

TT No.196: *Chris Freer* - Sat March 27th 2010; **Folkestone Invicta** v Fleet Town; Isthmian League Division 1 South; Score: 2-0; Crowd: 269; Entertainment value: 2/5.

London. Some love it and some hate it. I'm still not sure which camp I fall into, even though I've been coming down to 't 'Smoke' since the 1970s. One of the lads in our gang had a big brother who shared a flat in Ladbroke Grove with half a dozen attractive young ladies who hailed from New Zealand. We'd pay them a visit every so often, but never seemed to spark any love interest. Possibly it was down to our weird northern dress sense and a penchant for kebabs. More likely it was our habit of belching and farting at regular intervals, a practice scarcely designed to kindle any passion. We thought it was clever though.

Invariably whilst in town we'd take in a match or two. I can recall one trip to Highbury to see Leicester City, standing on the Clock End with a predominantly Midlands gaggle, whilst a snarling conga of Gooner hotheads snaked its way towards us looking for the kill. Those were the days before segregation, and a good chance of a dust-up was all part of the pre-match entertainment. I've also been in the afore-mentioned flat whilst drunken Scotland fans - down for the annual Wembley invasion - have hammered on every door in the street looking for a party, Jimmy.

I'm in London again today and I almost bump into four young ladies, presumably of overseas extraction, prancing around in 'I love London' t-shirts. What's the attraction of this place? Well to me, it's a jumping off point for virtually all of the Level 8 (step 4) grounds that I need to visit to complete my challenge. Now the weather has relented and I can plan trips with some level of confidence that my scheduled match will actually take place, I'm targeting the Kent coast, with Folkestone my destination today. Thirty-odd quid's worth of high-speed train gets me into the seaside town by 11.00 am, and my first port-of-call is the local Wetherspoons.

The Samuel Peto has to be seen. It's an impressive conversion of an old chapel, complete with galleries and an old pipe organ. There's not a fantastic choice on the microbrew front as Wetherspoons go, but I settle down with a pint of Whitstable and scan the latest issue of WSC. My next target proves to be elusive, but I do find my way to the Lifeboat, an attractive pub from the outside that's suffered internally during the 1970's. It's making a name for itself on the cask beer front and is well worth a visit. Further into town I come across Chambers, a regular cafe upstairs but a specialist real ale bar in the cellar. It's a former local CAMRA Pub of The Year and the staff do seem very knowledgeable about the product they're selling.

From here it's a fifteen-minute walk back via the station to the Buzz-lines stadium on Cheriton Road. With Invicta being the best team in the league, albeit having

lost ten points from being in administration, I sort of expect a little more activity when I arrive at just after 2.00pm. However, the ground is almost deserted, and there's no-one in the bar. By kick-off time, though, there's a fair few more in, although the front of the bar remains quiet. I discover a back room with 'Members Only' written on the door, but nobody's checking. There's a few more punters in here, but it's not manic. Maybe the lack of a decent pint has something to do with it. Likewise. the snack bar has little creativity to offer the only veggie in football. There is a 'Bring and Buy' hut raising funds for the cash-strapped club. Now that's something you don't see at many grounds. I wonder if Fratton Park is doing the same.

The stadium is of a certain vintage and provided you don't mind peering around roof supports, there's cover on three sides of the ground, only the raised terracing behind one goal being open to the elements. Visitors Fleet Town don't seem to have brought any fans, so the only banter is between sections of the home crowd and the visiting number eight, who appears to have a bet on how quickly he can get himself sent off. Involved in many a dubious challenge, he's lucky to last the 90. In fact, the entire game is littered with petty fouls and time-outs whilst the fussy ref lectures somebody or other, and the only bright spot of a scrappy first half is a neat turn and shot which puts Invicta one-up. After the break the visitors go in search of an equaliser and things open up a little, until a clever one-two results in a second Folkestone goal and its game over.

And so it's back into London, and another test of my feelings towards the old place. I fill up on curry at my regular buffet stop, brave the push and shove of stag parties in Mabel's Tavern as I sup at Kent's Best and read my copy of 'Hooligans 2', stretch out on the settee in the Euston Flyer savouring a cracking Fullers ESB as I watch a re-run of the Chelsea 7, Villa 1 game on the big-screen, and think to myself 'Yes, London does have its attractions'. Just as well, because I'll be back again next week.

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

good beer, veggie food and footy for the common man...

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