

TT No.194: Paul Roth - Sat 27th March 2010; Middlesex County Football League: Senior Open Cup Quarter Final; **SPORTING HACKNEY FC** vs. WILLESDEN CONSTANTINE FC; Res: 4-2; Att: 35; Entry & Programme: N/A; Weather: Sunny intervals with heavy showers; Altitude: Haggerston Park is 13m (42.650 ft) above sea level.

As much as I'm able, I do like to read what other contributors to this website say and naturally, it's interesting seeing where fellow travellers have been. Perversely, articles regarding Kent clubs grab my attention more than most; I'm always fascinated whenever someone ventures down to my neck of the woods. With this sentiment in mind, Chris Freer's tale ('TT' No. 188) relating to his visit to Ramsgate FC on March 13th caught my eye. Actually, the price he paid, £31.50, to travel on the new 'Javelin' train to achieve the Riviera is what really stood out and to some degree still sticks in my craw.

For the first time in my life, to glean my 168-hourly footballing-fix, I journeyed up to the Smoke by National Express coach today. Two reasons for this; firstly, the company has just altered its timetabling with their final departure returning to the Isle of Thanet at 19.00 hrs, affording me time to comfortably get back to Victoria; before, it was an un-workable 6 pm. Secondly the price; when I booked my ticket two weeks ago, I paid £5 for the round trip. If I'd booked it last Tuesday evening, I'd have paid just £2. That said, I fully concede that travelling by coach is slower, less comfortable than the train and ultimately a 3rd class experience.

My never-to-be-forgotten ordeals with Greek coach operator 'Consolas Travel' back in the late 1970s and early 80s, when Bob and myself put our lives in the hands of Hellenic madmen, who conveyed us non-stop between London and Athens and later back again, are testament to its shabbiness. Mind you, I'm still proud to have been associated with a company that was once described on Esther Rantzen's 'That's Life' TV programme as 'The most incompetent, dangerous and shoddily-run outfit of its kind anywhere in Europe'. They were indeed 5th class set-up, but somehow made our Greek Island hopping (see, I've been doing it nearly all my life!) adventures a lot more eventful. I could write books on the subject. Endaxi!!

Dear friends, please don't overly concern yourselves either that my early return meant that my drinking pursuits had in any way been curtailed. They had not! Eight East End pubs were on my agenda and eight East End pubs were summarily 'ticked'; plus, for good measure, the Nell of Old Drury, in Theatreland, as I withdrew. Also, upon my homecoming, I was conveniently deposited on the oceanfront Corniche, right opposite the Kosovan Elephant.

Alighting from Salvador Caetano-built charabanc No. 022 at the Lewisham Mega-transportation hub, the DLR was utilised to propel me northwards, via the 'Dwarf' (that's Cockney-Speak for Canary Wharf), where my opening hostelries were dispatched with alacrity. Alacrity, yes but also with much appreciation. The Gun at

Blackwall, recently rebuilt following a devastating fire earlier this century, becomes one of my all-time favourite taverns. Not for its beer, although delicious, but for its history and position. At its back the Thames laps up against it and the still futuristic-looking Millennium Dome lies directly opposite; at its front, the last vestiges of dwellings that once were the very fabric of Docklands life sit defiantly in front of sparkling towers of steel and glass that the rejuvenated region is now synonymous with. If ever a building could tell a tale, then the 250-year-old Gun could.

From there, it was onwards via Bow, then Hackney itself, eventually arriving in Haggerton and the Albion in Goldsmiths Row (a veritable West Bromwich Albion FC enclave within the city) for a final 'sharpeners' before decamping to the stadium at 14.28 hrs. The football pitch here is of course artificial, making it de rigueur for me to indulge myself in two of the sensual acts that can be performed on such a velvet-like medium. Namely, to gently rub my forehead on its surface followed by removal of my shoes and socks and to shuffle vigorously across it bare-foot. My hedonistic pre-occupations hopefully in no way bring us Groundhoppers into disrepute.

This MCFL Open Cup quarter-final tie was one of those classic east-west confrontations. Sporting, whose headquarters is located just 0.824 miles east of Shoreditch and next door to the Hackney City Farm, compete one division lower than their illustrious visitors who hail from the concrete boondocks of Alpertons. Their brief history, which has seen a meteoric rise through the London Commercial Leagues to stand today on the brink of promotion to the MCL Premier Division, has been well documented of late with a Groundhoppers' match having only recently been staged at the venue. Like most 3G facilities, this one is enclosed by a ten-foot high metal fence that has floodlighting, commissioned late-on in play as the skies blackened.

As for the match itself, it can best be described as a footballing treat, its entirety utterly belying each team's lowly pyramid ranking. For an hour the visitors matched their lower-league hosts but ultimately, the men in blue and yellow knew their home pitch too well and a burst of three goals in ten minutes, putting them 4-1 ahead, sealed a semi-final berth for the up-and-coming starlets. WC (the moniker isn't lost on me) consoled themselves with the game's final goal a minute from time, as the heavens opened and the gathered throng scurried for what little cover could be found.

So, Chris, why not 'hop' on the coach next time? By my calculation, if you can pick up one of those £2 bargain-bucket fares, you'll be able to avail yourself of an extra 7.375 pints of ale in the Fox and Anchor at Smithfield before you depart.

I say this nearly every week, but this truly was a fantastic day and I deem the coach experiment to be a success, if a somewhat uncomfortable one.

FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

Coach day(!), therefore 17,823 steps taken. 1,770 steps = a mile, thus 10.069491 miles walked.

06/20