

TT No.214: *Chris Freer* - Saturday April 25th 2009; **Annan Athletic v Berwick Rangers**; Scottish League Division Three; Score: 1-1; Attendance: 786; Entertainment Rating: 2/5.

And so, it is that I set off on a 450-mile round trip just to see a game of football some people wouldn't draw their curtains to watch. But it's a journey I HAVE to make. A bit of history is in order, here, I think.

In the Summer of 2001, I was holidaying with my wife and (then 3-year old) twins just outside Berwick-on-Tweed and we were having a drink in the garden of a pub close to Berwick Ranger's Shielfield Park. I casually mentioned to the landlord that I'd quite like to acquire a Berwick football shirt as a souvenir of my visit to the town. He was straight on his phone and within ten minutes the club's commercial manager, Conrad Turner, had invited us up to the ground where we got an impromptu guided tour and the club shop was unlocked so that I could purchase the afore-mentioned shirt. Now that's what I call good customer service! As a result, I vowed there and then that I would always take in at least one Berwick home and away game each season. Hence my need to visit Annan Athletic today.

My drive north is interrupted by two necessary detours courtesy of inconsiderate motorists familiarising themselves with the central reservation, but I still arrive in good time for the kick-off, parking in a residential street about two minutes from the ground. I take a stroll into town, passing the open expanse that is the Everholm Athletics Stadium, home to the re-formed Gretna FC for most of this past season. The Good Beer Guide listed pub in Annan is the Bluebell, by the river to the west of the town centre. There are three or four local ales on sale and the landlord and I compare notes on my jacket (a 1960's Harrington) and his Doc Martens (similar vintage) - a couple of old suede-heads together!

Back up at Galabank, the programme is being sold by an old boy outside the ground. It's £1.50 and reasonably informative if a little advert-heavy. The club bar is accessed from outside the ground and is pretty busy. There's no cask beer on (but then again this IS Scotland) although there's live footy on the TV. There's to be segregation inside the ground (of a sort ... one steward telling you where you can or can't go) so I have to walk round to the far end to get in. My old friend and fellow Berwick fan Eagle Bobster turn up prior to kick off and he investigates the nearby food hut. It's meat pies and sausage rolls - no surprise there then.

The teams take the pitch and for the first ten minutes I'm rooting for the wrong lot. The problem with following a team like Berwick is that most of the players are there for a season then move on. As I haven't seen them play since last August, I don't recognise anybody and assume the Black & Golds are the Wee 'Gers. Not today, we're in white and red (shudda' known that!) but there's no early goal so I don't embarrass myself, fortunately. My fellow fans describe the first half as

'Pish!' and I wouldn't disagree. It starts to look gloomy, thunder rumbles and lightning flashes.

The Berwick contingent huddle into our section of the main stand (the only cover) and we're in with the small moronic hardcore that think using the F and C words is OK in mixed company. Unfortunately, it's the norm in these parts and despite a token threat by the only Bobby on view, the tirade of inane and unfunny bellowing continues throughout the match.

The second half starts with the teams trading early strikes but any thoughts of a goal-fest quickly fades as the game settles back into the honest but wayward football of the first half. The goal-less draw does nothing for Annan's play-off hopes but the Berwick foul-mouthers seem happy about this, although they're less pleased that the home club's end-of-match evacuation drill - which they were hoping to disrupt - is called off because of the rain.

I was thinking, as I headed back down the M6, as to what comparable level in English football you would class Scottish League Division 3. I'd have to say probably something like the Southern League Midland Division, only with (slightly) bigger crowds, and unfortunately, the sort of language you'd wouldn't want to subject your kids to.

There's more on my blog at <http://flynn123.wordpress.com>

I'm the only real ale drinking veggie in football ...

06/20