessed as such a tender age left an indelible mark. Billy found his escape from a life of drudgery and exploitation through football. He followed his elder brother Sam in playing the game professionally.

These days Chirk AAA, nicknamed the Colliers, operate at the third tier of Welsh football in the National League (Wrexham Area). Their ground is at the far end of the cricket field, just off the Holyhead Road to the north of the village. It's a modest setting, a post and railed fenced pitch with a wonderful small seated stand in one corner providing the main focal point. At the back of the ground is a huge plant that manufactures wood-based panels, but more pleasing to the eye are to be found close-by in Chirk Castle, the Ceiriog Valley and the Chirk Aqueduct on the Llangollen Canal built by Thomas Telford in 1801 while the historic Offa's Dyke runs through the village.

The origins of football in Chirk date back to the 1870s; the club was a founder member of the Welsh FA and between 1887 and 1894 they played in no less than six Welsh Cup Finals, winning five of them. Meredith played in the last two, earning a winner's medal in 1894 before moving to Northwich Victoria and then on to greatness in Manchester. Chirk also entered the FA Cup in those days and in the late 1880s were twice only four games away from the final, losing to Darwen and Derby County respectively.

Chirk AAA proudly display their foundation date (1876) on the front of the superb, full colour programme they produced for this cup-tie. It's quite ridiculous, in these days of vast ticket prices at professional clubs that admission of only £1 for the quarter-finals of an important national competition is only £1, and that includes the programme.

The Welsh FA Trophy, the programme explains, is steeped in history. There have been 110 finals played since 1891 when the competition began as the Welsh Amateur Cup. Chirk have played in five of them, winning the competition in 1959, 1960 and 1963, just after Meredith's passing.

Meredith would have been proud of his former club's staging of this important game. On a day when the heavy rains of recent days washed out all but one of the games in the area an army of volunteers worked tirelessly on the ground to make it playable and ensure the Swansea based visitors could travel north. All the news was conveyed on the club's Twitter account, an invaluable resource for any club.

By kick-off time a decent crowd lined the pitch and though conditions were heavy the conditions were fine. Chirk started strongly and in no time were two goals to the good. They pressed forward relentlessly and by half-time it was 5-0, the visitors being reduced to ten men along the way. The second half was an exercise in damage limitation for the South Walians who lost another man to a red card and finished with nine players, narrowly avoiding the indignity of conceding double figures.

Billy Meredith would have been proud of the efforts of the villagers who carry on the rich traditions of football here. Some of their play was inspired and they looked a determined and creative side. It will take a good side to defeat them and a brilliant programme editor to better their splendid 24-page production.