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## RAMBLINGS REPORTS 2022-23

*Note – all FGIF match and ground ratings shown are marked out of a maximum of five stars.*

updated on 27/09/22



**R No.8: WebEd** - Saturday 24th September 2022; **Rawcliffe** (v Easingwold Town); York Football League Premier Division; Kick-Off: 2pm; Venue: Rawcliffe Recreation Ground, St Marks Grove, Rawcliffe, York, North Yorks, YO305TS; Result: 2-1; Admission: None; Programme: None; Attendance: 43.

### ANOTHER HOPPERTUNITY, ALMOST MISSED...

It's now 1.32pm. I'm sitting in the car by the entrance to York racecourse and my pulse is racing. I've just discovered that my chosen game featuring Hamilton Panthers FC\* (v LNER Builders in a York FA Junior Cup tie), is off. A series of red plastic road cones have closed off the club car park, the shutters to the new changing room block are firmly bolted down and the teams haven't turned up for some reason. Apart from a young couple exercising their Labrador dog, the ground, on the Little Knavesmire, which looks in perfectly good nick, is totally deserted. With time rapidly ticking by (nearly as fast as my heart rate) and no Plan B to fall back on, I am literally right up against it (feel free to substitute any other words to that effect). The chances of finding another game in the area are now looking slimmer than slim. However, being 'a pint half full' type of hopper, at least I do have my mobile phone, trusty Sat Nav and the hopping gods on hand to help get me out of this situation. Or so I keep telling myself.

With a deep breath, I manage to steady my shaky hand and flag up the York Football League from the trusty *FGIF* home page (of course!) and scroll down the fixture list on my smart device. It's all now down to potluck and those hopping gods I've just mentioned. Although there are plenty of fixtures (mostly in the early rounds of the cup) to choose from, it's now a case of finding something close by and getting there ahead of the fast approaching 2pm kick-off deadline. Out of the clubs playing at home, I spot that Rawcliffe have a game, but my knowledge of the

area is poor, and I don't know how far it is from here. From memory, I think it is on this side of the city centre, but I'm not entirely sure. After hastily entering the ground post code into my car computer, I fix my eyes on the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. It seems to take an age to upload (but it always does when you are in a rush). Eventually after connecting with the satellites, my onboard data reveals that I might, in fact, have a fighting chance of reaching the ground in time, from here. There's a faint glimmer of hope that things could just be looking up. It says that my estimated arrival time is 13.49. Without a second to waste, I re-start the car engine and with the mindset of Lewis Hamilton, begin to follow the purple route direction arrow on the screen. To be honest I haven't a clue as to where I'm heading, nor what the roads are like. With little to lose, I throw caution to the wind and decide to go for it. Using some simple mental arithmetic, I've basically got about fourteen minutes to cover a journey lasting just over four miles. It's now 13.35.

From past experiences York can be a nightmare to drive through at the best of times, particularly near to the busy city centre or close to the racecourse when flat race meetings are on. Or when the annual fair is taking place - which just happens to be, today. You couldn't make it up, could you? I can see that the immediate area over to my right is jam-packed with cars and people heading for the white-knuckle rides on an adjoining part of the racecourse, about a hundred yards from here. I just about manage to edge my way carefully past the traffic queuing to get in and head steadily through a couple of narrow back roads which are punctuated with meaty speed bumps, before joining the main A59 Tadcaster Road.

With one eye on the traffic and another on the Sat Nav, I manage to keep up to speed with the journey planner remaining unchanged, that's until I reach Water End in Clifton where everything comes to a standstill. Sods Law - I am now less than two miles from my destination. The traffic begins to crawl slowly bumper to bumper through three separate sets of lights along what is an horrendous half mile drag that seems to take forever. It costs me valuable time. As I repeatedly check the Sat Nav it shows I've now lost almost six minutes and there's only five minutes to go, ahead of kick-off. With a sweaty palm, I move up through the gears as the traffic begins to return to a decent speed once again. I manage to reach Rawcliffe village and work (slalom style) my way through a maze of narrow streets zigzagging from left to right (and back again) before arriving at the ground in St Marks Grove. It is now 13.58 and as I park up, I can just see over my shoulder that the players are leaving the changing rooms to take their positions to the field. I've made it, but only just!

Rawcliffe Football Club has played at the village recreation ground since its formation, back in 1983. The site, which shares its facilities with the local tennis club, belongs to land owned by the Rawcliffe Parish Council. The large field, or Rob Winspear Rec, as it's called on the tall name sign standing just inside the entrance, is bordered along both sides by rows of neat suburban semis. A long, tarmacked communal path on the right (near side of the ground) runs from the fenced entrance to the far end of the field away in the distance. Pride of place here goes to two impressive red brick club buildings which are located next to the car park (behind the top goal) used not only as changing rooms for sport but for a wide range of functions organised by the local village council. Unusually several

robust electric scooters are found parked in a small bay on the edge of the car park. The main pitch, which is roped on both sides, is marked out parallel to the residential properties which back onto the field. Although there is no dedicated spectator cover at present, two portable synthetic nylon dug outs, with room for bench seating inside, are placed on opposite sides of the halfway line - strangely, the larger one (on the far side of the pitch) is set up for the opponents to use.

Today's game sees the visit of Easingwold Town to the Rawcliffe Rec. With both sides currently sitting in mid-table, boasting almost identical records, the stats show that they have only won one game each so far, predicting a close encounter is in prospect for the hopping neutral. Incidentally, it's also the first time I have seen either club play a game in my footy travels since relocating up to 'Ull over four years ago now.

With barely five minutes gone on the stopwatch, it's Rawcliffe dressed in their Newcastle United lookalike kit who take an early lead through Harry McMillan (5) who is on hand to tap the ball home from close range following a counter-attack that starts back on the edge of his own area. The visitors are next to score, rather fortuitously, also against the run of play, before the half hour mark, when Josh Sargeant's (29) tame shot from ten yards out is fumbled by the keeper who allows the ball to somehow evade his grasp and trickle agonisingly past him over the line. It really is a howler and one he, like most keepers, will definitely want to forget in a hurry. The half ends level at 1-1 going into the break. With both sides creating plenty of chances, the result is eventually decided mid-way through the second half when Rawcliffe's tricky Harvey Stevenson (68) escapes his markers to slip the ball under the advancing keeper to make it 2-1 and in doing so give his side their first home win of the campaign. On balance I think this is just about a fair result in the end.

Apart from a short sharp shower which blows over ten minutes after my arrival, the game is played in mostly sunny but cloudy conditions on what is a well grassed (remember that) expansive pitch. In fact, it's one of the biggest playing areas I've seen for some time - no wonder several players were cramping up well before the end. Over forty spectators were in attendance including a fellow hopper called Dave who had come up by train to York from his base in Birmingham. Afterwards, I managed to have a brief chat with enthusiastic club secretary Ian Smallwood who told me that the club is enjoying its most successful period in years. Confidence is running high after the first team gained promotion to the YFL Premier Division, for the first time in its history, only two years ago before going on to win the prestigious League Cup last season after beating Dringhouses on penalties (FT: 0-0) in the final contested at the York Community Stadium at the end of May.

