

**TT No.203: *Chris Freer*** - Saturday April 3rd 2010; **Margate** v Bognor Regis Town; Isthmian League Premier; Score 1-1; Attendance: 469; Entertainment value: 2/5.

Do I believe in 'Deja Vu'?

Y'know, I'm sure I've been asked that before....

Deja Vu is this nagging doubt I have that my decision to revisit the Margate experience is going to end in smiles this time. For those not party to my earlier blog post (mid-November) I'll simply recap how I battled through howling winds, rail replacement buses, and astronomical rail fares - eschewing a beer festival at a nailed-on game in the process - only to see the lily-livered referee call off the match just ten minutes from kick-off. Six months on, and determined to finally complete the top seven levels of English football, I deem April to be safe enough weather-wise to make my return. That was until both of my mid-week games were waterlogged off and even today, as I sit in the Shakespeare's Head in Holborn trying to ignore the singing loony at the table next door, I'm following the dreaded 'P' signs on the Isthmian website once again.

By 11 o'clock I decide to ring the club, just to be sure. Apparently, there's no problem and so I shell out my small bank loan to buy a rail ticket to the Kent coast for the third time in the last four weeks. Despite the forecast of heavy showers, I arrive to a Margate bathed in sunshine. People are on the beach, although not quite in short sleeves, this being England in April. The derelict roller coasters of Dreamland catch my eye, as does the gaggle of green-shirted Bognor fans trying to beat me to the door of the Mechanical Elephant, the GBG-listed Wetherspoons. The beer list shows plenty of 'Coming Soon's' but not much interesting on now, so I leave them to it and make for the Northern Belle, a Sheps tied house down a side street opposite the harbour. It's a local's pub and has a cask stout on. I sup this whilst trying to anticipate when the pub dog is going to bark again and scare me half to death.

A poster is advertising Thanet Beer Festival on this very day at somewhere called the Winter Gardens, Margate. Unfortunately, it doesn't state where this palace of ale actually is, so it looks like just the match for me. It's a fifteen-minute walk back up to Hartsdown Park, and my Deja Vu moments return with an irrational fear that a typhoon is going to suddenly whip up and flatten the whole stadium. It's only when I'm in and can see that the pitch in prime condition that my anxieties are eased. The clubhouse bar is behind the goal and is showing the latter stages of the key Manure v Chelsea game on the big screen. There being no beer worthy of the name, I just sneak into a corner and observe all of the Manchester-born locals suffering as their beloved team's Premiership hopes take a knock.

I'm a bit peckish but as neither of the two snack bars has anything for the vegetarian, except the inevitable chips which would doubtless upset my already dodgy stomach, I decide to starve and just take in the surroundings. It's like I've

done this before! Hartsdown Park is a bit disappointing really. Having been the home ground of Margate for more than eighty years, you might have expected it to have more than just two kit stands to offer as spectator accommodation. Granted there's a bit of a covered raised terrace behind the goal, sandwiched between club offices and the bar, but elsewhere it's flat standing, and no-go down one side. There's history behind this, of course, so no-one needs to post comments pointing out my lack of knowledge on this matter (Wikipedia tells me all I need to know!).

A pitch-side sign saying 'Welcome Back to Margate' makes me smile as I celebrate the kick-off between two struggling teams. Margate are third from bottom of the Isthmian Premier whilst for visitors Bognor Regis Town the only way is up. Their fans forum was encouraging a good turn out during the week, and about 30 or so are in evidence, decked out in green and white and declaring their boys to be the best team in Sussex. Doesn't say a lot for the others, observes the bloke next to me who insists on photographing every attacking move at either end, invariably poking his long lens into my field of vision. Unfortunately for him he's picking his nose when Bognor surprisingly open the scoring on fifteen minutes and he doesn't get the shot. Ha! Justice!

Although both teams are ping-ponging the ball about, giving it away cheaply is the name of the game and both keepers have little to do. Margate are huffing and puffing but offering little sustained threat until a hopeful through ball puts their striker in on goal and the keeper dives over the ball. Are we set for a pulsating finale? Sadly, not and a 1-1 draw is of little use to either side, although it does drag Bognor off the bottom.

Back In London, I nip into the Bree Louise, a free house by the side of Euston station. Some of the Wolves lads who I got to know during my time in the Black Country in the 1980s have alerted me to this pub, and they're in here along with more than a dozen trad beers - many on gravity dispense - including the local Sambrooks and Resolution breweries. The place is actually a bit of a dump but what the hell when the beer's good! They head off to the station and I finish my day by sitting in the Euston Flyer with a pint of Fullers ESB in front of me. Y'know, I'm sure I've done that before. Well that's Deja Vu for you...

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

One veggie's quest to eat and drink his way round the top eight levels of English football (and beyond) ...

06/20