

**TT No. 1: *Chris Freer*** - Sat 8th August 2009; **Cardiff City** v Scunthorpe United; Football League Championship; Venue: Cardiff City Stadium; Result: 4-0; Attendance: 22,264; Entertainment value: 4/5.

After taking a keen interest in Forest's summer spending spree I probably should be at Reading today but the little matter of re-completing my 92 gets in the way as I plot a course to Cardiff and City's new stadium. I decide to buy a ticket in advance and discover I also have to purchase a 'Stadium Card' (£4 including credit card fee) which arrives at my house a few days before the game. However, there's still no sign of the match ticket which the e-mail confirmation assures me will be sent to my house. I re-read the website and see that the card is all I'm going to get. The problem is that the card doesn't contain any visible reference to where I will be sitting. No worries, I'll just take the confirmation e-mail with me, that should do it, eh? More later.

My train gets into sunny Cardiff bang on time and I set off towards my other targets for the day - the local Wetherspoons for some brekky, followed by the CAMRA National Inventory-listed Vulcan, a real drinkers local defying the ravages of 'progress' currently eating up Cardiff street-by-street. I recognise it as a pub we called at back in the late 1980's after visiting Ninian Park with the Wolves fans - real ale drinkers to a man. The place hasn't changed, although the bar maid is new! On my way to the match I travel past the Millennium Stadium and am surprised to see the much-smaller Cardiff Arms Park rugby union ground sitting in its shadow - thought that had been demolished!

An Asian couple in a car pull up and ask me for directions to the beach. A BEACH - in Cardiff? Sorry, can't help on that one, and they set off hopefully in the opposite direction to the blue hordes who are making the 25-minute walk from the city centre to Ninian Park - still intact apart from the impact holes of a thousand vandal missiles - and then across the road to the new Cardiff City Stadium. I scan hopefully for any signs of a programme seller. I can buy fanzines, badges, golden goal tickets ... but not a programme. Then I spot the booths, each complete with a mile-long queue. In the end, an official, walks down the line, taking your £3 and hands them out. It's weighty and colourful but not, in my eyes, attractive enough to want to read it.

Now, how to get in. I show a steward my piece of paper. No, he says, that means nothing to me, and points me in the direction of a chap with a purple tabard. I'm not the only one in trouble as several more punters, all hopefully clutching their plastic card and e-mail print out, take it in turns to have their card scanned by the purple man. We're all sent to Gate 3. Why doesn't it say that somewhere on the card, or the confirmation?

The stadium itself is OK but you've seen it before all over the country. The food bars have the usual stuff but I'm intrigued by the 'Veggie Wrap' which is £2.90

according to one price list but £3 on another. Let's call it £2.95, eh? "Men of Harlech" booms out of the PA as the teams run out on a snooker table of a pitch. The bloke next to me seems to be in the wrong part of the stand as he enthusiastically joins in all the chants, occasionally nudging or elbowing me, then apologising profusely afterwards. Scunthorpe start well but are soon overwhelmed, three first half Cardiff goals being a fair reward for their fluent passing game. This is a team that should be knocking on the Premier League door next May.

The bloke next to me shakes the hand of everyone in the immediate vicinity and declares that we won't see him in the second half as he's "... go-win to squeeze in wimi me-atts...". His team pick up where they left off and that they only win by four is the biggest surprise of the day. My route back to the station takes me via the Goat Major, a Brain's pub with the whole core range of ales, a guest, good cheap food and TV footy - a real find. I then have to endure a series of rail disasters, including signage misinformation, staff that know nothing, a cancelled train, a re-route via Bristol, another cancelled train, eventually arriving at Derby to find it's a replacement bus which leaves an hour and ten minutes later and I finally open my front door just after midnight. Why do it I put myself through this? I don't know but I'll be doing it for the next forty weeks, for sure!

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

Football through the eyes of a real ale-drinking, 'vegetarian' ground collector...

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