

TT No.149: Paul Roth - Sat 14th February 2009; Wessex League Division 1; **AFC Portchester** v Blackfield & Langley; Res: 1-3; Att:40 (?); Entry & 8-page programme: £4; Weather: Mild and sunny; French Onion Soup: None.

Drooling over a visit to the Wicor Recreation Ground, home of Wessex League Division 1 strugglers AFC Portchester, isn't something I've been doing leading up to this weekend. In fact, what I'd read and heard about the place had left me slightly apprehensive.

I like driving, always have, but us Groundhoppers do get a tad fed up with constantly covering the same highways every Saturday. This one, for sure, gets fed up with pounding the monotonous M2 and M25 respectively. So, what an absolute delight it was yesterday to motor down the A32, between Alton and Wickham, through glorious countryside that is best described as pure England. Rolling hills, mighty oaks, picturesque villages and a landscape almost untouched by time passed by as I meandered sedately along the Meon Valley.

Along this a 20-mile or so, stretch I'd selected four pubs to visit, chosen, of course, from my favourite book.

The Thomas Lord, at West Meon, now stands amongst my all-time favourite hostelries supped in. It's a fantastic rural pub, with a roaring fire, set in a quaint village selling the full range of Bowman Ales' beers, a brew not sampled by myself previously. But that alone isn't what makes this place so magnificent; it's the plethora of historic cricketing memorabilia adorning the walls that made it such a joy for your correspondent. Amongst this treasure are two modern poems, framed and hung in the public bar, written by the lyricist and song writer Richard Stilgoe; one is about the game of cricket itself, the other is dedicated to the late, great Brian Johnston, of 'Test Match Special' fame. The latter piece is both funny and moving at the same time and I could just hear 'Johnners' dulcet tones as I read it. Everyone that loves the game of cricket still misses him enormously. The Wickham Wine Bar, a bit further south, also sells a Bowman Ales' offering, 'Quiver' in this instance. This bistro-esque establishment is housed in a glorious 15th century building; after chatting to the landlady for a while about the history of the place, she showed me upstairs to their restaurant, only open in the evenings, to look at the remarkable, original, colourful decoration that abound on the walls therein. Truly breath-taking.

From here, it was on to what I had imagined to be the less enjoyable part of my day. Locate Cranleigh Road, off the A27, and follow this lane until you reach a large car park. You're there! £4 gleaned my entry which was accompanied by a modest, but most welcome, 8-page programme. Colin Brans, the club secretary, turnstile operative, programme seller and tea bar manager, had informed me the match was definitely going ahead as planned, despite the Rec having been under water as recently as the previous Monday.

The arena is fully railed off with two large dugouts on the tea bar side; green mesh, attached to wire fencing helps give the place an enclosed feel. Six floodlight pylons have now been added, but there is no covered accommodation whatsoever, which I'm sure is a requirement, even at this level of the Wessex League. This oversight may soon be rectified though. A first for me, I think, was that the goal nets were differing colours. Orange at the entrance end and white at the other. The modest canteen doesn't sell French Onion Soup!

All in all, much better than I'd imagined.

So was the game. Second placed Blackfield came roaring out of the blocks and took the lead in just the 3rd minute; despite being on top for the rest of the half Portchester were guilty of wasting two gilt edged chances to equalise. The visitors were a constant threat though, with their pacey counter attacks. Teatime saw the visitors leading by that solitary, early score.

The second half was far more competitive; the men in Tangerine deservedly drew level soon after the restart and from thereon in the match could have gone either way. The result swung controversially in Blackfield's favour, when in the 88th minute the referee failed to spot a deliberate handball by a visiting striker: The home stopper had come racing out of his area to head the ball clear, but a pretty obvious use of the hand went unnoticed by the officials and aforesaid striker embarrassingly and gleefully tucked the ball away. Distraught, the home side soon lost concentration and conceded a third. As the new home keeper, recently signed from Horndean FC, said to me afterwards, "88 minutes of sheer graft thrown away by an incompetent referee" I did feel for him.

Trudging off, I could hear the Blackfield players congratulating their second goal scorer on a 'Great Handball'. With a bit more luck, and on this showing, AFC Portchester are going to start climbing away from the wrong end of the league table.

With the sun setting on the nearby water, gently rolling hills in the distance and yacht masts popping their heads over the horizon, moored in the Portsmouth basin, this isn't a half bad place to come and watch the beautiful game.

You know what I'm doing now, don't you? Drooling!

FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

06/20