It had been another memorable hop to another friendly, well organised club in the YFL. A visit to Rawcliffe Football Club comes highly recommended to all travellers who will receive a warm welcome when they go there. In hindsight, I only have myself to blame for pressing the hopping self-destruction button this afternoon on a day when I was more than lucky to get to a game of football. Notes to self: (1) always remember to phone the home club before setting out; (2) always have a Plan B, C etc, etc, just in case you need it and (3) set off much earlier from *FGIF* to get to a game. You would think that after forty years of hopping, I would have got the hang of it by now! It seems not...doh!

*FGIF Match Rating: 3\* FGIF Ground Rating: 3\**

Note\* Apparently the York FA Junior Cup tie was awarded as a home win to Hamilton Panthers FC after opponents LNER Builders forfeited the game (indeed the only one to be called off in the entire fixture list this afternoon!).



**R No.7: WebEd** - Saturday 17th September 2022; **Strensall Tigers** (v Cawood); York Football League Division One; Kick-Off: 2pm; Venue: Strensall Sports Club, Durlston Drive, Strensall, York, North Yorks, YO325AT; Result: 1-6; Admission: None; Programme: None; Attendance: 31.

RIP QUEEN ELIZABETH II

Well, what a week it's been. Who would have predicted such an historical event would have taken place in front of our very eyes in just a matter of days? I'm not a royalist and I've never met the Queen, but I certainly echo the sentiments of a nation and sympathise with a royal family in mourning, following her passing. I did start to worry about her sudden frailty when she met Boris Johnson and Liz Truss at Balmoral only two days before her death. No one can underestimate how many lives have been touched - witness the unprecedented press coverage and the heartfelt testimonials, the long queues lining the streets to catch a glimpse of her cortège for affirmation, if you need any. All the engagements, the pomp and ceremony which have taken years in their planning have passed with precision. I can't imagine standing in a queue for nigh on twelve hours to visit her body lying in state at Westminster Hall, but it appears thousands have. Although I can't be there in person, I can still pay my respects ahead of her funeral to someone who has been our monarch for over seventy years.

Like many sports fans, I realised pretty soon after the Queen's passing was announced, that lots of events would have to be called off as a mark of respect to Her Majesty. But many disagreed. I'm not sure if you have a twitter account but the response to calling off sport over the weekend didn't go down well with lots of

horrendous comments posted on social media. As much as I love football there are things in life that are much, much bigger than sport and have to take priority. To miss going to watch football for one Saturday, in respect of the Queen, is not a lot to sacrifice, is it?

After a two-week break, I'm heading out to York this afternoon for my footy fix. An unexpectedly long queue at the local petrol station and some very poor decision making (on my part) at two adjoining roundabouts along the city's outer ring road almost scupper my plans, but a well-timed U turn along the busy A64 manage to retrieve the situation and get things back on track. I arrive at the ground with only fifteen minutes to spare ahead of the 2pm kick-off.

Hoppers may be pleased to learn that Strensall Tigers FC have moved back to the Strensall Sports Club this season. Following a two-year absence which forced them to play home games just up the road on the neighbouring New Earswick playing fields, the necessary ground improvements have since been made and this afternoon marks a welcome return for league action at their Durlston Drive base.

Travellers here should come off the busy A1237 at the Strensall Road roundabout (third exit) in Earswick and continue past the Queen Elizabeth Barracks (appropriately named at this time) in Strensall Camp, before taking a left fork into York Road. After about two hundred yards take the second left turning (not the first) into Barley Rise, a well-heeled estate, before taking a right turn into Durlston Drive where the ground is located at the end of a cul-de-sac. Although the main entrance, fashioned from shiny metal fence posts, is hidden from view on your approach, look out for a row white lock up garages which provide a useful landmark next to the main driveway.

The site, bordered closely by some residential housing, the banks of the River Foss and the main York to Scarborough railway line (which incidentally is the same one which passed by their previous base at New Easwick), is all very neat, tidy and appealing. A small car park leads to the main facilities which are all situated (in parallel) immediately over to your right. As indicated on the smart white club welcome sign, this is also the base of the Strensall & Towthorpe Tennis Club who have access to three sets of floodlit tennis courts here. Adjacent to this is a smart brick club building which since refurbishment, houses several club changing rooms with a well-equipped function room/café situated at the far end. The hall seemed quite busy as a children's party was also taking place this afternoon. To round things off, a small caged floodlit multi use games area with low concrete walls (Astroturf pitch) is found beyond the pavilion, closest to the main pitch on the field.

The football club has developed its junior programme in recent years and has a new mini pitch dedicated to the younger age groups found directly in front of the changing rooms. The main first team pitch is marked over on the far side of the field. Roped in part, it is both well grassed and extremely undulating in places, judging by the rise and fall of some of the white light lines painted on the surface. Check out those still fashionable and smart (old Subbuteo style) 'World Cup' goals decked out with black and amber nets supported by thick sturdy wooden poles to give a unique rectangular shape to them. If you find yourself along the grassed



embankment behind the furthest goal look out too for the step ladders placed next to the safety fence in front of the railway line. An accompanying piece of carpet (rug size) also sits on the fence waiting for any intrepid club official or player designated brave enough to straddle it in comfort and retrieve any lost balls (pardon the pun) which could lie perilously close to the tracks. Dare I say it, as far jobs for volunteers go, this is definitely not one for the faint hearted. Ouch!

According to the detailed archives found on the excellent York Football League website (click on the *League Tables* tab on the main home page menu at the top for more), records show that a team representing the village first competed in the YFL, possibly called the York and District League then, shortly after the First World War. It was in the 1923-24 season that a club named Strensall United FC finished in third place behind R St Lawrence WMC and South Bank WMC in Division Two, then comprising of eleven teams. Despite a brief change of name to Strensall St Marys FC in the early 1930's, the village continued to compete in the YFL before resigning its membership in the early 1970's. After a break of almost twenty years Strensall returned to the league for the 1992-93 season and have competed in the competition ever since, flitting mainly between divisions two and four. The Tigers achieved their highest position in 2020-21 when, after a season curtailed by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, they finished eighth in the Premier Division after playing only a handful of games.

Back to today. After a brief two-year spell plying their trade in the top-flight of the YFL, Strensall find themselves fighting it out in First Division once again for this coming season. Although they almost avoided the drop, pipped by Kirkbymoorside who clung on to their place by virtue of a single point, it was seen as a dreadful campaign with the club losing every match from early March onwards until the bitter end. This afternoon the visitors are Selby-based side Cawood FC, a club who, by coincidence, could have gone up to the Premier Division themselves but fell short on gaining promotion by just two points last time out. So, with both sides unable to play last week (when all games were called off as a mark of respect following the Queen's passing), this is their first league game of 2022-23.

