

Outside the Bay

An offbeat look at the world of North East football inside & outside of Hillheads. . . with our recently returned to the Bay (welcome home) correspondent Paul Benneworth



Today we welcome Hebburn Town in the Emirates FA Cup. I moved to the Netherlands in 2009, it's only when a club like Blyth Spartans have a decent FA Cup run like in 2014 that North Eastern non-league clubs get into Dutch media.

Although I come back three times annually and go to the odd game, it's been social media that's been vital for

following local football.

When I left, Twitter had just stopped sending SMS text messages to your phone. But in the intervening decade, it's become a lifeline for expats to follow the North East's football scene.

One of my most vivid memories of supporting Whitley Bay by social media was our own brilliant and money-spinning FA Cup run a couple of seasons ago where we made it through the qualifying rounds.

Wikipedia had informed me that there was £20,000 at stake for the winner of one game. Following that match on social media was like following NUFC games on Ceefax with a live betting slip in the early 1990s.

More recently, it's been fun watching club legend Paul Chow enjoying his swansong years, and then finally putting his playing feet up last weekend.

And Mark Carruthers' – himself an occasional visitor to Hillheads – has been active writing about North East non-league football. He's covered everything from Gateshead FC's heroic rebirth as a fan-owned club down to the Ebac Northern league's comings and goings in the Sunday Sun.

Following at a distance is harder in times of turmoil. It was my fellow columnist Bay Blogger who expressed it better than me, saying Bay fans sometimes found it hard to comprehend our club's unexplained departures and apparent lack of investment given the highest league attendances nationally at this level.

He calmed down and cheered up when a board member took him to one side and explained the plans that were going on. But no one is putting that kind of sensitive information into a press release.

So the life of an expat Bay fan for much of last season was following the results, crossing my fingers, and hoping it turns out for the best.

My expectations this summer have definitely been raised by the steady flow of signings new and unknown. Craig Macfarlane's retention and captaincy is a very positive move and with Craig showing that you can do it twice, I thought it a well-considered gamble to bring Lee Kerr back after six years away.

The new signings also seemed to bring a pedigree and potential that the club clearly needs. So my hopes were high that the club has enough on paper for a successful 2019-20 season. But football is played on grass, not paper, as the cliché goes.

And the expat life ended last month when me and the family bought a house back in Whitley Bay. I was barely off the plane when the West Auckland friendly kicked off, so my first decisive act as a North Tyneside resident was to head to the game.

I've been to two preseason friendlies, and I've been impressed. Against West Auckland Tuns, we looked like a sharp, aggressive and drilled outfit, winning our challenges and finding our passes.

Playing lower league opposition, we showed no mercy in the first half, before the necessary substitutions saw the foot taken slightly off the gas for a pleasing 7-0 win.

I also cycled to Croft Park for the Blyth Spartans game on a glorious summer's evening. Spartans' Robbie Dale was every bit as impressive as in the 2015 FA Cup, dominating the left side before falling into a more central holding role in the second half.

Beyond the talismanic Dale, we held our own against a side fighting last season for the National League North playoffs. Even home fans admitted we were unlucky that a foul in the dying seconds was given outside the box, although a penalty and 2-2 draw would have definitely flattered Bay.

The early season start meant not all players looked fully match fit, but games come thick and fast from now on in. As we start our 2019-20 Cup journey, we're two games down, with our first game a 1-1 win against a Benfield side that are strong contenders for a top half finish.

On the down side, the Bay team that day fielded 7 new players in the starting eleven, with some more familiar and long-serving faces absent.

Our challenge seems to be getting the squad to gel, managing individuals' expectations and ensuring our most talented players don't leave part-way through the season.

I'm not be back full-time in the region but I'll be back more regularly than recent years. I am looking forward to a season where we finally turn the corner, have a decent run in the FA Cup starting today, and give me something positive to write about here!

Paul