

**TT No.146: *Chris Freer*** - Sat February 7th 2009; **Dover Athletic** v Hendon; Isthmian League Premier Division; Score: 3-0; Attendance: 976; FGIF Rating: 3/5.

Several years ago, when I ran a pub in Nottingham, one of my regulars for a time was a guy named Jim who hailed from Dover. We usually referred to him, for some reason, as Dover Jim. That's when we weren't calling him Boring B\*\*\*\*\*d. Anyway, he used to regale us with tales of his home town team, the mighty Dover Athletic, who naturally none of us had ever heard of. I resolved never, ever to go there. Fast forward a decade or so and the D word starts to loom large on my radar. Regardless of my earlier resolve, it has to be done.

I'm sitting in the Willow Walk opposite Victoria station scanning the desolation that is the Isthmian League fixture list. This Winter weather has taken its toll but I've been lucky thus far. Today I'm due to watch Hendon play at table-topping Dover and the signs look good. Little snow and no frost on the South East coast, so I make my move. As a town, Dover is as boring as the irritant Jim. Even the Wetherspoons looks uninviting, despite the wad of CAMRA-issue money off vouchers in my wallet. I find a place called Blakes where a cosy cellar bar serves ale from the cask, then start the 30-minute walk to the ground which takes me through some dodgy areas until I come across a couple of rugby pitches - matches in full flow - and the sight of Crabble on top of a hill.

The ground is of course up to Conference standard, as that is where the club once plied its trade. There's plenty of cover and its unlikely ever to fall down. During a lull in proceedings I decide to count the number of pillars and posts supporting the various roofs around the ground. Eighty-bloody-one! No wonder I can't find anywhere to stand without an obstruction of some kind spoiling the view. Needless to say, I stay at pitch level to observe proceedings. Prior to kick-off I do the usual survey of standards - the prog at £2 has a girth about it which defies my efforts to bend it. Unfortunately, the content is pretty predictable, being gleaned from various websites - where are the programme editing visionaries in the 21st century? I could have written the food menu before I came. Burgers - including the Crabble burger which is, well, just a regular burger that's a bit bigger - and chips. No pies, or pizza, or stuffed pittas or anything approaching innovation or of interest to the veggie. However, I am, of course, the only one that watches football. The bar is spacious and echoey with lots of TVs and no handpumps. They do have bottles of Adnams (why a Suffolk beer in Kent, I ask you?) in the fridge and there's a few being drunk.

The crowd is approaching 1,000 and they're here to see Dover win. Why wouldn't they, given their team's 100% home record thus far this season? A dozen or so green-scarfed-Londoners do their best to create a party atmosphere but following a plucky opening twenty minutes when the away side come close but not close enough, it turns into men against boys. You can see why Dover are umpteen points clear at the top, and destined for Conference South football. They have players

who are not restricted to positions, and you're just as likely to see Number 2 or 3 getting into the box as the no. 9. Their midfield players don't give the ball away and they have the arrogance of a team who know that they will win in the end. That it's only three-nil at the final whistle is purely down to the Hendon keeper and some pretty wayward finishing.

Fortunately, I never come across Dover Jim at the match. He may have been around boring the back legs off somebody, or maybe he's just letting his team do the talking nowadays.

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