Before a ball was kicked a minute's silence was impeccably observed by all those gathered either around the centre circle or standing at pitch-side. For the record, an under-par Tigers' side, missing several key players, found the going tough, particularly in the second half. With the scores remaining level, at 1-1, going into the break, Cawood stamped their authority on the game to run out comfortable 1-6 winners by the final whistle. Young Ryan Glover was their star turn bagging himself a well-earned hat-trick, with all his strikes coming from tap ins inside the six-yard box. The turning point in the game came on the hour mark when Strensall keeper Ben Marshall had to be replaced, having turned his ankle reaching for a high ball following a corner. Up until then the Tigers certainly looked to be in the contest. Incredibly Cawood were to be denied top spot in the table after Tockwith beat Duncombe Park 7-1 in one of the other Division One matches.

The game played in cloudy but sunny conditions was attended by just over thirty spectators. This number included an assessor (or 'observer' as *FGIF* maestro Sir Keith calls them, these days) from Grimsby who, using his National League refereeing experience, had come over to watch one of his young protégés, budding

match official Isaac Stephenson. I do hope he gets some rewarding feedback - considering he is still only seventeen I thought he controlled proceedings very well and kept a lid on things when they got feisty - as we really do need to hang on to our referees without whom there would be no games at all. It was most interesting to watch the high speed Transpennine Express trains come thundering past at break-neck speed behind the far end of the ground at various points during the game. Although I'm not into trains like many of my fellow members of the 'hopperati' who simply love everything about them, it's certainly quite a challenge trying capture these fast-moving engines inside the camera viewfinder making for what can be an intriguing backdrop to the action.

As I managed successfully to negotiate the busy York ring home on my way home, I found out over the radio waves that my beloved Hull City had lost 3-0 at Swansea. As I said in my last report (see *RR No.6* below), the Championship is not an easy league to play in, and each defeat is a harsh lesson to learn at any level - ask head coach Shota Arveladze, who seems to cut a very dejected and lonely figure right now. With millions of pounds to spend on gathering a large squad of players, I shouldn't think he will get as much sleep or sympathy as the Strensall boss who also faced a heavy defeat today. Sadly, it had not been a good afternoon to be a Tiger...but then in the great scheme of things as we've seen this last week, there are more important things in life than a game of football.

*FGIF Match Rating: 3\* FGIF Ground Rating: 3\**



**R No.6: WebEd** - Sunday 4th September 2022; **Hull City** (v Sheffield United); Skybet Football League Championship; Kick-Off: 3pm; Venue: MKM Stadium, Walton Street, Hull, East Yorks, HU36HU; Result: 0-2; Admission: £20; Programme: £3; Attendance: 20426.

**A WONDERFUL SURPRISE**

A cracking surprise birthday treat! Having just returned home from Selby after completing a superb cycling Sportive event in the morning, I was thrilled to learn that my daughter Steph had unexpectedly booked us a couple of seats for this afternoon's Championship match. With enough time for a quick shower (I needed one), I grabbed my stuff and headed over to the Priory Park and Ride around the corner to catch our bus to the ground. Phew!

It has been a busy summer for the club, with Tigers' ambitious owner Acun Ilıcali and his head coach Shota Arveladze working hard behind the scenes to strengthen the first team squad. With the much-publicised sale of playmaker, Hull-born Keane Lewis-Potter moving on to Premier League side Brentford for somewhere in the region of £16m (possibly reaching £20m with add-ons), no fewer than sixteen new players have come through the doors of the MKM Stadium during the summer transfer window. Indeed, four of these only arrived on Thursday, transfer deadline day. Amongst the new additions are Tobias Figueredo (from Notts Forest); Cyrus Christie and Jean Michael Seri (both Fulham); Oscar Estupinan (Vitoria Guitumares SC, Portugal) and several who were playing in Turkish league football last season: Adama Traore (Hatayspor), Dimitros Pelkas and Ozan Tufan (both Fenerbache), Dogukan Sinik (Antalyaspor) and Benjamin Tetteh (Yeni Matayaspor).

There is without doubt a feeling of renewed optimism about the club and the city these days. The new regime has become popular in the short time since taking charge of the Tigers back in January. Although it may not happen as quickly as hoped for, the Turkish owner and media mogul Acun Ilıcali has set his sights on building a club good enough to return to the Premier League one day.

But it's not all been about spending vast sums on bringing new players into the club. Obviously, it helps to have a strong squad, but since coming here, he has been proactively involved, using his charisma and presence (call it what you will), in trying to reconnect with the fans, many of whom lost faith and literally walked away when the Allams were in charge. It's not just about bringing those supporters back but also in attracting many new fans through the turnstiles. Things have changed: new sections of the ground, like the West Upper Stand, have been re-opened; ticketing prices have been slashed markedly, especially for juniors who as Ilıcali believes, are going to be the next generation of fans part of building foundations of what should be a true family focused club. Apart from creating a feel-good factor about the place on matchday, he has offered holidays to fans through prize draws and more recently subsidised the price of coach travel to away games - when QPR charged visiting supporters an eye-watering £36 for a ticket, the owner immediately put his hand in his pocket and paid half of their bus fares to get them down to Loftus Road.

With an hour to go before kick-off we have a bit of time to nip into the Viking Fish Bar on Anlaby Road to buy some tasty fish and chips, before heading back to the ground to pick up our tickets. We eventually manage to navigate our way up several flights of steps and find our seats in the lofty heights of the Upper West Stand. With a big sigh of relief, we can now begin to soak up the atmosphere ahead of kick-off. As the players enter the field, the whole place is buzzing. Most home fans expect the in-form Blades to provide a stiff test for the Tigers who have several (eight) players missing through injury (notice I've got the excuses in early!) this afternoon - they come to the MKM having lost only one game so far in the



opening few weeks this season. Although Hull failed to pick up a point on the road at QPR in midweek (3-1), they do boast an unbeaten home record which will offer much encouragement to the faithful.

Alas it was not to be. A goal in each half from Olli McBurnie and Sander Berge helped to seal a first away victory of the season for the Blades. Hull City had two glorious chances in the first half when Oscar Estupinan and the returning Ozan Tufan failed to take them and were punished by a United side who went to the top of the table above overnight leaders Norwich.

A loose ball through midfield saw Ghanaian international Tetteh overstretch and go down to the ground with a hamstring injury before being replaced. The visitors took the lead through McBurnie (20) who drove the ball low from the edge of the box to beat keeper Matt Ingram at his near post. City then had a glorious chance to level. Ozan's instant pass forward freed Oscar to race away one-on-one against Foderingham, he took an age to shoot before firing at the goalkeeper, it bounced back out and the Colombian's effort was blocked again by United's number one. Just before the break, Oscar then turned provider to turn it through for Ozan who tried a delicate first-time lob over Foderingham, only to see it land on the roof of the net.

After the break a big spell of pressure came for City, who couldn't find that killer final ball in and around the box. Arveladze brought on Seri for his return and Tyler Smith. Seri showed a couple of nice touches before giving the ball away on the edge of his box and was royally punished by Berge (75), who via a deflection made it 2-0 fifteen minutes from time after a really good spell from the home side.

It was another harsh lesson for the Tigers in taking chances against a well-organised, well-drilled side likely to be near the top again when the medals are dished out come May. The game was marred when I later discovered that one of United's players had been racially abused whilst warming up by someone in the crowd. When will all this sort of behaviour end? There's no place for it in the game - these people are not fans, just kick them out for good. Rant over.

