

TT No.31: *Mike Latham* - Saturday 5 December 2015: The Hallmark Security Cheshire Football League Division 2: **Cuddington FC** 2-1 Warrington Town Reserves; Attendance: 25 (h/c); No admission or programme.

I've long had a theory that the River Mersey acts as a dividing line in weather terms and on a day when gale force winds bombarded the north-west the theory was aired again. North of the Mersey Saturday morning was again dismally wet, so much so that many of the lanes and roads that led me to the M6 at Standish were flooded.

Nothing as bad as the conditions suffered in Cumbria but still bad enough to wipe out most of the local football- just one game survived for example in the West Lancashire League and that on the artificial surface at Ladybridge. How many football clubs are going to have to follow ambitious Ladybridge's lead in the future and, funds and grants allowing, install 3g or 4g pitches? Many clubs have hardly kicked a ball in anger for the best part of two months.

I kept an eye on the forecast and on the mounting tally of postponements and decided in the end to head to Cuddington and the modest surrounds of the third tier of the Cheshire Football League. As soon as I got south of the Mersey the rain disappeared and though the high winds persisted the Cuddington pitch looked in almost perfect condition.

Cuddington is a small village, just off the A49, the major trunk road that runs along the border between England and Wales. The village is built on sandy soil which certainly helps drainage and the football field is part of an impressive facility on Norley Road, centred around the village hall. Tennis and bowls are also played here, both enjoying floodlights, and just along the road is the impressive Sandiway Golf Club. The village hall, recently renovated has a meeting room, function room and dressing rooms for the two teams and there is also an adjoining youth club building on the sports field.

Cuddington is a commuter village with a railway station that provides a regular passenger service to Manchester and Chester and beyond and is close to the motorway network. There are many public footpaths around the area and Merlewood Pool is an outstanding local beauty spot.

I hadn't anticipated a great game, especially in the weather conditions with the strong winds negating any hopes of constructive football. Moreover, Cuddington were rooted to the foot of the table with just one win all season and the visitors, who certainly looked the most purposeful and creative side in the first half looked too strong. But it was still 0-0 at half-time with the home goalkeeper excelling with his coolness and anticipation under pressure.

Even so it was no great surprise when the visitors took the lead midway through the second half. But Cuddington were undeterred, fought back to level and, with

the wind at their backs staged a grandstand finish to grab an injury-time winner following a corner. Their joy was unrestrained.

I enjoyed my visit here; Cuddington is a pleasant, well equipped village with some great amenities for the locals and the football ground is part of an impressive facility for the community. The standard of play reflected well on a well organised league and Cuddington's overall display, considering they began the day as bottom of the third tier was excellent. Referee Joe O'Neill presided with an experienced eye and coped remarkably well without linesmen, again confirming my long-held view that linesmen generally just get in the way of a game of this level. All you need, as in the Scottish Juniors, is a bloke with a flag on the halfway line, ideally equipped with a pie and a can of Irn Bru to signal ins and outs.

The referee also didn't hang about and so I was able to bid a hasty retreat on the final whistle and head to nearby Winsford for the second half of table-topping 1874 Northwich against Atherton Collieries. The visitors won 3-1 and I enjoyed a re-visit to a distinctive and well-maintained ground that I last visited nearly 30 years ago. Not a bad return to a day that dawned so unpromisingly for the groundhopper.

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