

TT No.132: *Chris Freer* - Tues December 29th 2009; **Wingate & Finchley** v Northwood; Isthmian League Division One North; Score: 0-4; Attendance: 65; Entertainment value: 3/5.

A couple of years ago I booked on a coach being run by a local Northern Premier League club to an away game in Lancashire. It turned out to be the team coach and the club secretary soon spotted my unfamiliar face amongst the gaggle of regulars. In conversation I revealed that I had no particular allegiance to his club, but was taking advantage of a cut-price fare to a new ground. Oh, he said disparagingly, you're one of those bloody Groundhoppers, are you....

Now I'm not sure if the non-league world in general views us nomadic football souls with such a collective disdain or not, but I'd say that the 'hopper' purse is putting a decent whack into the coffers of many a struggling non-league outfit as we boldly go to places that others won't leave their armchair for.

A classic case in point is tonight. I have a bus ticket from Loughborough to London, I'm not feeling so good, the weather forecast is abysmal, and there's a very good chance that if my transport can actually battle through the predicted blizzards and reach journey's end, I still won't have a match to watch. Then I still have to come home and probably won't get to bed until 3.00am. I weigh up my options and for some bizarre reason decide to go.

At 4.30pm my coach is stuck in M1 traffic, the I-phone is just telling me that my chosen game at Dulwich Hamlet has been postponed - as have most of my alternatives - and I'm starting to think that I've cocked up. The only light at the end of the tunnel is that Chatham Town are definitely playing, and it looks like Wingate & Finchley is still on too. It's bucketing down when I do get into London, but the Isthmian website lists them as 'playing' so I decide 'what the hell' and head on the Northern line to West Finchley.

As I near the end of the 15-minute walk to the ground, the glow of floodlights in the night sky is a heartening sight, as is the open turnstile. It's 'Game On!' and life's not so bad after all! The pitch looks fine if a tad damp, and it makes me wonder why it is that every other ground in the area isn't up to the task on the night.

The Abrahams Stadium has two stands worthy of note. The main stand is possibly unique in that it serves two grounds, this one and the rugby club next door. It's also classic Art Deco and immediately goes to the top of my favourites list. Opposite is just a short piece of shallow covered terracing, but it's crowned by a cracking oversized analogue clock, totally out of proportion to its supporting structure.

I hit the bar and am extremely pleased to see bottles of London Pride in the fridge. The attractive ladies behind the counter also offer me a room temperature option, but I'm a bit of a heathen when it comes to bottled beers and prefer mine chilled.

I get talking to a chap called Jim who's driven from Maidenhead in search of a game. Transpires he's not the only one as there are several - dare I say - 'hopper' types littered around the room, shoulder bags and clipboards to the fore. I check out the snack bar and although there's nothing for the veggie on the menu, yet another very presentable young lady overhears my query and offers to knock me up a cheese salad roll. As I've not eaten since this morning, I accept her proposal before venturing pitch-side in the continuing drizzle.

It's a mid-table clash between Wingate & Finchley, and visitors Northwood, who I watched earlier in the week putting one over on Potters Bar. The game is interesting without being a classic. Much of it is played in midfield, and effective forays on goal are at a premium, but Northwood get their noses in front, and add a second before the break. They stay dominant in the second half and score twice more, either side of seeing their hosts reduced in numbers by one rash tackle too many. Further rain continues to fall but the pitch stays true - top marks to the groundsman.

Towards the end of the match I take up residence in the Art Deco stand and find myself amongst the groundhoppers. The Head Honcho Hopper seems to know everybody, is on his phone to another hopper, and passes it to a lady who is with a group of six German hoppers. My new friend Jim joins them and is familiar with the group.

I point this out because, out of a crowd of only 65 people who have braved the elements, I'd hazard a guess that a good fifth of the attendance are people of no-fixed-abode, in football terms that is. Given that they all have paid to get in, have acquired programmes, drunk in the bar and bought food, that's around £200 or so extra in the club's kitty, on a night where the natives clearly didn't fancy it. Bloody groundhoppers indeed!

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

Proper beer, veggie food, interesting grounds, parakeet-watch... and some football too!

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