

# Cinderella goes to the

**S**O WHY dug-outs? Well, in many ways the humble dug-out offers a snapshot of non-league football.

Often they have that wonderful home made quality (or lack of quality) which epitomises what so many of us love about the lower reaches of the “national game.”

It's something of a Cinderella structure, often overlooked, but where many game-changing decisions are made. Closer examination also reveals that the subtle but interminable tinkering with ground grading requirements is reflected in dug-outs. It's not unusual for there to be three or more, sometimes at opposite sides of the pitch.

My publisher's comments were music to the ears. After years of visiting southern grounds, often following Eastbourne Borough on their rapid Pyramid climbing, I now had an excuse. Better, I was actually being paid to venture into what I regard as football's spiritual home.

It was to be more than a dug-out hunting exercise. A trip to the “Northern Goalfields” offered the opportunity greatly to expand the portfolio of the burgeoning Pyramid Passion website.

Northwards by air, I read Harry Pearson's wonderfully evocative “Far Corner” to get into the mood. The “north” also included the north-west, an itinerary that would take me from Altrincham to Kendal Town, via the likes of Nelson, Accrington Stanley and Clitheroe before heading to the North-East the following day.

Leaving the Cumbrian rain on Saturday morning, my first call was Hazel Grove, Cockfield, christened the “Village Wonder team” after the 1920s' Amateur Cup exploits. I'd an idea of what to expect, but nothing

A bench mark, no doubt, **DAVID BAUCKHAM** is writing a book about non-league dug-outs. “Great” said the publisher, but you have to get yourself to the North-East. Anxious to see the real technical area, he caught the next plane...



prepared me for the degree to which it had deteriorated. The dug-outs were still there, in front of the only remaining cover. Given that the first English dug-outs didn't appear until the 1930s, when Everton pinched the idea from Aberdeen, they probably didn't witness the glory years. An evocative venue, nonetheless.

It was a short drive to the Welfare Ground, Evenwood Town's erstwhile home. Thanks to the vandals, access was easy. It was clear from the number of discarded beer cans that the ground remains a favourite haunt of the indigenous undesirables. I understand that it is going to be used by other clubs, but fear a perennial struggle to keep it free from unwanted visitors.

Off to West Auckland's well kept ground, where a friendly backroom boy was preparing for that afternoon's match at Washington. Still no dug-outs of note, though, and a detour to Spennymoor's Brewery Field also proved fruitless, the ground tightly locked up.

Sadly I was too late to visit Kingsway, Bishop Auckland's much lamented home and one of the historic venues, so it was off to Dean Street, Shildon, where the pagoda shaped stand was everything I'd hoped. Judging by the pigeon droppings and the hole in the roof, however, I couldn't help wonder how popular it is on match days.

While in the town, I popped into Shildon Railway, where I found dug-outs on either side of the pitch. That on the far side was clearly the more recent, but being particularly perverse, I was rather taken by its smaller wooden companion opposite, which apparently also serves as storage for the flags.

Crook Town next, and again in luck. A club official was gathering the kit before heading to Spennymoor, where I hoped he'd find someone at home. Millfield is everything a traditional non-league ground should be – terracing, grassed banks, fine pitched roof stand. I could pen an entire article about it.

More nostalgia down the road at Willington, and at last some wonderfully wobbly dug-outs for the book – but hard to believe from a sparse Hall Lane that 88,000 once watched them at Wembley. They were about to face Darwin, whose ground I'd visited the day previously. The Vase campaign was sadly about to end.

Next to Stanley United, another ground with iconic status among enthusiasts. It featured on the Culture Show, and no wonder. The High Road address of the Hill Top ground offers an idea of what to expect, the views are impressive, but it's the solemn two-up, two-down house-cum-dressing rooms on the touchline which gives the ground its



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undeniable character.

Onwards and upwards. It's said that no English ground is nearer the moon than Tow Law, and though Buxton vies with it to be the highest, the Derbyshire experience is nothing like that at the Lawers.

It was time for a bit of action. Esh Winning v Billingham Synthonia was tempting, if only to see the only team named after a fertiliser, but I opted for Consett against the re-named Worsbrough Bridge Athletic in the Vase. The entrance to Belle Vue is perhaps more imposing than the ground itself, though the stand is still impressive – as is the programme. I also picked up NVNG, to realise that Ryton's "bus stop" dug-outs should have been on the itinerary.

I left at half-time, arriving at Whickham's three-sided ground in time to see the hosts take a 3-0 lead against Chadderton, but the highlight was a pie. Southern grounds rarely offer pies, and the service was by three of the most delightful tea ladies I've ever come across. It would appear that Whickham WI is alive and well.

I might have made Dunston but got lost. Rather than risk an unscheduled visit to the MetroCentre, I decided on a bit of culture in the imposing shape of the Angel of the North. I just wish it had faced the other way, so I could have taken a photograph with the adjacent football pitches in the foreground.

There was still time for a pic over the wall at Chester-le-Street, where I've never seen so many warnings in so small an area, before heading to my hotel at Scotch Corner. It should have been via Darlington RA but I got lost again, no doubt overwhelmed by the riches of an eventful day.

■ Dugouts will be published by New Holland Publishers (UK) in October 2006. David Bauckham's website is [www.pyramidpassion.co.uk](http://www.pyramidpassion.co.uk)



● Dug in: the dug-outs (top to bottom) at Cockfield, Willington and Stanley United. (Pictures by David Bauckham).