

TT No.212: Dean McClean - Travels to the West Country and Beyond! Barnstaple Town (Western League); Caerleon (Welsh League Division 1) and Forest Green Rovers (Football Conference).

Wednesday 5th April 2006: Western League Premier Division: **Barnstaple Town** 2-4 Hallen. Attendance: 90 (est.); Admission £4.50; 48pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

As is often the case in April the fixture back-log presents the opportunity to take in a match almost every night. And with the fixture gods throwing up a Thursday match, the decision was made to visit 3 grounds in one trip.

Barnstaple was easily reached in about 5 hours from deepest Lancashire, exiting the M5 J27 take the A361 North Devon Link Road until you reach the town centre. Follow the signs to Ilfracombe, once passed over the River Yeo turn left into Mill Road. The first port of call on arrival was the local Tesco for some much-needed refreshments, a first-class range of sandwiches were available for this hungry traveller.

Mill Road is a superb little ground. There is a covered terrace stand running almost the full length of the touchline, providing ample cover if need be. Fortunately, today was a wonderful spring day with wall-to-wall sunshine for the majority. On the opposite touchline there is a charming old wooden grandstand fronted by the respective dug-outs. To right of the entrance is a clubhouse of the highest order, adorned with lots of old photos of the team. The most interesting photos were from the years 1888 and 1889 where the players posed in fancy dress! Another asset here was the tea bar, serving Bacon Rolls, Sausage Rolls, Chips, Tea, Coffee and one of the finest Cheeseburgers I have ever tasted. The programme was a classy effort with plenty of facts, stats and other info to keep me occupied at half-time. Barnstaple are celebrating 100 years; in every match programme the Chairman of the supporter's club is dedicating a page to the history of the club. Another superb facility at the back of the football ground is Barnstaple RU Club, which boasts a wonderful Grandstand.

With both teams firmly in mid-table mediocrity and the corresponding fixture having finished 1-1 only four weeks earlier, a low scoring tight affair was expected. In fact, the opposite happened with visitors Hallen playing some excellent football, storming into a 3-0 lead by half-time which was quickly added to in the 2nd half. The skills of Hallen's midfield maestro Paul Cook was a pleasure to watch. With Hallen seemingly in cruise control, Barnstaple mounted a spirited come-back, scoring two quick goals and missing a further two glorious chances.

A thoroughly enjoyable evening was spent in the company of Barnstaple fans who were very civilised and a credit to their club and non-league fans in general. The conduct and behaviour of both sets of players and managers was refreshingly 1st class. A trip to North Devon is most certainly worth the effort.

Thursday 6th April 2006 Welsh League Division One: **Caerleon** 1-0 Bettws.
Attendance: 35est Admission; £2 (incl. Prog.) 16pp Programme; FGIF Match Rating: 1*.

Whilst walking through the beautiful Cathedral City of Wells the decision was made to cross the border to Cymru, to visit Cold Bath Road, the home of Caerleon.

Caerleon is a University town situated about two miles North of Newport. The team play at Cold Bath Road near the town centre. The pitch is actually located within a local school. It is fully railed off with a small covered terrace on the far side. There is also a smart clubhouse behind one of the goals.

A truly unmemorable game was won by the home side in very controversial circumstances. With just 5 minutes left a ball over the top was flagged offside by the linesman, only for the referee to wave play on and duly allow the hosts to roll the ball into an un-guarded net. The referee was promptly surrounded by players and officials of Bettws but thankfully almost ten minutes later the game resumed and finished soon after in near darkness.

Friday 7th April 2006 Football Conference: **Forest Green Rovers** 1-1 Accrington Stanley. Attendance: 1187 Admission; £4.50 (student) 48pp Programme; FGIF Match Rating: 2*.

At the end of the season Forest Green Rovers will vacate their home, The Lawn. So, with only two home games remaining after tonight this match was designated as a "must do". At the start of the week I was rather hoping that Hereford would lose on Tuesday, meaning 3 points for Accrington would guarantee them the Championship.

The Lawn is a charming and welcoming venue to visit, with plenty of good vantage points from where to watch the action. At the main entrance is the excellent Trevor Horsley Stand (named after the club chairman) comprising 500 seats, executive boxes and underground changing rooms. The stand is also flanked by two open terraces where the majority of the home fans seem to congregate. On the opposite side there is further open terracing which runs to the half-way line. Behind the left goal there is a covered terrace along half the length of the goal line which is mirrored opposite.

Upon entering The Lawn, you are greeted by the wonderful sight of a wooden "tea hut" which serves tea, coffee, soup and the all-time favourite Pukka pies are available with the Chicken & Mushroom highly recommended. The programme is of the highest order; as well as containing the usual stats, fixtures and results there was an appeal by the painting and decorating co-ordinator for help with the new stadium.

FGR were founded in 1890 as Nailsworth & Forest Green and spent the majority of their first 60 years in the Stroud & District League and Gloucestershire Northern Senior League. In 1982 the club achieved a remarkable "double" by winning the Hellenic League and The FA Vase, defeating Rainworth MW at Wembley in front of 12,500 people. After winning back-to-back championships the club was promoted

to the Football Conference in 1998. On 15th May 1999 the club entered the record books by becoming the first to play in both an FA Vase and FA Trophy final. Although losing 1-0 to Kingstonian the club gained many new friends with their performance. The club were also FA Trophy finalists in 2001, beaten 1-0 by Canvey Island.

With Accrington needing four more points to secure promotion to the FL, they were obviously playing for a draw from the start. And with FGR desperately needing the points to avoid relegation the match wasn't a classic. In fact, the standard of football was quite poor and the visitors were lucky to get a point. FGR produced a spirited 2nd half performance and almost stole an unlikely victory.

A trip to The Lawn is a pleasant and welcoming experience. Unfortunately, if you haven't visited this excellent ground there are only two more opportunities to do so.

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