The match attracted 20,246 fans to the MKM this afternoon. This was the best attendance for a league game in over five years, since Spurs thrashed Hull 7-1 in the final PL fixture here on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> May 2017, in front of 23,804. No doubt a new wave in interest and a feeling of excitement around the ground, the new low pricing structure and maybe playing on a Sunday all helped to boost the crowd. A glossy, 60-page, full-colour programme (which will take at least a week to read) entitled '*The Tiger*' sold for £3. For me there are far too many adverts which, although important to advertisers in raising much needed revenue, seems to detract from the overall content and something I don't need.

So, how would I sum up our overall experience visiting the MKM today? It was definitely a wonderful occasion and one not to be missed - the atmosphere inside an impressive ground; the feeling of tribal celebration, and a chance to watch a game of football played at a more intense level made for an excellent change. Even though Steph and I had travelled only a few miles from home to get to the match, it seemed a much longer and more tiring day out, than the ones I am normally used to these days. Having taken advantage of the park and ride bus, sorted out food, a programme, tickets, found our seats and watched the game, by the end it felt like we had done a gym workout (mind you that could be down to

my old age and in hindsight having taken part in a bike event in the same day, didn't help either!). Despite the result, it had been a superb experience and one not to be forgotten. As far as belated birthday treats go this was certainly right up there with the very best of them. There was just enough time to polish off that triple chocolate cake smothered with full fat cream, to end what had been a perfect day!

*FGIF Match Rating: 4\* FGIF Ground Rating: 5\**



**R No.5: WebEd** - Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2022; **Gunness & Burringham** (v Glennys); Scunthorpe & District League Division Two; Kick-Off: 2.30pm; Venue: Gunness Playing Field, Old Village Street, Gunness, Scunthorpe, Lincs, DN158TW; Result: 0-5; Admission: None; Programme: None; Attendance: 30.

#### A PIECE OF CAKE

I really do love this time of year. It signals a time of change, and with autumn fast approaching there's a noticeable chill in the air, early golden leaves are beginning to fall from the trees and nights are growing dark, that bit earlier. For the avid grounds' collector, it's also a chance to find a game in one of the much smaller 'grass roots' competitions which finally commence their programme of league fixtures around this time, an added bonus with more, what I call, 'local' games to choose from.

I've got to take things a bit easier and save some energy today. No, that's nothing to do with the soaring price of gas and electricity but comes ahead of the gruelling Selby Three Swans Sportive, a cracking cycling event that I've entered. The exciting thirty-mile challenge, held on a flat and fast course gets underway early tomorrow morning starting at the abbey. I'm in luck as the Scunny League starts its new season this afternoon which fits the bill perfectly for the hopping neutral not wanting to stray too far. With a journey time of no more than twenty-five minutes I'm crossing the Humber into North Lincolnshire for my much-awaited fix at Gunness and Burringham FC.

With plenty of time on my hands and light traffic on the roads, I decide to take a more leisurely, scenic and winding route through South Ferriby and Thealby, skirting the river before heading down towards the western fringes of Scunthorpe. The small village of Gunness, located about three miles from the main town centre and running close to the banks of the river Trent, is easily reached from the Neap House roundabout along the B1216. The ground is found off Old Village Street, a horse-shoe shaped road which joins the approach on Station Road at both of its ends -although I took the first turning next to Empson's timber merchants and continued through the housing estate, it's probably quicker, as I found out, to take the second turn further along, which works out to be much closer to the football ground.

The lovely tree-lined venue, owned by the parish council, is very neat and tidy. A large welcome sign incorporating the club's name and logo is affixed to the outer fence next to the entrance and main car park. Just in case you were wondering, the adjoining village of Burringham which forms part of the club's title, is only about two miles south from here. The site containing the playing field and well equipped children's play park, is quite spacious. A large modern brick building, opened in 2015, accommodating both the village hall and changing rooms, looks a picture, adorned with an array of decorative plants and hanging baskets around its perimeter. Travellers here will not fail to miss the ornate metal forged 'Halloween' themed weathervane, complete with a witch sitting astride a broomstick, atop of the tiled roof. The two large flags unfurled at full mast are a reminder of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations, held here a couple of months ago at the beginning of June. The (only) main un-roped pitch is marked out in the field beyond the changing rooms. Although there are no dedicated spectator facilities at present, the club has invested in a couple of brand-new Perspex dug outs, positioned close to half-way along the right-hand side touchline.

According to the busy club chairman Adam Donskey, Gunness & Burringham Football Club was formed only a couple of years ago, playing initially as a junior side at under fifteen level. A decision was made to form an open-age team, which came to fruition when a successful application was made to join the S&DL last season. The club really struggled in their inaugural campaign and the stats make for some grim reading. Finishing next to bottom in the third (lowest division), they lost eleven (out of twelve) matches, recording many heavy defeats along the way and scoring the fewest goals in the entire division. Indeed, their only victory came when they beat rock bottom side and perennial whipping boys, Santon FC, in a game that ended 7-2 back in March. So, with renewed optimism and a few new faces brought in to strengthen the squad over the summer, you would hope the lads could do better this season.

Judging by this performance, the answer is a resounding, no! In truth, the hosts were never really in it from the off, as the visitors Glennys, named after a bar with the same name in Scunthorpe town centre, were in full control throughout the entire game. Tyler James (17) put his side into the lead poking the ball home through a group of players inside the six-yard box before Aaron Lidgett (31) doubled the score sending larger than life keeper Jon Fowles the wrong way from the penalty spot just two minutes later. Glennys went three up before the break, again as a result of some slack defending, when Josh Housam (33) was allowed time and space to tap home from close range shortly after the half hour mark.

Within five minutes of the restart, it was Kane Henderson (50) who stole in at the back post beating the offside trap to drill the ball home following a corner, one of many set piece plays chalked up during the afternoon. Substitute Adam Simmons (74) came on to complete the rout netting his side's fifth goal, beating the advancing Fowles, in a one-on-one contest, to complete what had been a thoroughly miserable afternoon for Gunness. Despite picking the ball out his net more times than he would have liked, I voted the bespectacled keeper (aka Jonno - check out his name ironed onto the back of his jersey) the Man of the Match, after making some heroic last gasp saves to prevent the final score from reaching double figures. Although it seemed easy pickings for the visitors, I thought overall that they looked a decent outfit and wouldn't be surprised if they improved on their fourth placing from last season (like Gunness, it was also their first campaign in the S&DL). The game, refereed expertly by match official Stephen McManus, his first in the league since moving up here from Kent, was played on a surprisingly well-grassed pitch. According to my headcount, made during the second half, about thirty spectators were in attendance.

The league is one of the smallest in the country and, like many of its kind up and down the land, supplements its fixtures by organising several cup competitions. As much as I enjoy watching games in this league, I do worry about its future longevity and ultimate survival. If you don't know much about the S&DL, I can confirm that for the current 2022-23 season, it will be contested with just two divisions (and not three). With some teams leaving and fewer new applications, restructuring over the summer has meant that twenty-four clubs have now been reduced to nineteen, with ten teams in Division One and nine, in Division Two. Losing four teams might not seem that many, but if this pattern continues at the same rate, then a once proud competition boasting thirty-one teams just ten years ago, could be struggling to make up the numbers and like many former leagues disappear altogether, one day. Let's just hope for the good of the game that this situation doesn't happen.

