

TT No.222: *Chris Freer* - Sat April 17th 2010; **Merstham** v Leatherhead; Isthmian League Division One South; Score: 0-0; Attendance: 373; Entertainment: 1/5 (comic value).

My only companion on many of my trips is a good book. Invariably it's a football book and amongst those I have read this year are: The (brilliant!) *Damned United*, Roy Keane's autobiography (doesn't hold a candle to Frank Worthington's 'One Hump or Two!') and my current, weighty tome: 'Hooligans 2'. Not that I consider myself a reformed thug or anything, it's just that I have a fascination with football culture, as I grew up in an era where dress code was all-important, and where an anticipation that the balloon might go up at any time was always part of the match-day atmosphere.

Although I can honestly say that I never thumped or booted anyone, I did use to enjoy the thrill of being part of the 'pack' as we were inevitably herded from one away ground to the other, wearing the uniform of the age. I recall being at Sheffield station in the early 1970s with about 400 lads from Leicester, every one of us dressed head to foot in Ben Sherman, Sta-pressed and a Crombie jacket, plus the obligatory blue scarf. And the lack of segregation in grounds back then meant your presence was always likely to annoy somebody in your immediate vicinity.

For a while in the 1980s, wearing club colours seemed to go out of fashion. Certainly, when travelling away it became the norm not to display your allegiance, either to avoid having your collar felt for no particular reason, or simply to deflect the attention of the local hotheads. Post-Hillsborough it became acceptable once more to visit another parish and wear your top without necessarily looking for or attracting 'bover'.

I'm reminded of the different stages of football man as I sit in the clubhouse at Mertsam watching the second half of the Man City v Manure match on the big screen. The City fans are decked out in pale blue, almost to a man. Pan to the securely-segregated United enclosure and there's hardly a red top to be seen. Surely not too frightened to wear their colours to an away game in their own city? Or is it more of the anti-Glazer backlash?

I'm back on the National Express coach today as I'd delayed booking a train due to the threatened rail strike. As I survey the blanket of volcanic ash hovering just above my head, I thank the lords that I didn't decide to jet down to London on a whim. The coach is full of the usual cross-section of travelling society - hefty women off to shop, foreign gentlemen no doubt hoping to fly somewhere exotic subject to someone plugging the volcano, and a trio of inane students practicing their bad language. I convert my I-phone to I-pod, switch Gazpacho on and the world off.

My rail journey from Victoria to Merstham (via East Croydon) takes about 30 minutes and I call for a pint at the Feathers near Merstham railway station. It's a

tired old pub trying to do food. The real ale choice is predictable save for the Adnams Wheat Beer which I've never tried before. Suffice to say this will be my only pint of the stuff. The walk to the Moatside Stadium takes about ten minutes and after pre-paying for entry ("Saves you queueing later, chap") and buying a programme I repair to the bar where the afore-mentioned Manchester derby is holding sway. There's no proper beer but I plump for my old Guinness standby and watch the screen, straining for any glimpse of on-terrace red.

Mertsham's ground is in a peaceful suburban setting and consists of a modest main stand on the halfway line, covered flat standing behind one goal, and a small covered raised terrace at the other end. There are two snack bars but neither of these have any veggie stuff save for the ubiquitous chip. It's a nice warm sunny day and most of the punters are leaning on the pitch-side fence, except for a three-year old kid whose eagerness to play the game results in the occasional welly against the back of my legs. I see his potential and play him the occasional one-two in return.

The on-pitch scenario is very similar to that which entertained me on Tuesday at Dulwich. Visitors Leatherhead are looking for points to gate-crash the play-off party, whilst Merstham have had a difficult season at the wrong end of the table but need points for further respectability. However, whereas Tuesday was a fascinating encounter, today borders on the comical. Good passing football is at a premium as the ball pings about on a bone-hard pitch. Highlights of the first half are the ball hitting the lino on the head, a defender heading against his own post when it's easier to clear and the grateful striker doing the same with his follow-up when it's easier to score, a soft Merstham penalty sportingly being passed to the keeper, and the home manager and keeper having a very audible slanging match. If I wasn't laughing so much, I'd be yawning.

Half Two is so exciting I can't remember anything of interest actually happening. The game drifts out to a goalless draw as all we get is an April suntan for our trouble. Show me the way to go home!

The one highlight of the day as far as Merstham FC are concerned is that a crowd of 373 has turned up. On consulting the programme notes, I make this about three times their average gate. No doubt the sun has played its part, plus the local nature of the fixture, as there are about sixty or seventy Leatherhead fans in attendance. I deduce this because they are mostly wearing green shirts. In fact, probably more wearing their colours here than United fans at Eastlands. A sign of the times, I muse, as I fasten up my Crombie...

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

Ramblings of a sun-kissed veggie...

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