

**TT No.14: Mike Latham** - Sat 10 October 2015: Wearside Football League: **Annfield Plain** 1-4 Horden Colliery Welfare; Attendance: 49 (h/c); Admission: £2; no programmes.

High on a plateau in the midst of the old Durham coalfields lies the village of Annfield Plain whose Derwent Park ground is a 'must visit' for any groundhopper. The ground had featured in a recent issue of the fantastic *Groundstatic* magazine and had long been on my list of grounds to do.

It was a glorious autumnal day, fairly still, clear and reasonably warm and Derwent Park, situated behind a small housing estate on the western side of the village looked a picture in the sunshine.

Annfield Plain is these days a largely residential village, after the collapse of the coal mining industry. It once had some of the cheapest house prices in England but recently prices have started to grow as people relocate from nearby Durham, Newcastle and Sunderland. The surrounding landscape is mainly rough moorland and the distinctive Pontop Pike television mast and wind turbines dominate the landscape.

The football club here has a long history and though it's plain to see the club and ground has had better days it's a fine example of a club that refuses to die, keeping the village tradition alive through the dedication of a small number of volunteers.

The club has suffered spates of vandalism attacks in the past and the main stand is now a shadow of its former self. But the ground is superbly maintained, with huge grass banking on three sides that are immaculately mowed, and terracing on the main stand side. The ground is huge and similar in design to many in the Scottish West Juniors.

I like the Wearside League- it's well organised, has a really informative and up-to-date website and the matches I've seen in the league rarely disappoint. The visitors, who have recently left the Northern League are another club from an old mining area with a hard core of helpers and supporters that keep the faith and they brought around 30 supporters with them, more than half the crowd. The visitors were the better team and won this entertaining game fairly comfortably in the end.

I usually take around 15 or 20 photos of a ground but by the time I got home I realised I'd taken over one hundred, such is the scope at this distinctive and historic ground. I hope I've done it justice. If you haven't been, I'd heartily recommend a visit.

On the way home I called in at Tow Law Town, a ground I'd only previously visited for an evening game. Their home game against Team Northumbria was drawing to a close. What a magnificently maintained ground it is, with stunning views and the

electricity powered by a wind turbine inside the ground. This part of the old Durham coalfields has seen many footballing casualties, Stanley United, Cockfield and Evenwood Town all being part of the Northern League's growing list of former members. Happily, a visit to Annfield Plain and a brief visit to Tow Law revived the spirits and showed that the grass roots heartbeat of football still beats strongly thanks to the indomitable spirit of local people.

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