It had been another lovely afternoon's entertainment, spent at a most welcoming, friendly club. A visit to Gunness & Burringham FC comes highly recommended to all fans of 'grass roots' football. I nearly forgot to mention that I'm also celebrating my birthday today - doh. What a shame that very large slice of triple chocolate cake with helping of full-fat cream poured over it for good measure, will just have to wait until I've finished my bike ride tomorrow. Hmmm. Until then, how about a few lines from that famous Beatles song: *'When I'm Sixty-Four...?!'*

*FGIF Match Rating: 3\* FGIF Ground Rating: 3\**





**R No.4: WebEd** - Saturday 27th August 2022; **Middleton** (v Leeds Medics & Dentists); Yorkshire Amateur League Supreme Division; Kick-Off: 2.00pm; Venue: Leeds South Hub, Middleton Road, Belle Isle, Leeds, West Yorks, LS103JA; Result: 3-2; Admission: None; Programme: None; Attendance: 41.

#### MAKING A LEAGUE DEBUT

It's something a little bit different for the hopping neutral from the East Riding today. With nothing really standing out in the Bank Holiday fixtures this weekend, I eventually decide to pick a game in the Yorkshire Amateur League, a competition which I know very little about having never crossed my hopping radar before. Yes, this is a definitely a new one for me. With participating clubs predominantly based in West Yorkshire, I find a couple of games in Leeds which are both within easy reach of *FGIF* HQ. and after a bit of faffing about finally prime the Sat Nav for Middleton Football Club (over my second choice Alwoodley FC which is a bit further afield requiring a longer journey around the city's northern ring road).

The club is relatively new having been established five years ago, back in 2017, and only joining the YAL a year later. Formally known as New Middleton, the first team have achieved huge success in their very short history winning the Yorkshire Amateur League Division Three title and Hancock Cup double in their debut season which resulted in them being promoted four (yes, four) divisions up to the YAL Premier section. After suffering only one defeat and amassing a positive goal difference of over 100 goals, Middleton lifted the title in 2020/21 moving up to the Supreme Division, thereby gaining Step 7 status. Incredibly, they finished as runners-up, behind Huddersfield based side Littletown FC, and went on to win the Leeds & District Senior Challenge Cup.

The club also runs a Reserve team formed in 2020-21 which now competes in the YAL Championship after winning the Division 2 in their debut season. In addition, they also operate a 'Flexi' team which participates in the West Riding FA Flexi League (be honest, I bet you had never heard of it either). They joined the competition in 2017 winning it three times: in 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2020/21 and went on to win the West Riding FA Flexi Summer Cup in 2018/19. Hoppers may be

interested to note that the Flexi games are played on Thursday evenings at the West Riding FA ground in the Oulton area of Leeds.

The club plays its games at the South Leeds Hub, an activity centre for youngsters located in the Belle Isle area of Leeds. It's in the adjoining district to Middleton itself and not far from both the M621 and M1 which run close by. After leaving the M62 junction at junction 30 my westerly route by-passes both, taking a more circuitous journey from Castle Gate through the sticks via Carlton and Rothwell before arriving at the ground off Belle Isle Road. As you approach, the entrance and car park can be seen on the opposite side of the carriageway which means that you need to drive past it, turn at the Belle Isle Circus (next) roundabout further along and come back on yourself to get there.

The first team and reserves both play matches on a 4G pitch inside the multi-use games area (or cage to you and me) which is next to the car park and runs parallel to the main road. The playing surface here certainly seems less springy than the 4G rubber crumb version used by Nunsthorpe at the FDC in Bradley where I attended a game in the Lincolnshire League last week. In fact, I'm still finding bits of the black crumb inside my trainers from my hop a full seven days later. A separate walkway/spectator viewing area runs almost the entire length of the pitch (along the left touchline) inside the green wire mesh fence perimeter. There is no spectator cover or dug outs on site at present. Apart from buildings belonging to the youth centre, a row of semi-detached houses overlooks the far end of the playing area. The players use changing rooms located inside the dedicated sports department/faculty of the SL Hub, an impressive new brick building with slightly curved roof which stands beyond and to the left of the main car park, some 100 yards from the pitch.

This afternoon Middleton are taking on Leeds Medics and Dentists: a great name for a club, by the way. Once made up of such learned professionals, it is no longer the case today, as the membership is open to all according to one of the subs who happened to be a PE teacher. Check out their interesting club emblem (in the album gallery) ironed onto their shirts - I hope that the skull and crossbones doesn't truly reflect the current state of the NHS, or we are all definitely in trouble! With a couple of league games having been played already, the hosts have made a terrific start to the new campaign sitting joint top of the table on maximum points whereas their opponents find themselves next to bottom, yet to record any points to their name. On this evidence *Wraybet* would be foolish to predict anything other than a comfortable home win.

Not a bit of it. After taking an early lead when the unmarked Jordan Walker (12) found himself with the easiest of taps in from six yards out, it looked as though the hosts would go on to dominate the game. How wrong can you be? In fact, it was the visitors who ended the half the strongest, taking a well-deserved lead into the break. Firstly, Jack Helliwell (17) levelled matters five minutes later when his direct free kick, taken just inside the Middleton half, surprised everyone including keeper Harry Bradley who seemingly unsighted at first, saw the ball too late to keep it out. Next it was Nathan Brady (23) who put his side, dressed in all-purple, ahead, when his well-placed shot from the edge of the box comfortably sailed past the outstretched arms of Bradley and into the back of the net.

Moments after the break it was Walker (58), nicknamed 'Horse' by his teammates, for reasons I can't go into here (!!), scored his second goal of the game, firing an unstoppable and thunderous drive into the top right-hand corner of the goal frame which helped Middleton to draw level. Inspired by this the hosts then scored what proved to be the decisive winning goal just five minutes later, as the ball took a wicked deflection off the three-man wall lined up to face a direct free kick (OG-64) - leaving the keeper stranded - desperately trying to change direction, he could only look on as the ball crossed the line. As the final whistle sounded it signalled the end of what had been a thoroughly absorbing end to end contest. With Middleton consolidating their top of the table position, somehow you really couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for the Medics who battled hard throughout and deserved to get at least a point for their efforts.

The match played in lovely warm sunny and, at times hot conditions, attracted over forty spectators to Middleton Road (address given for the main part of the Hub at the opposite side the campus). Neither programmes nor refreshments were made available during the afternoon. But it mattered not a jot to me as the club officials, players and fans made me feel very welcome on my short stay and I would recommend a visit here to fellow travellers. Special mention must go to the affable manager Reece Mudd and his assistant Don Chadwick who kindly fielded all my questions about the club and allowed me to access all areas for the photos.

In fact, I certainly wouldn't hesitate attending future games in this competition, details of which can be found on the formative *FA Full-Time* website and on social media where most clubs have *twitter* accounts to keep you informed about their progress these days. If you get chance, why not throw caution to the wind and attend a match in a new league. Like me, you might really enjoy it!

