

**TT No. 125:** *Keith Aslan* - Saturday 21st April 2018; **ABBEY HULTON** v St. Helens; North West Counties Division 1; Kick-Off: 14.59 (yippee); Result: 3-1; Admission: £3 for old people; Programme: £1; Attendance: 142 (118 home, 16 away & 8 neutral)

When they come to ask me to feature in 'Who do you think you are' the potteries will feature very prominently. My mother's side of the family come from Burslem, and my prodigious football knowledge is inherited from my great grandfather who played for Port Vale in the 1890's. His truncated playing career was down to injury according to the family, but I prefer to believe his Wikipedia page that he was sacked for disciplinary issues. He was a bit of a maverick, but no Joey Barton. Back in those days not doffing your hat when a lady passes was a serious offence. After he finished playing Jim Mason became a referee and reached the very top, officiating the 1909 Cup Final between Manchester United and Bristol City. My mum used to dote on her grandfather and her tales of life in pre-war Burslem were fascinating. Stanley Mathews, who lived a couple of streets away, was a regular visitor, people really did leave their doors unlocked (it helped that nobody had anything worth stealing) and Jim Mason's 'reward' for refereeing the cup final was a canteen of cutlery which is still in the family. A different world and a telling statistic is that Wayne Rooney earns more in a week than Mathews earned in his entire career. A poor reflection on both eras. Although born and bred in London, today felt like I was coming home.

Our old friends Virgin Trains made the journey north only 16 minutes late, an obstruction on the line at Milton Keynes. All the buses in the area radiate from Hanley Bus Station which means the only place you can get to easily from Stoke Railway Station is the aforementioned bus terminus. My decision to walk to the ground was, in hindsight, not one of my better ones. Three-and-a-quarter-miles across a mountainous terrain in temperatures of 25 degrees with two dodgy knees. Not good. My advice to any fellow travellers, is to get a taxi.

Abbey Hulton are a magnificent club and a credit to football. Their officials actively seek out groundhoppers and chat with them. They ask for any feedback, good or bad. I don't know quite how they think any of it will be bad. (o.k. if I was being really picky the choice of music played over the tannoy wasn't to my taste). The tannoy man gave myself and another hopper a lift back to the station and I was astounded at the end of the game to witness the officials, and a fair number of spectators, applauding St. Helens off the pitch. 'We always do this, it takes two to make a football match' What an attitude, shows more 'respect' than a hundred pre-match handshakes. A bar with Sky Sports was a welcome place to cool down after my exertions and the food shack had one of the widest selections of stomach fillers you will find at any football ground. I found out too late about the oatcakes (a Staffordshire delicacy). Everyone was singing their praises but I'd already stuffed myself full of pie and peas. Two years ago, this was a field, it now boasts everything the North West Counties League could want for their ground grading

expeditions, with not one, but two *Atcost* stands along one touchline, and a raised grass bank on the opposite side.

The first half was a tale of two penalties, the St. Helens one was brilliantly saved, then 5 minutes later the home side converted theirs. And talking of penalties this was the return fixture of the infamous match at St. Helens where Abbey Hulton were just about to take what would have potentially been a match winning penalty when the lights, on a timer, automatically switched off. Somewhat strangely the North West Counties League allowed the result to stand, telling Abbey Hulton they were quite at liberty to appeal, but if they were successful (and my guess is they would have been) they would have had to replay the fixture. Understandably they didn't fancy that. Of course, the league totally ignored the real problem, why, when the away team arrived at 7.38, was the game still going on at 10 o'clock. The referee should have had questions to answer but of course he didn't. There was a very amusing cartoon about the match in the programme.

On a personal note, this was the second time I've completed everything in steps 1-6. The ref. kicked off on time but the game still didn't end until 5 to 5, and my abiding memory of another superb day out will be of the applause for St. Helens as they left the field. Football can be wonderful sometimes. Jim Mason would have approved.

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