

TT No.64: Mike Latham - Sat 26 March 2016: **Slyne-with-Hest** v Charnock Richard; West Lancs. League Premier Division; Result: 4-2; Attendance: 50 (h/c); no admission or programme.

It may be late March and we are adjusting the clocks to herald the onset of British Summer Time but the weather is still unpredictably wild. This was a game that just survived the elements on a day when some games in the West Lancashire League were abandoned as heavy rain spread in from the west.

Slyne-with-Hest is a sprawling village on the banks of Morecambe Bay and the football club is located in a rural location inland from the A6 between Lancaster and Carnforth just south of Bolton-le-Sands. The football pitch is on Bottomdale Road, overlooked by a small caravan park and a graveyard and with rolling hills and a wood in the distance.

It's a lovely ground in this league of contrasts- well run, competitive and stretching over a wide location from the Furness clubs in the west to east Lancashire and the delightful Hurst Green ground overlooking Stonyhurst College. To the north Milnthorpe Corinthians carry the flag into Westmorland with the Chorley based clubs like Charnock, Euxton and Coppull to the south and Burscough Richmond and Southport Hesketh on the Fylde coast.

I like visiting this ground and decided on a re-visit rather than chancing my arm farther afield. Returning home drenched but happy after seeing an entertaining game I was glad I'd made a wise decision- for once- as my originally intended game at Borth near Aberystwyth was postponed.

Charnock's manager Andy Westwell, a fine fullback in his day, has recently completed 15 years at the club, a proud record. His club have aspirations to step up to the NWCL for next season but first they are hoping to end their long association with the West Lancashire League with a championship. But this defeat cost them dearly and left them trailing leaders Fulwood Amateurs by 12pts, albeit with five games in hand with Blackpool Wren Rovers also still in contention for the title.

The weather was calm and bright as kick-off approached and spectators gathered around three sides of the pitch which had been recently rolled and looked in great condition. But halfway through the first-half, with the rain bucketing down most of the spectators had taken a vantage point within the overhang of the changing room block in the bottom corner of the ground that also hosts a welcoming tea bar.

By then Slyne had come back from conceding a first minute goal to lead 2-1 with two fine goals. Charnock equalised after a home defender put the ball through his own net but Slyne then went in 3-2 up at half-time after another great goal. By this stage the pitch was holding water, the temperature had dropped and the wind was biting cold. Many a referee would have called a halt to proceedings.

To his credit the ref persevered and just about got away with things though the water was lodging in midfield and preventing the ball moving freely at times. Slyne sealed the game with a fourth goal and held out to record a famous win, maybe in the last meeting of the teams for a long while.

Many spectators huddled for warmth in the tea room at half-time and it was interesting to read old league handbooks that had been left around. In the mid-1970s the WLL membership was far different than today with long defunct sides such as Ribchester, Anchor Cables (Leigh), Highfield and Springfields (Preston) together with some sides like Holker OB, Barnoldswick and Padiham that have moved up to the NWCL and others like Whinney Hill and Waddington that are now in the East Lancashire League.

Forty years on the WLL has over 40 clubs in membership, playing in a diverse range of locations and grounds in a competitive yet friendly environment. It's a players' league above all and one that is well organised and administered. I love visiting the clubs in this league and find that re-visits such as this one can be equally as rewarding as visiting a new ground. On another day of vile weather in this most wet of winters I was just glad to get in a game at all.

04/20