

TT No.144: Chris Freer - Sat January 23rd 2010; **Harrow Borough v AFC Hornchurch**; Isthmian League Premier Division; Score: 0-0; Attendance: 180; Entertainment value: 2/5.

As you might expect from a chap who travels every weekend to some different region of the country - and beyond - I spend a lot of time looking at transport. Not slobbering over pictures of buses and trains, you understand, but simply studying the logistics of getting from A to B in the cheapest and quickest way possible. Take today's trip to London for instance. East Midlands trains for some reason began to offer £5 each way deals, but only from Sheffield. Now I'm not based in Blunt city, but I sure as hell live en route to London so I thought I might as well have a piece of that, especially as a National Express return has now gone up to £15.

The down side is that I have to catch the train in Direby, that market town where the inhabitants enjoy a love affair with sheep. Much as I detest the place, it does do a good line in pubs, so I find myself in the Babington Arms, a Wetherspoons hostelry, at just after nine in the morning drinking some 6.7% Scottish brew alongside my essential Veggie brekky. Good pubs, naturally, are always part of my master plan, which today includes a tube detour to the Albion in London's East End, a Good Beer Guide listed pub where the gaffer is a Baggies fan and the place is decked out accordingly. It's at this point that my meticulous planning starts to fall apart. Half the London Underground and Overground is having the weekend off to enable the navvies to bang a few bolts back in, so my intended round trip taking in the Pembury Tavern in Hackney is abandoned and I'm soon back on the Central Line to Oxford Circus before taking the Bakerloo Line up to Harrow & Wealdstone station.

I get about two-thirds of the way before a sobering thought hits me. Why am I going THERE? A quick, belated check of the map and I realise I should be heading for Northolt, way back on the Central Line. Doh! I remember back in the 1970's going to Fulham and getting off at Fulham Broadway, only to find Stamford Bridge where Craven Cottage ought to be. The tube train clanks and creaks along and the clock is ticking. I reason I should break the habit of a lifetime and grab a taxi at Northolt station for the last mile and a half to the ground. When I get to Northolt taxis are conspicuous by their absence. Fortunately, my weary legs find another gear and I reach Earlsmead just as the game kicks off.

This is a tidy ground with raised step terracing virtually all the way around. Much of the cover is cantilever style - including the main stand - so viewing is good, although the areas behind the goals are open to the elements. I take a walk around and pass in front of the gaggle of visiting Hornchurch fans who, after a session on the pop, are declaring their undying love for each other. A vocal member of the troupe invites me to endorse his passion for his chum, and immediately spots by my accent that I am not of this parish. "Hey, You're, a Northerner" he cleverly observes. Ah yes, to you sir, but to a Scouser, I'm not.

I take up position under the covered terracing and try to get into the game. It's two mid-table teams jostling for ascendancy and there's not much football being played on a decidedly lumpy pitch. The home team press early doors but apart from two thumping headers which scare the life out of the corner flag, there's very little goalmouth action to savour. Indeed, the bloke next to me says not a word throughout the first half, but greets the comical culmination of every move with the guffaws of laughter it deserves. His jaw is aching by half time.

I retire to the clubhouse which is outside of the ground. I note that Youngs Bitter is available on handpump, but as it's not one of my favourite ales I decide to save myself for a Fullers session later. Back in the ground I check out the snack bar which is advertising pies, and I ask if they're all of the meat persuasion. Oh yes, the lady declares quite proudly, and lists four or five colourful varieties, all of which are anathema to my ears. OK, I'll go hungry, then.

Back to the action and the pace picks up in the second half although the ball is in the air a lot, no doubt to avoid the pudding of a pitch. The shots are getting closer to the target but it still stays goalless. I feel a storybook ending unfolding when Harrow throw Kenta Nakashima into the fray halfway through the half. I'm already writing the 'Japanese Sub Sinks Hornchurch' headlines but for that he needs to score. Sadly, he's not up to the task. At the other end, however, the referee is defending well. His nit-picking performance penalising innocuous midfield challenges draws the ire of the Hornchurch players and bench, whilst he steadfastly ignores a string of more credible penalty area offences and thus the inevitable goalless draw prevails.

As I'm leaving the ground I casually thumb through the programme and come across an article - bizarrely - about fatal rail crashes. Apparently 14 people were killed in 1955 when a train derailed at Sutton Coldfield. Compared to that, I muse, my own transport woes pale in comparison.

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

Trekking the length & breadth of the UK in search of that elusive veggie football pie....

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