An offbeat look at the world of North East football inside & outside of Hillheads . . .

Today we welcome guest columnist Paul Benneworth, a Netherlands based Bay fan who writes in The Journal; and also for The Mag.

I am a slightly unlikely Whitley Bay fan in that I live in the East of the Netherlands, and travelling to a home fixture would take me more than eight hours each way. But being an expat, I am always keen when I am back in the North East to enjoy the delights of home, and that's made me a very keen supporter of the Bay.

But I can't claim to be a dyed-in-the-wool fan who's been with the club through thick and thin. Although I grew up in Cullercoats and knew about Hillheads, I only really took the leap in 2010. I was lucky to be home for Easter for the FA Vase semi-final clash. There was a real buzz around the whole coast, and I bought my ticket from the Tynemouth Metro station shop curious to see what it would all bring. That day stayed with me for many reasons, 4,400 fans for a non-league fixture outside Wembley is a real rarity. But it was the welcoming feeling of it all, the police working for free to make it happen, that really opened my eyes to the magic of the Northern League.

Maybe we peaked soon after with the unparalleled three in a row at Wembley. But it was exciting, frenetic stuff and I remember following via goal updates on Facebook the desperate promotion scrap against Ashington a year later.

It's been a fun journey, and the constant throughput is that there's never been a sense that our league position has been in threat. There's always been a run of victories to hold things together, and we've always looked comfortable in the Ebac Division 1.

Whitley Bay is a community club, and I've enjoyed the sense of being part of that community, even if at a slight distance. So I was slightly disturbed this spring when things seemed to be going the wrong way.

It's great that one of your strongest players gets the chance to sign a pro contract, even if it means they disappear from the club. But when it's part of an exodus of players and training staff, and you witness a demoralising landslide against Shildon, you start worrying if there's something really going awry.

I ended up in June in a Twitter conversation with another fan and we were both fearing the worst. And it was with a real sense of trepidation that we started watching the preparations for the new season.

But the moment the pre-season began, something strange started happening. I was still in the Netherlands, and in the evening my Twitter feed started filling with reports of the Bay scoring goals. Lots of goals, lots of tweets. Maybe that's not so surprising against teams that are lower than us in the Pyramid, like Bedlington Terriers and Seaton Delaval. But its nice to be winning any game, and scoring lots of goals made it even sweeter.

Our worries about squad depth were soon put to rest when the triallists started knocking them in at a fair old rate. And that was made all the sweeter when those same triallists put pen to paper and joined the club.

And the highlight of the friendlies has to be getting a result at Blyth Spartans, three leagues above us. That was the moment when it started to feel like we'd have a fighting chance to get back to the glory days of ten years ago.

With that renewed sense of confidence we boarded the ferry to North Shields for a month's holiday back at the start of August. Family obligations meant that I was only able to attend three matches, but it was definitely worth the wait.

There's a renewed intensity in the team and the trainers that was a joy to watch. The opening game was going always going to be tough, and I was biting my nails after the first goal went in waiting for the counter. But the intensity stayed high, the lead was extended and the victory never in doubt.

West Auckland Town are rightly one of the favourites to win the League, and at the time of writing are in 4th place. Undone by two goals against the run of play, we kept pushing back until the final whistle, and what we lacked in refinement we made up for with sheer energy, even if it wasn't enough to get a point.

And with serious money riding on the Barnoldswick game in the FA Cup, it was great to see that intensity and energy click into place to deliver a battering. Good times are back at Hillheads, something the 680 fans who witnessed the last minute victory against Whitby Town can testify to.

We've made some great signings, gelled as a team and if we can hold it together for the season then it's definitely going to be a good one.

I can't wait for North Shields when I'm next back!