

TT No.217: *Chris Freer* - Sat April 10th 2010; **East Thurrock United v Ilford**; Isthmian League Division One North; Score: 5-2; Crowd: 111; Entertainment value: 4/5.

One swallow doesn't make a summer - allegedly - but what if you see two? With the sun beating down on my back for the first time in several long months it certainly feels like summer has arrived, and the sight of a couple of the aforementioned winged fellows flying low over Rookery Hill today assures me that the worst of the weather is finally over and I can now rely on an uninterrupted schedule for what remains of the season.

So, my only decision today is either to go with the original East Thurrock option, or an alternative to fit in with a World Cup song video-shoot somewhere in North London by a band called Ken Dodd's Dad's Dog's Dead. Much as the latter has its attractions, it looks like an all-day job and as I have a match to go to, I politely decline the invitation afforded me by my old ex-mod mate Wayne. So, I head for Fenchurch Street Station via a Wetherspoons brekky in the Hamilton Hall, where I sample two of the 'foreign' beers brewed as part of their latest beer festival. The beers are palatable which is more than can be said for the re-hashed hash browns which splinter under the assault from my fork.

I decide to break my journey to Stanford-le-Hope - the nearest station to East Thurrock's ground - to visit a pair of Good Beer Guide pubs in Grays. These are virtually side by side near the waterfront, a couple of hundred yards from the railway station. The Theobalds is a more traditional style of pub building, and looks like the local's haunt. There are four cask beers visible and I sample the Harwich Town brew which is a tad murky but tastes OK. From here I move to the White Lion, more of an estate-style construction and the current local CAMRA branch pub of the year. There's a bigger selection of beers and a basket of cheese cobs for a quid each. I buy one for now and one for Ron, at that price.

Back on the train I'm joined by a group of bright young things who have seen the sun god Ra and have come out to play. The boys are in shirt sleeves and the girls in somewhat less than that. It brightens up the journey and they're still heading for Southend when I alight at Stanford. Fellow blogger Simple Pieman had advised me to catch a bus to East Thurrock's ground - two miles distant - but it's such a nice day I decide to walk, as you do. Some forty minutes later my knees are creaking as I discover the stadium, set amidst derelict caravans and some kind of communal tip by the side of the A1014 trunk road.

The clubhouse bar is accessed from outside but a quick survey within shows no sign of anything worth drinking and I retire to the ground. It's a tidy enough affair with two seated stands, one on each side of the pitch, plus a matching pair of covered micro-terraces either side of the goal at one end - very unusual. There's a small

snack bar near to one of the stands, but the only thing for the travelling veggie is a cheese baguette, and I've filled up on similar earlier.

The sun is still shining as the teams take to the field, and it's a real top v bottom affair, with visitors Ilford as close to the foot of the table as East Thurrock are to the League leaders. It doesn't take long for things to fall into perspective when United take a fifth minute lead direct from a free kick and it's a surprise that there's no further score until minute 35, when the home team go two up. It's looking all over for Ilford until they snatch a reply close to the break and we think, maybe, we might just have a game in the second half. After my exertions earlier, I spend the first half in the seats but it's a bit nippy out of the sun, so I adopt my more familiar pose after the break, leaning on the pitch barrier level with the penalty area.

The second half doesn't live up to competitive expectations in that it's pretty much a case of how many United will score. Ilford are playing like a team who expect to get stuffed, are making silly mistakes at the back, and only wayward finishing keeps the score-line under control. Even so, East Thurrock have it up to five - including a short-range blast following a free kick for the visiting keeper needlessly fielding a back-pass - before Ilford gain some pride with a second in injury time from a hotly disputed penalty.

Without ever being a classic, I feel I have been entertained and also enjoyed the best of the English weather. All those bleak cold Saturday's are now a distant memory - what a shame we're nearly into the cricket season. Summer football anyone?

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

Ramblings of a footballing veggie with the sun on his back...

06/20