*FGIF Match Rating: 4\* FGIF Ground Rating: 2\**



**R No.3: WebEd** - Saturday 20th August 2022; **Nunsthorpe** (v Immingham Town); Lincolnshire League; Kick-Off: 3.15pm; Venue: Bradley FDC - 4G pitch, Bradley Road, Grimsby, North Lincs, DN370AG; Result: 1-3; Admission: None; Programme: None; Attendance: 46.

## COMPLETING THE SET

My hop today involved making the relatively short trip over the Humber Bridge to Grimsby, a journey taking about forty minutes to complete, from *FGIF* HQ. This was in fact my third visit to the FDC in Bradley having previously taken in games to watch Grimsby Borough FC here last season and, before that, former tenants Cleethorpes Town FC in their ground share days, back in 2018. This afternoon it was with eager anticipation that I took in a game 'next door' on the adjacent, 4G pitch which occupies part of the football hub. I'm not really sure how fellow travellers would judge this, but I considered it to be a new ground 'tick' with the added bonus of finally completing visits to all current Lincolnshire Football League club venues thrown in for good measure - a two for one offer, if you like.

The FDC covers a vast area and provides a wide range of community pitches used by players of all ages and abilities. Check out the framed legend near reception which highlights all the pitches on site. Although Borough and Nunsthorpe share the main facilities (social club, tea bar, changing room area and toilets), each of their grounds are self-contained and quite distinct from one another inside the complex. I tried, a couple of times, to get a peek of the action over the panelled fence (Borough were playing Hebburn in a NPL fixture) but couldn't see very much at all. Indeed, spectators watching Nunsthorpe actually come in through a separate entrance to access the floodlit 4G playing area, situated over to the left. Running parallel to, and behind the pavilion, this has its own concourse (outside the perimeter fencing) which continues along the whole length of the pitch. Although fans are not allowed inside cage itself, there is an open section/viewing area complete with comfort rail found just to the left of the players' dug outs.

Today's game saw the visit of local club Immingham Town to the FDC. Despite having only played one game to date, both sides come into the match unbeaten - the hosts overcoming Brigg CIC 6-0 here last week to go top (yes, I know it's very early days...) with the Pilgrims winning on the road, earning a 1-0 victory over Skegness Reserves. For the neutral observer a feisty 'derby' encounter is definitely 'on the cards' this afternoon.

The game which started later than normal (at 3.15pm to accommodate a children's party booking on the 4G) did not fail to disappoint. Once the eagle-eyed referee was happy that the four corner flags were eventually located and hastily placed in situ, the game started at what was a frantic pace. The visitors bossed the early stages and deservedly took a first-half lead when Lucas Meredith (19), with his back to goal, flicked the ball up, turned and blasted it over the keeper James Fenty from a tight angle, at position just within the bright white lines marking the six-yard box. Meredith himself then became provider with a defence splitting pass to find Callum Degruchy (55) who calmly slipped the ball under the advancing Fenty to make it 0-2, barely ten minutes after the re-start. The Pilgrims effectively wrapped the game up just after the hour mark when Ollie Graham (64) capitalised on a mix up in the Nunsthorpe defence to expertly steer the ball home despite the best efforts of Fenty to close down the cavernous space left in front of him by his defenders. The hosts did manage to get themselves on the scoresheet when Luke Spreadbury (67) prodded home from ten yards out, a few minutes afterwards but it counted for little, as Immingham held onto their two-goal lead to claim victory and three more valuable points. The result now moves them to the



top of the table, a ranking they currently share with Wyberton, Lincoln Moorlands and Tetney Rovers, all of whom have gained maximum points at this early stage of the campaign.

The game played in lovely, warm and sunny conditions attracted, judging by my rough head count, nearly fifty spectators although the *FA Full-Time* website states that only 20 were present. I don't know why there is always such a discrepancy, I can never understand this, can you? I was joined fence-side by fellow hopper Pete who had travelled over from Chesterfield and was excellent company to be with. As expected, the club doesn't issue programmes, probably like most others in the league, unless Immingham still do...if you do know of any, please drop me a line.

During a stoppage in play, I managed to have a quick chat with enthusiastic club manager Davie Cooper who gave me a useful potted history about Nunsthorpe Football Club. Established back in 2014, they started out as Nunsthorpe Tavern FC - the village is only a few miles away from here - with a strong social bias, formed by Davie and his assistant Ash Ballard. They gained early success competing in the Grimsby Sunday League finishing as runners-up in Division Five in 2015 before moving up to take both league and cup honours in Division One, only a short time later. After playing in the Premier (top) Division for three seasons, a successful application was made to join the Lincolnshire Football League. Despite a disrupted 2020-21 season (caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic) which saw the club finish in the mid-table after only playing a handful of games, they did manage to lift silverware, winning the Lincolnshire League Supplementary Cup beating Louth Town 3-2 after extra time in the final played at Skegness Town FC. This was a terrific achievement considering it was only their debut season at this level. With the competition now gaining Step 7 status in the pyramid, the club was 'strongly advised' to drop the 'Tavern' bit from their name this campaign, in line with Lincolnshire FA rules which bar pub teams (pardon the pun) if they wanted to continue at this level. Sounds like a bit of arm twisting behind backs, if you ask me. Reluctantly they did, and here they are today.

Davie went on to explain that the fanbase is growing in numbers, but attendances here can often depend on whether other local sides are also playing at home (in the area) on the same afternoon. When you consider that Grimsby Borough, Grimsby Town and Cleethorpes were all playing home games this afternoon (what are the chances of that happening?), attracting a crowd of nearly fifty offers plenty of encouragement for the future.

To find out more about Nunsthorpe FC check out the *FA Full-Time* website covering the Lincs League or, view the club's *twitter* account where updates on fixtures and results are added on a regular basis. If you are into match photos then check out the excellent feed of Tony Cox, the club photographer, who covers most home games here. Needless to say, a chance to take in a game at this friendly club is to be recommended to all grounds' collectors. The joys of completing another football league continues...have fun wherever you go...

*FGIF Match Rating: 3\* FGIF Ground Rating: 2\**



**R No.2: WebEd** - Saturday 13th August 2022; **Wakefield AFC** (v Armthorpe Welfare); Northern Counties East League Division One; Kick-Off: 3.00pm; Venue: The Millennium Stadium, Featherstone Rovers RLFC, Post Office Road, Featherstone, South Yorks, WF75EN; Result: 5-0; Admission: £5; Programme: 32pp, £2; Attendance: 248.

#### A LOFTY CONVERSION...

With an athletics competition taking priority over my groundhopping duties two weeks ago (what a part-timer, I hear you say!), an opportunity to take in Wakefield's first competitive game in the Northern Counties East League was, temporarily, put on the back burner (no pun intended despite the hot weather). In true hopping style I'm making amends for this today, by heading with mega enthusiasm, over to Featherstone, for my belated fix.

