

**TT No. 136: Steve Ayre** - Sat 9th January 2010; **Coventry City** v Barnsley; Football League Championship; Result: 3-1; Attendance: 15031.

Well here goes a write up on a weekend that was looking ever likely to be gameless for me. My football these days is split between managing Woburn Lionesses U12 Blue side; an occasional referee's stint for whichever side wants me (bacon rolls generally help) to mad dashes to a game on a Saturday afternoon. Helped with some grounds achieved thanks to a daughter who will go and watch the Ladies games on a Sunday.

Early season started with a clutch of new, to me, grounds with the odd revisit. Desborough Town was followed by trip to watch my beloved Manchester City, albeit the Ladies away to Luton, at Biggleswade Town. Then there was a trip to the Finnair Stadium in Helsinki for England Woman vs. Russia and the Olympic Stadium, Helsinki for Finland Women vs. Ukraine. What a season start! With new grounds added at Shefford, Wolverton Town; Harpole and the girls played alongside the main pitch at Sun Sports. No new grounds over Christmas due to the bad weather, although games on the 19th, 26th, 28th (x2) of December as well as the 1st January, was no mean feat.

Surely the 9th January 2010 would not be a blank weekend? No game for the girls, we called that off on Wednesday, when even training on a 3G pitch was called off. Leagues were falling thick and fast, yes leagues not just games. Thursday a glimmer of hope with Leamington against Atherstone on a 3G pitch in Tamworth, a definite possible. Northampton Town was hopeful, a good backup possibly Crystal Palace, London is always warmer. They all fell by the wayside to leave a Saturday with just seven league games and one game in Cornwall (not that I knew about that). Well I could rule out the two Premier League games, Norwich was too awkward to get to, I have been to Elland Road (granted Leeds Cougars vs. Tyneside Trojans American Football in 1986!), Cardiff was too far and I have seen the Woman's FA Cup Final at Pride Park. So, could I get to the Ricoh?

At 9:14 on Saturday morning I had registered on the Coventry City FC website as I reckoned this was the cheaper option. Live train info looked OK. At 9:34, after some deliberation, I had bought a ticket in the corner of the home end for £16. A quick call to the ticket office seemed to confirm this could be picked up, however the E-Mail implied it would be sent out. The 11:25 train change at Northampton would be £11 return. Still checking the game was on, the train was running with an 11am departure left a brisk walk to the station and the use of the ticket machine to bypass the queue. The train duly arrives only 2 minutes late, so off we go quickly passing the new flats (or should that be apartments, estate agent I am not) that overlook the once spectacular Wolverton Park, a place where many a match has been played out. Even I witnessed Arlesey clinching the SML title and MK City (Mercedes Benz) during an FA Vase tie there. A quick phone call to another legend photographer, Gordon Whittington, to relay where I was going, confirmed, for

once, he was game-less. This led to a Maltese lady asking where to alight for "St Andrews". Yes "Salford" were visiting in the Premier League!

Now the only problem with Coventry is the transport system as most of the buses do not serve the station. It was too cold to wait so a brisk walk across the city to Pool Meadow bus station was in order. Surely, I would see some Coventry fans, I was getting worried now - was the game still on? Fortunately, after a cheese, certainly not prawn, sandwich some obvious fans got on the 3A bus just before we departed. Yes, the game was still on and I was on the correct bus so I just had get off after them, as they were off to a social club first. You cannot miss the Ricoh from a mile away; modern yes and similar to other grounds, but a bit different and quite eye catching. The bus dropped me just the other side of the Coventry to Nuneaton rail track. Why the plans for a station have been delayed is another matter.

Emerging up the steps I am greeted by the programme sellers and stewards who between them took £3 for a pretty good effort (this kept me busy on the way home especially with two pages devoted to the 1931/32 season), and they direct me to the ticket office. The question was, would my ticket be there? After a bit of a queue there I was, E-Mail print out in hand... it must have taken the lady in the office all of 20 seconds to find the ticket, handing it over with a "enjoy the game Mr. Ayre". Wow this was more the quality of service you get in the UCL, not the usual you're just 'more profit for us' service that the larger clubs are often excused of! Entry to the ground is 'self-help' using the ticket bar code. Having discovered that turnstiles 44/45 are not used, it appears block 33 where I have my seat is a family orientated part of the ground, ideal for a neutral. Like all of the modern grounds the concourse between turnstile and seats is full of bars etc. You just have to buy a card with a £2 deposit as all of the food outlets operate a cashless payment.

Maybe it is just me but I always like to chat to the nearest steward at bigger grounds. Well today I was lucky - it was someone who, as well as watching Crystal Palace also used to watch Hendon, a real football person and he even knew a bit about Ladies football having spotted my Woburn woolly hat, a vital part of last Saturday as it was very, very, cold.

The game was all Barnsley to start with but two great Coventry goals, the first from former Grays' player Freddy Eastwood, swung the balance and they were both at my end of the ground. Barnsley having the decency to reply after half time so I saw that goal as well before a late Coventry effort sealed the game. Interestingly the young supporter behind me was obviously brought up well as he offered some very sensible observations about team formations etc, it was a pleasure to hear.

The return journey was similar although I had a longer trek to a bus, I could use my day pass on, not the £3.50 football specials! All in all, I had a really good day out and felt the hard work Coventry had put in to get the game on was easily worthy of my money. You must not forget the 600 Barnsley supporters who only gave up

shouting when the final goal went in after 93 minutes. Fingers crossed though: hopefully it will be the FA Vase next week Royston Town vs. Tipton or Stotfold vs. Shildon.

06/20