

TT No.38: *Mike Latham* - Sat 22 November 2014: Spar Mid Wales League Division 2: **Abermule** 3-2 Churchstoke; Attendance: 32 (h/c); No admission or programme; FGIF Match rating: 4*.

Abermule is a small village located just off the A483 between Welshpool and Newtown in mid Wales. It's a beautiful area of rolling hills and lovely countryside and relatively sparsely populated- yet despite this there are many teams from a small area competing in the top four levels of Welsh Football.

In Welshpool the town's football team, for many years, members of the Welsh Premier League are now in the first division of the Spar Mid Wales League, as are their near neighbours Waterloo Rovers. The mantle of the main Welsh Premier League side is now held by Newtown with their newly installed artificial pitch. Within a few miles radius there are Four Crosses, Berriew, Montgomery, Llanfair Caereinion, Kerry and two recent newcomers from the Montgomeryshire League, Abermule and Churchstoke. Competition for players, supporters and benefactors must be fierce.

Many hoppers have visited Abermule in the recent past- it was a popular location for a recent Hop Game in the league. I was pleased to visit on a murky November afternoon with rain threatening from leaden skies. I much admire the hop organisers and their devoted band of disciples but far prefer to visit grounds in their natural state. Abermule seems a peaceful place- there are two village pubs, a convenience store, a caravan site, a private burial ground and some lovely new-build houses. The River Severn flows quickly by and there's also a canal. There used to be a railway station but the infamous Dr Beeching put paid to that half a century ago.

This was a local derby but the build-up as decidedly low-key. They must be fairly laid back in these parts as there seemed a distinct lack of fervour and passion leading up the game. Maybe it was the threatening weather or the fact that the Abermule FC ground is a community field located behind the village primary school but only a few locals had drifted in by the time the referee called the teams together for kick-off.

I rather like the ground- a typical set-up for this part of the world. A small covered area with two dug-outs along one side, some hard standing and a railed-off pitch. No tea bar though and no one coming around with raffle tickets or, least of all, programmes. I counted 32 spectators plus a babe in arms and a beautiful Beagle pup- surely, it's worth at least coming around with a collecting box to help defray the referee's expenses? Churchstoke did not appear to have brought any fans with them, at least judged by the silence that greeted their two goals, the players apart.

This is level four of the game in Wales but they operate with just the one official. The home subs shared the linesman's duties, later being replaced by one of the

substituted players. The away team had a well-dressed gentleman with wellies on, a good choice considering the increasingly muddy state of the touchlines. All did their job well and conscientiously - indeed both sides had a goal disallowed for offside and dissenting voices were few. The 'home' linesmen had a devil of a job as the Churchstoke no9, a diminutive fellow and easily the best player on the field- was a master at trying to time his run late into the attacking line.

Soon after kick-off the heavens opened and rain fell on and off throughout the rest of the game. The playing area, already well grassed but heavy and rather uneven showed signs of water-logging. But the players got on with the game, the referee, who looked as though he may be an amateur thespian judging by his demonstrative decision-making kept a firm grip on proceedings and an eventful game unfolded.

To me Churchstoke looked slightly the better side. They took an early lead and had the better of the first-half despite conceding an equaliser when failing to mark the home captain and centre-half from a corner. But they took the lead again early in the second half and then wasted several clear-cut chances.

Then came the turning-point. It was the turn of the linesman in front of me to discard his flag and take the field- the substituted player taking his place on the line. Within a few minutes he had headed the equaliser and in the closing stages as darkness descended Abermule snatched the winner after a flowing attack. The players' joy was all to see, confirming just what victory meant in a local derby.

Another great day out in Wales- I love the Spar Mid Wales League.

04/20