My journey along the M62 is an easy one and after dropping my daughter Steph at the Junction 32 Outlet retail park in neighbouring Castleford to grab the latest bargains, I arrive at the home of Featherstone Rovers RLFC, off Post Office Road, with plenty of time to spare ahead of kick-off. The place is buzzing as fans head through the turnstiles and onto the main concourse. As you can imagine (if you haven't been here yet) the rugby ground, also known as the Millennium Stadium, is very impressive with a vast amount of seated cover (if you didn't yet know some of it was transported here from Scarborough Town FC) on three sides, and a large open terrace on the other. Suffice to say, with a capacity of 7000, it more than outweighs the needs of any football club playing in the NCEL, possibly even the National League, which makes a visit here seem quite surreal, if I'm being honest. The photos in the album gallery will provide a much better description of the ground, than I can in writing.

However, here are a few observations which might help. From first impressions, you can't help feeling that you are in a large rugby (not football) ground and rightly so. The history of Featherstone RLFC dominates proceedings here - check out the brown ground direction sign on Post Office Road; the grand lettering splashed across the stands and over the seating and, the terrific mural documenting the history over the years stretching along the end terrace - there is no mistaking that you are in rugby league territory. As a result, the presence of a football club, namely Wakefield AFC, is still very much low key, with little or no

signage to give them any sort of identity here. Except for a few flags draped over the front seats in the home stand before the game starts, it would be hard to make a case for them being here. But this is only the start of bigger and better things to come, you would like to think, and it will definitely take time for such an ambitious 'project' to move forward. Don't forget that progress on the field has been startling and it is hard to believe that the team was playing in the second tier of the Sheffield County League just a few years ago (see below).

Many older (and perhaps a few younger) members of the hopping fraternity may remember that a former club Wakefield FC (nothing to do with the present set up) existed, having played in the Northern Premier League between 2007-2014. The club had strong ties with Emley FC who, after facing eviction from their Welfare Ground home, due to stringent NPL ground grading restrictions, moved into Wakefield Trinity's RLFC Belle Vue ground in 2000-01. After being renamed Wakefield & Emley FC, many supporters felt alienated at the change, and with lower attendances, left the club bottom of the NPL Premier Division. Although there was a further change in title to Wakefield-Emley FC in 2004-05, disgruntled fans needed a team to replace their reserves side who had been disbanded leaving the village without a football team to call its own. When a new club AFC Emley was formed in 2005, many fans parted company with quasi-Wakefield-Emley setup, returning to watch football in the village instead. After relegation to the NPL 1, the club dropped the Emley part of its name, simply becoming called Wakefield FC. Struggling to build a proper fan base in the city, the club moved to College Grove in Wakefield before resigning from the NPL and being wound up altogether in 2014.

So, what's the back story with this new club, Wakefield AFC? It appears that a group of businessmen first founded the club back in 2019. Initially playing its home games at the Dorothy Hyman Sports Centre (inside the running track) in Barnsley, the club competed in the Sheffield & Hallamshire County Senior League Premier Division. However, during this time the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and it was decided by the league in consultation with the FA, that the season would be cancelled and all results for the matches played in 2019-20 would be declared null and void.

With the pandemic still prevalent and lockdowns being enforced, only a handful of games were played during the following campaign, with the club finishing in the top half of the table (sixth out of fifteen clubs in the division) by the end of 2020-21. However, off the field, an ambitious deal had been made by Wakefield AFC to enter into a groundshare agreement with Featherstone Rovers RLFC allowing the football club to play its home matches at the Millennium Stadium. By November 2021, VO2 Capital, an American, Connecticut-based family-run firm, had taken a majority interest at the football club, announcing at the same time, a merger with Wakefield Trinity Ladies Football club, thus creating a new women's section for Wakefield AFC.

By January 2022, Chairman Guilherme Decca appointed Gabriel Mozzini as first team manager as part of several measures taken by VO2 Capital to re-organize the club structure. Under Mozzini's, guidance, the team went on a remarkable run of seventeen unbeaten games, including six consecutive clean sheets, to finish what was a most eventful and successful season. On May 14th, Wakefield AFC finally

won their first league title after beating Barnsley based Dodworth Miners Welfare 2-0 at home in the last game of the season (in front of a massive 608 spectators!!!!), thereby gaining promotion to the NCEL within three years of first being established, which is a truly remarkable feat, it must be said...

Today saw the visit of Doncaster-based Armthorpe Welfare to the Millennium Stadium for a NCEL1 fixture. After beating Glasshoughton here by a 3-1 score-line on the opening day (the game I had originally planned to watch) and earning a 2-2 draw at Shirebrook last week, Wakey stood seventh in the table behind a clutch of clubs already on maximum points. By contrast the visitors had yet to record a single point having lost both of their opening games to date (H v Dronfield, 1-3 and A v Worsborough, 1-0) which left them in fifteenth place. As expected, the result went according to the form book with the homesters notching a resounding 5-0 victory (3-0 up by half-time) putting in a superb team performance. It certainly didn't help matters for Armthorpe when they were reduced to ten men in the second half. As each goal was banged in, there were some terrific graphics on the electronic scoreboard positioned in the far corner of the ground which naturally went down very well with the jubilant home fans and neutrals, like me.

The match played in very hot conditions (requiring several drinks breaks during the game) on a surprising well grassed, verdant surface, attracted an impressive crowd of 248 spectators. Most in attendance chose to watch the game inside the large main stand (a cooler option out of the strong heat) with the other areas remaining almost empty, except for a few who had gathered on the far side and on the open terrace to the right. It was interesting to note how many locals were wearing their white, red and blue replica kit shirts, perhaps a sign that an interest in supporting the club is starting grow.

A glossy full colour 32-page programme entitled: '*All Wakey Aern't We*', priced at £2, covered all the basics including a hefty four-page focus on the visitors and a further six devoted to their own pen pictures. Although I had left my reading glasses inside the glove box of the car (doh!), it didn't matter as the print size was so big, I didn't need them. A wide range of refreshments were available from several mobile catering outlets parked up along the concourse behind the main stand. The club also sells a range of souvenirs available from the club shop and from a stall set up inside the entrance. Although I managed to pay cash admission upon arrival, the club also operates a ticketing system on their website where you can scan the bar code on your smart phone for entry at the turnstile. Unsurprisingly, the option to get in for free (as was the case last season) no longer exists!

I thoroughly enjoyed my short visit to the Millennium Stadium this afternoon. It had been a wonderful experience to take in such a fantastic ground, oozing with character and steeped in rugby league nostalgia. Without a doubt, it has to be one of the best venues to watch NCEL football, even non-league football higher up the pyramid, come to think of it. I was certainly made to feel very welcome by everyone I spoke to, and I wish Wakefield AFC the very best for the future and hope that they continue to sustain a football club, perhaps playing at a higher level than this one day. The joys of watching football matches in great stadia is definitely not to be missed.

*FGIF Match Rating: 3\* FGIF Ground Rating: 5\**





**R No.1: WebEd** - Saturday 6th August 2022; **Goole AFC** (v Consett); FA Cup Extra Preliminary Round; Kick-Off: 3.00pm; Venue: The Victoria Pleasure Grounds, Marcus Street, Goole, East Yorks, DN146SL; Result: 4-1; Admission: £6; Programme: 20pp, £2; Attendance: 177.

