

TT No.33: Mike Latham - Saturday 12 December 2015: West Midlands (Regional) League Premier Division; **Bilston Town Community** 3-0 Cradley Town; Attendance: 110 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £1.

There are those grounds you always mean to visit but for some reason never seem to get around to ticking off. Queen Street, Bilston has been long on my list of 'must-do's' and on another dreadfully wet Saturday I finally managed it. It was well worth the wait, a fantastic, atmospheric ground with a history, a heartbeat and a soul.

It was a good day to visit because the club launched a history book charting the club's ups and downs from Victorian times- a fine effort by the author Jay Hearst for a bargain price of £10. Most books were pre-ordered but the friendly club official manning the tea bar managed to find me a spare. The History of Bilston Town FC now has pride of place on my bookshelf.

Bilston get the basics right- their twitter account declaring the game was on 'with not a puddle in sight.' It seemed hard to believe on the journey south as the M6 was awash and many games had again fallen foul of the elements. It was a relief to see the floodlights on as I turned off the Black Country Route, about three miles from the M6 and made my way to Queen Street. It was the only game played in the Premier Division, so a fine effort by Bilston.

Queen Street for me was immortalised by an excellent book on groundhopping in the West Midlands by Steve Field. Give my Regards to Queen Street was the title. It's amazing to think that the book is now 12 years old.

The thing that strikes you on entering the ground is the sense of history. The club has experienced many ups and downs and these are charted in three impressive and informative display boards on a wall by the entrance. There's an excellent programme and the whole ground, with orange the dominant colour is well maintained and cared for.

The iconic main stand with social club adjoining is one of the best at this level of football and the Steelmen, a reference to Bilston's industrial past is one of the legends written on the wall. Behind one goal supporters have erected a small and neat cover known as Turner's End and this area houses some of Bilston's most passionate fans. The playing pitch was immaculate despite the wet weather and the home side, fourth bottom at start of play, gave one of their best displays of the season to defeat the high-flying, third-placed visitors with a standard of football that was impressive for this level. Coming off the back of a 5-0 home defeat in the week it was even more noteworthy.

Bilston, just two miles southeast of Wolverhampton, was extensively developed for factories and coal mining and was the centre for a huge British Steel plant which

closed in 1979, after 199 years of steel production at the site, with the loss of nearly 2,000 jobs.

The roots of the football club date back to late Victorian times with the merger of Bilston Rovers and Bilston Wanderers in 1894. The club moved to Queen Street just after the end of the First World War and has undergone numerous name changes since. I liked the legend on the club's twitter feed: Our greatest glory is not in never failing but rising every time we fail.

In the 1980s and 1990s Bilston spent 17 seasons in the Midland Division of the Southern League before resigning for financial reasons in 2002 and they resigned from the West Midlands League in 2007. The club was reformed in that year and started again in division two of the WML, forging links with the local community and involving youth teams and leagues across the Black Country.

The ground, which was heavily vandalised, was out of bounds for a while and the club had to play on a public park but these days is a real focal point of the local community. This was reflected in their name change to Bilston Town Community in 2014.

It's a fantastic football ground to visit and I'd recommend this to any groundhopper. Just wondering, why it took me so long.

04/20