

TT No.39: Mike Latham - Sun 23rd November 2014; **Bishop Auckland** 1-4 1874 Northwich; FA Vase Second Round; Attendance: 407; Admission: £6.

I'd been saving Heritage Park for a rainy day as I'm not a great fan of new builds. In the event the day was fine if increasingly chilly but the 4pm kick-off (due to a pre-booked christening in the club) suited me fine- a lovely journey across country from J38 at Tebay and even time for the purchase of a bottle of Champagne in Barnard Castle (I had arranged to meet a friend who had just got engaged) and a car wash in Kirkby Stephen.

On the way there's time to pause in West Auckland and admire the fantastic statue erected to mark the feat of the town's football team in winning the Sir Thomas Lipton Trophy, the first 'World Cup' in Italy on two occasions just over a century ago (see the attached image album for more). If you get chance then pay a visit, it is well worth it. Sadly, the journey also passes signposts to two now defunct Northern League sides in Cockfield and Evenwood, a reminder of the number of teams that have been lost over the years especially in this part of Co Durham.

The ground's easy to find, particularly if coming from West Auckland on the A686 and parking was easy and the ground was ok- very similar to Penrith's new ground in design. I am surprised they didn't build a cover on the far side opposite the main stand. There is a refreshment wagon which is above par and the tannoy announcements are excellent. The pitch is heavy and no wonder it can be problematic in wet weather, particularly with Darlington ground-sharing here. It's close to a massive retail park, in fact Sainsbury's dominates the backdrop along one side and the whole site must be unrecognisable to someone re-visiting the area say after a 25-year absence.

It's a far cry from The Bishops' old ground at Kingsway in the centre of town which they shared with the cricket club until leaving in 2001. The cricket club remained but the football ground was built upon and one of the region's most iconic and unusual grounds was no more. Bishops have a rich history- having won the old FA Amateur Cup on ten occasions and been losing finalists on a further eight occasions.

I had never seen 1874 Northwich before- they had a large and well-behaved following and have clearly got a very decent side. Their slick and creative football was a joy to watch at times and their no9 looks capable of playing at a far higher level. But they have less edifying side to their game, with one player in particular seemingly going down far too easily and being constantly admonished by two frustrated home defenders for his antics. They also seemingly had a pack mentality, surrounding the referee when a decision went against them. On the touchline the occupiers of their technical area were unrelenting in pressuring the near-side linesman, who was decent to my untrained eye. It's an all too common occurrence these days and some of the locals assembled behind the pitch-side

barriers shook their heads in dismay and disbelief. I don't know how linesmen put up with all the stick they get. I would simply down tools.

At the game I met a cricketing friend of mine who has taken the field for England and also played Northern League football and a former high-ranking policeman and they simply couldn't believe the anger of some of the visitors, especially as they won the game reasonably comfortably. They felt that some people really do need to take a look at themselves and how they behave. The Respect campaign from the FA clearly isn't working.

On the plus side it was fantastic to meet for the first time Martin and Denise Haworth who do such fantastic work for the Northern League, running the website and the Northern League Club alongside Chairman Mike Amos. I'd hoped to meet up again with an old friend and contributor to their excellent publications who resides in nearby Shildon, only to be informed that he has taken up a temporary job as Father Christmas. Ho, ho, ho!

I'm glad I don't have to watch too much English football these days- nearly all the grounds I want to do, I've done. It's far too cynical and unpleasant for me. I think half the problem is having linesmen- the system in the Scottish Juniors works far better where a big bloke often carrying a can of Irn Bru signals 'ins and outs' and leaves the decisions to the referee. It takes away the confrontation element.

The visitors won this fairly comfortably in the end despite having a man red carded for what appeared to be violent conduct. When they concentrate on playing football, they're a good side and could progress considerably further in this competition.

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