

# Turnstiles, Aldi & Screwfix- Inside The World's Oldest Football Ground

In the second of our series going behind the scenes of local clubs and organisations, **Kyle Kennealey** visits the world's oldest football ground at Sandygate for last week's contest against Garforth Town

**U**nsurprisingly, poor weather has limited the amount of local non-league football on offer over the past few weeks.

Doncaster City's clash with Route One Rovers was one such example. Barnsley U21's cup tie with Worsbrough Bridge has been switched to the latter's ground following some floodlight problems on the showcase pitch next to Oakwell.

Weather issues have also affected Hallam FC, who have been carrying out necessary ground works. The Countrymen had been given a year's grace to make the improvements following their dramatic promotion via the play-offs last season.

Despite such conditions, secretary and kitman Ian Jones revealed that the next steps of this work have been achieved.

"We have to thank our unbelievable volunteers. If it weren't for them, the infill work that has been completed simply wouldn't have been done.

"As a committee, we've been able to get the funds in place to go and secure the infills. Our volunteers have come in god-awful weather in the last two or three weeks every single morning.

"It's invaluable. The money it has saved the clubs in terms of manpower, you can't really put a price on it. It's a fantastic improvement, and there is more to come."

Nevertheless, Hallam FC were finally able to get a home game on for the first time in February last Tuesday evening. After an eight-game unbeaten run came to an end at runaway leaders Redcar Athletic last month, they had slipped to a few defeats.

But it's all part of the journey for the Countrymen, who sit comfortably in mid-table with a healthy gap above the relegation places. Regardless of the division, the hours that go into keeping the club running are as long as ever, as Ian explains.

"My usual matchday starts very early in the morning. My secretary job starts with the paranoia that we've got some players suspended. I'll check the FA sites first to make sure that's all sorted.

"Then, as kitman, I pop to Aldi to get water & sweets



and then to Screwfix to get your sock tape, which looks an awful lot like electrical duct tape. I'll chuck all that in the back of the car with bibs, cones and balls and then come up here or to whichever lovely away ground we're at.

"Tuesday nights are more interesting because you've got to juggle it with work. I was at the laundrette for 7 am this morning, and then at work for 8:30."

The Countrymen have recently announced fresh investment, something that is massively important for a club at this level. In the current economic climate, it is even more significant. Ian was tight-lipped on what it may mean for the future.

"It's still in the process of being ratified," he said. "We want to make sure we do things right from a legal point.

"It's something that, as a committee member myself, I fully support. It's definitely going to take the club forward. There are limitations as to how high we can go. But our plan is to solidify ourselves at step four, and utilise the facility that we have better.

"It's getting people in that have a better skill set, especially in terms of marketing and event management. This will help try and move the club forward and sustain us at the level that we are at."

As kick-off approached, supporters began to gather on two sides of the ground. Spectators are not per-

mitted on the far side, opposite the only seating section at Sandygate, which forms a cricket pitch in the summer months.

Attendances have risen drastically in the past few years. From low three-figure crowds, they have seen some gates surpass 1000. Even Tuesday's attendance was a healthy 415. That level of support doesn't go unnoticed.

"It's massive," Ian said. "In terms of our playing budget and outgoings, it's massively reliant on what we get through the gate. It's almost like a chicken-and-egg situation.

"Like every football club, things are tight, but we make it work. With the fans coming in the numbers they have this season, it's allowed us to put the money into the players on the pitch."

A minute's silence took place prior to kick-off to mark the passing of young Garforth Town supporter Ella Lynch, who sadly passed away on Monday.

The Miners started strongly, testing Hallam goalkeeper Hugo Warhurst before forcing a string of early corners. And just seven minutes in, Garforth took the lead from a set-piece, as Rinor Ejupi turned the ball home just in front of the home goalkeeper. Kiyani Clayton struck a fierce effort just wide of goal, as Hallam looked for an instant reply.

Following that frantic start, the game calmed down until a late challenge saw referee Louis Parker award Garforth a penalty. Up stepped Luke Aldrich to send Warhurst the wrong way, with his effort nestling in the bottom left-hand corner.

Hallam were almost gifted a way back into proceedings with 10 first-half minutes remaining. Visiting goalkeeper Harry Flatters was caught in no man's land trying to clear a set-piece, but no player in blue could make the most of the fumble.

After the break, the Countrymen made a quick start. A clearance off the line resulted in a corner that saw the visiting goalkeeper called into action to deny Calum Ward. And the West Yorkshire outfit soon made the home side pay. An excellent threaded ball found Max Tweddle, who put the ball and the game beyond the home side's reach.

It went from bad to worse moments later, as Warhurst brought down Ejupi for the visitors' second penalty of the evening. After getting back to his feet, he emphatically dispatched the spot kick. Warhurst made a big save to avoid Tweddle getting the better of him once more from the opposing flank.

Garforth saw out the remaining minutes to gain an impressive away victory. Hallam's season won't be determined by this disappointing result, but there is still work to do, on and off the pitch, to maintain their step four status.

