

TT No.211: *Chris Freer* - Monday April 5th 2010; **Congleton Town** v Newcastle Town; North West Counties Premier; Score: 2-1; Crowd: 321; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Whenever I arrive back from my long-haul trips to London or Scotland, the wife always asks the same question. 'Have you had a good day?' she enquires. 'Tiring...' is my regular repost. This is the point where she inevitably scoffs, and says bitingly 'How can drinking beer and watching football be tiring...?'

Well, there's the early starts, the usual footslog to a ground some distance from its nearest railway station, my preference for standing up during the game, energy-sapping British weather conditions, a skin-full of food and ale ... all contributing factors. Plus, the little matter of my advancing years, although I've not quite reached bus-pass status yet. But do I let all this hold me back? Not on your life which is why I decide that a Bank Holiday Monday is not best spent at home, but in search of football heaven.

And today I have my 11-year old son for company. I reckon he's reached the age now where I can drag him to distant parts of the land and not bore him to tears. He's young enough to qualify for cheap rail fare and free ground entry, but tall enough to see all the action. He's a Chelsea fan (bedroom decorated accordingly) but likes coming with his dad to watch Forest. I've told him if he ever becomes good enough to play professional football, he's not signing for Direby. A man has to have some pride.

We decide to get a train via Direby and Stoke to go to Congleton in Cheshire, where the local team - Congleton Town - are playing runaway league leaders Newcastle Town in a North West Counties Premier top-of-the-table clash. As usual I check out the rail fares in advance and calculate I can save a tenner by buying stage tickets, and although connections are slow, we manage to get to Congleton in time for a spot of lunch. The local Wetherspoon's - the Counting House - is busy but we find a table in the family section, where the lad indulges his passion for Bangers 'n' Mash whilst I wash down my cheese & onion pasty with a pint of the local ale, Beartown.

Many of the shops and other businesses in the town centre have a prominent red cross displayed in their windows. We speculate this may have something to do with 'our boys' out in the Middle East, but are disappointed to find it's a protest movement against car park charging. Whatever floats your boat!

From the centre to the ground it's a mere five-minute stroll, and we arrive in good time for the kick-off. Town are offering free entry to Under-12's today and so the lad gets in for nothing, although I've bought his passport along just in case. At nearly five and a half foot tall he looks a bit older than he is. The ground is on a slight slope and is in a residential area. All of the houses behind one goal have a full view of the pitch, although that doesn't stop at least two residents from

pitching up a chair and watching the match from over the fence. Nice to see they're contributing to the future of grass roots football.

Spectator accommodation consists of a reasonably-sized main stand on half way, a covered terrace a little further along, and cover behind one goal. There's a grass bank at the other end which provides an elevated view of the game - you can even position yourself in front of one of the freeloading residents and really tee them off. Down the other side access is restricted to two small strips of uncovered flat standing. The lad is looking forward to his pre-match hot dog but despite being on the menu, there are none for sale. I also note that all the pies are meat so that even if I had been hungry, I'd have just got hungrier.

The clubhouse is behind the main stand and has Beartown Bearly Literate on handpump. As I sit drinking my pint, I notice a familiar face, as one of the guys from the brewery walks in. He's half expecting to see me, as I'd exchanged email traffic with one of his colleagues earlier, and is intrigued as to why I happen to be in his parish. What other reason would you need but the promise of a good game of football, and a decent pint?

We take up position at the grass bank end and await the flood of goals. Visitors Newcastle had won every one of their first twenty-seven games of the season - surely some kind of record - and although having lost and drawn two of their last nine are already planning for life in the Unibond. Almost thirty points clear at the top, they come to third place Congleton no doubt expecting to prevail. The home team have other ideas, and have the better of the first half, wasteful finishing denying them the chance of going into the break at least one goal in front. They pick it up again in the second half but as the game wears on, Newcastle begin to take control, pressurising the home keeper and restricting Congleton to rare breakaways.

However, it's from one of these that they go in front, barely two minutes from the end, with a sweetly struck drive from a right-wing cross. As if to celebrate, the Congleton mascot - some chap in a bear suit - makes an appearance in front of the main stand, but barely have the emotions subsided when the visitors earn a corner, and their centre back buries from five yards. It's the turn of the Newcastle lads to hop around like schoolkids, hollering and whooping like pumped-up Americans at a heavy rock concert, and as the now-despondent mascot trudges past me, I tell him it was all his fault, as Congleton were winning until he showed up. Barely have the words left my lips when the home team score again, deep into injury time, and the joint - including the bear - is rocking. A quite sensational three minutes.

And that's the way it stays. We set off back to the station and our long-haul home. We arrive back at 8.30pm and the wife says, 'Have you had a good day?'. 'Tiring' I say and today I at least have some back-up, as the lad slumps on the settee.

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

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