

TT No. 180: *Chris Freer* - Sat March 6th 2010; **Barwell** v Norton & Stockton Ancients; FA Vase Quarter Final; Score: 3-0; Crowd: 600+; Entertainment value: 4/5.

Family relationships notwithstanding, probably the only other thing as dear to my heart as football is beer. Not just any old beer, of course. It has to be of the cask variant when drinking in the UK, or sometimes a bottle if the draught isn't available. Since joining CAMRA in the 1970s, I've managed to spend most of life surrounded by the stuff, either serving it or writing about it. Indeed, one of the twin purposes of this blog is to advise on the availability of good ale in or around the nation's football stadia.

I'd been discussing this subject with the managing director of a national brewing group at a Conference on Friday night. By chance we were sitting adjacent to each other at dinner and inevitably conversation turned to the national game. He seemed surprised at my assertion that cask ale was available in the social clubs of probably one in two of the grounds in the non-league ranks, and speculated as to the quality of the goods on offer. Surprisingly, I've never found that to be a problem, no doubt due to match-day throughput.

Fresh back from the conference, I borrow the wife's car to travel the twenty-five miles or so to Barwell. The club is at the top of the Midland Alliance, and looks set to go up to the Southern League or Northern Premier League next season. Today's business, however, is in the FA Vase, with all roads leading to Wembley, the holy grail for all Northern League clubs. Of the eight teams left in this competition, three are from that neck-of-the-woods, with one of them, Norton & Stockton Ancients, supplying today's presumed cannon fodder for a home team that hasn't lost since August.

I'm meeting up with an old pal today, a former travelling companion from my days of following Darlington home and away. Despite having no car, and only latterly a phone of any description, said pal had drawn up an impressive record of not having missed a Darlo away game for nigh on fifteen years. All that came to a shuddering halt when redundancy kicked in but he still gets to the odd Darlo game, as well as following Barwell. He also likes a drink. Or two. Since a session on Hoegaardens almost killed him off one time in Nottingham, his tippie of choice is cider. Today he's been supping it since dawn but, despite that, some intelligent conversation is still possible.

The Barwell ground consists of a tall main stand with some covered terracing adjacent. Other than that, it's flat standing, beneath the billowing nets designed to prevent stray balls from sailing into neighbouring gardens. It's frighteningly cold, even though the sun is doing its best, and although hungry, I really don't fancy eating any chips, the only veggie food on offer.

There's a handful of Ancient's fans dotted around the main stand, but they have little to cheer about in the first half, other than its mission accomplished in that the one-way-traffic towards their goal hasn't succeeded in breaching the rear-guard. There's plenty at stake in this delayed quarter-final, with serial finalists Whitley Bay waiting for the winners in the semis, and it appears that Norton would like to take Barwell back to their own turf. All that changes early into the second half when a stonewall penalty claim is upheld by the referee. There's a novelty!

Suddenly Norton have to chase the game, and they start to dictate terms. They are celebrating an equaliser until it's pointed out that the shot has actually cleared the bar and hit the net from the back. Still it seems only a matter of time as they pour forward, but they leave inevitable gaps in their rear-guard which are duly exploited by home No.9 Cunnington, whose brace settles the tie. 'We're going to Wembley' sing the home faithful. "You've not met Whitley Bay yet" shouts a defiant Teesside voice.

You may have noticed that thus far I haven't mentioned the beer situation on the day. Following my statement to the brewing industry man about availability and quality, I'm hopeful that Barwell - in the midst of traditional Pedigree country - won't let me down. Sure enough, the clubhouse sports two handpumps and, although the guest beer has just run out, the Tetley Cask is in excellent form. No Pedigree, then, but with brewing of Tetley's about to switch to Marstons, I suppose it's the next best thing.

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

from the only veggie in football...

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