#### A WONDERFUL TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

After a gap of almost thirty-three years, I have chosen to make a re-visit to the Victoria Pleasure Grounds, home of Goole AFC. Now don't get me wrong this is not the first time I have thought about taking a trip down memory lane to check out the ground - my last attempt was a couple of years ago during the pandemic when football viewing and travelling had been severely curtailed. It was during the second wave of COVID-19 when it was deemed necessary by our leaders and prominent medics to place certain parts of the country into tiers (depending on the rate of transmission) that I attempted to travel across East Yorkshire (and not an inch outside it) to get my fix. Alas I was denied access with preference going to home fans and season ticket holders only. Despite the looming health crisis, the country was (or should that be is) going through, it almost made sense at the time...

According to my little blue hopping logbook, the first of many subsequent editions used to compile my hopping exploits over the years, it was back on the 17/12/88 that I attended the ground to take in an HFS Loans (Northern Premier League) Premier Division fixture against Southport. Reading the now almost faint entry written then in pencil on the fading yellow page, I can tell you that the game, my fortieth non-league match, ended in a 1-1 draw. Although I do remember attending the game, I can recall little about the match nor the ground apart from there being a running track, possibly a cinder variety of some description, surrounding the pitch, and a large water tower overlooking the site.

Fast forward to today. Filled with the wide-eyed excitement I turn down Carter Street and pull up into a prime parking spot literally just vacated by a local resident, which brings me outside the ground in the adjoining Marcus Street (the one given as the club address). The VPG is virtually shoehorned into its place with hardly the width of a 'fag paper' separating a sprawling myriad of terraced houses which back onto its four sides. This location dominated by row upon row of similar looking terracotta brick buildings each bearing almost identical sloping roofs,

chimney pots, satellite dishes and gardens with lines full of washing hanging out to dry in the sultry air, give the place an instant and unique appeal, something that dare I say it, is possibly only found 'up North'.

I'll let the ground photos in the album provide a better and more detailed description than I can, but here is a brief summary to get your hopping juices flowing. From first impressions the site is vast. There is a feeling of symmetry about the place too with stands flanking opposite sides of the arena and both ends remaining open with plenty of standing room. A six-lane running track surrounds the pitch with the modern-day rubber crumb construction now replacing the old, dated cinder in-fill to give it a lovely, enclosed feel. As first imagined a large water tower and adjacent chimney (a rather phallic-looking red brick construction) totally dominate proceedings and clearly visible from all angles as the photos will testify to. Referred to locally as the Salt and Pepper Pots, I believe these buildings were originally old water towers serving the dockland area of Goole. It's hard not to be distracted by such prominent twin structures. A tidy main stand to the left complete with red corrugated metal fascia houses a large terrace covering at least a dozen concrete steps beneath. There is a section of seating at the far end. The stand opposite which replaced a former cover blown down by a storm back around the time of the millennium provides additional cover. A well-stocked club shop, manned by the ever-helpful Dave Oldridge, and tea bar are found at opposite sides of, and close to, the main entrance and turnstile block, another nice touch.

Although the club has firmly established itself in the NCEL, it has not always been plain sailing for The Vikings (pardon the pun) who have endured turbulent times over the years. Established by Mike Norman in 1997 as a replacement for the old Goole Town FC which folded at the end of the 1995-96 season, the new club immediately joined the Premier Division of the CML. It went on to win the division at the first attempt, losing only one league match all season, earning promotion to the Supreme Division. The following season saw the club win the Wakefield Floodlit Cup and the League Cup. A third-place finish also saw them gain promotion into Division One of the NCEL.

In its first season the club won both the Wilkinson Sword Trophy and the Division One title, earning promotion to the Premier Division. In 2004-05 the club won the Premier Division, earning promotion to Division One of the NPL, and went on to lift the West Riding County Cup League two years later. League restructuring saw the club placed in Division One South for the 2007-08, and they remained in the division until being transferred to Division One North in 2012. Although they were moved back to Division One South the following season, the club were transferred to Division One North again in 2016. After finishing second-from-bottom of the division the club were due to be relegated until being reprieved when Ilkeston were excluded from the league. Sadly, Goole finished bottom of Division One North the following campaign, resulting in relegation to the Premier Division of the Northern Counties East League where they have remained ever since.

My visit today saw the visit of newly promoted NPL outfit Consett to the VPG which added much extra spice for the hopping neutral to this opening round FA Cup tie. The game was an absolute belter and provided one of the shock results of the afternoon with the hosts winning 4-1 to book their place into the next round.

However, before a ball was kicked a problem with the shirts had to be resolved - there was a clash of colours, as Consett normally dressed in white tops were unaware that the hosts had elected to play the match wearing their newly designed centenary shirts, also in white. As a result, the visitors donned the red Goole away shirts instead, to placate the officials and add a bit of confusion to proceedings. I wonder what late comers thought after passing through the turnstiles upon seeing two teams dressed in Goole kit on the pitch?!

For the record it was Goole who took the lead just after the half hour mark from a corner with Sam Cable (32) raced into the six-yard box and headed the ball low into the net. Moments before the break The Vikings scored their second, without doubt the goal of the match, when Nathan Perks (42) seeing the keeper off his line following a poor clearance, fired the ball into an empty goal from just inside his own half. Despite some heroics from the home keeper Matt Zaniewski who had been called upon to make several fine saves at the start of the second half, Consett got back into the game when Kieran Aplin (65) scored straight from a corner with the keeper and his defence being helpless to prevent the goal. Within ten minutes Goole restored their two-goal lead when Joel Spence's lofted free kick was met at the far post by Dylan Collington who set up Josh Dacre (74) to head home on the line making it 3-1. The game was over when Luke Williams (90+2) chested the ball into the back of the net after an excellent Callum Petch cross to make it 4-1, just before the final whistle marked the end of what had been a pulsating cup tie.

The game played in beautiful warm and sunny conditions on a surprisingly, given the current drought situation, well-grassed pitch attracted 177 spectators including many visiting fans who had travelled down from Durham. A glossy full colour 20-page programme, entitled the '*Vikings Review*', was issued for the match and contained a mixture of news, past match reports, stats and an informative focus on the visitors. Although the tea bar was closed due to staff sickness (hope it wasn't something they had eaten), a replacement mobile refreshment wagon was booked, arriving just minutes ahead of kick-off. Before then many had already nipped out to get some fried tuck from a chippy around the corner. At this point I would like to thank the old couple from Consett who found the large portion size too much for them and generously donated almost half their helping to yours truly and very tasty it was too. Before you ask, no, I didn't twist their arms in parting with it!

My visit to the VPG had been a lovely way to start the new season and I wish the Vikings well on their march to the arch where they will travel to Carlisle City in the next round of the FA Cup. For more information about the club visit the Goole AFC club website, *twitter* feed or the pages on the superb NCEL site where there will be updates on all essential stats covering The Vikings. The unbridled joys of re-visiting old clubs, checking out cracking grounds and watching FA Cup upsets definitely footballing things to saviour, made this an afternoon to remember!

*FGIF* Match Rating: 5\* *FGIF* Ground Rating: 5\*

End