

TT No.34: Chris Freer - Saturday September 19th 2009; **Hastings United v Billericay**; Isthmian League Premier Division; Score: 0-1; Attendance: 507; Entertainment value: 1/5 (and that's being generous).

After my fleeting dalliance with the Scottish Premier, it's back to the heady heights of the Isthmian Premier today as my National Express 440 hurtles towards London in the wee small hours. I've taken the opportunity to pre-buy tickets from Victoria to Hastings at just £3 each way in a Southern Railways fire-sale, so I don't waste time and good money at Victoria station and can dive straight into the Willow Walk for my brekky prior to a two-hour trip to the South Coast.

Bungling announcements at Victoria and on the train mean that when it splits into two at Eastbourne, having already shed 4 coaches at Haywards Heath, I'm sat in the wrong section until the cleaner points out my predicament and I manage to decamp to the other part of the train just before it pulls out. How hard can it be to get the announcements right?

I arrive in Hastings to cracking weather and my first port of call is the White Rock Hotel Bar on the prom for a veranda pint of Dark Star, overlooking the locked and boarded-up pier. A large sign adorning the construction suggests that I can save it. Maybe I should form a pier-hoppers society and launch Pier-tastic magazine! There's a thought

After a pint in the First in, Last Out, brew-pub I set out on what looks a lengthy but straightforward walk to the Pilot Field, which is to the north of the town centre. I reckon without the undulating terrain that exists betwixt my start and finish - a back-breaking climb then a quick descent and yet another climb. Walking on the flat is minimal. I'm getting hot and I'm wishing I hadn't had that second pint, so am very glad to see the ground appear on my right.

It's an interesting stadium. A large old main stand set well back from the pitch, a traditional steep roofed terrace slightly to the side of one goal, and a newer and much smaller terrace at the other end. Most of the playing area is surrounded by the what looks like a dog track. One of the natives informs me that it is indeed the remains of a long-abandoned flirtation with greyhound racing and speedway. To the north of the Pilot Field, set at right-angles and on a much higher elevation, is another stadium, the Firs, which is currently unused. In fact, says my helpful native, the council have built an all-weather complex on part of it, meaning it can't now be used for competitive football... effectively a lost ground.

The programme costs £2 and is a bit down-market for this level. Having said that, there's plenty in it, even if we have to go through the ritual of reading consecutive articles by the Secretary, the Manager, The Chairman, and somebody called Pat McCrossan, all welcoming us to Pilot Field for today's game. I partake of a veggie-burger with raw onion (lovely!) at the snack bar near the entrance then make my way into the clubhouse which is reasonably spacious with two bars, The only TV is

a small 14" used for BBC Sports results, and the only beer is Charles Wells Bombardier in bottles. Out on the pitch a dozen little darlings are a tad disappointed when the chosen CD for their twirly-routine fails to function and they will have to wait for half time for their three minutes of glory.

The game kicks off and most of the crowd starts to nod off. Hastings are high-flying and Billericay looking to kick-start their season, but we get 90 minutes of rubbish. To be fair, the referee doesn't help. "You're making it worse, Ref..." shouts a local and he is being kind. The man in black is making a diabolical game ... well, even more diabolical. The players get involved in niggling with themselves, their opponents, and the ref and there is no football. Just hopeful hoofs, miskicks, and misplaced passes, players running down blind alleys, and balls sailing out of the ground. Probably the worst game I've seen since, I recall, AFC Hornchurch last season, and at least that had three goals in it. The biggest cheer of the game is when a defender hoofs clear and the ball ricochets back into play off the top of a floodlight pylon. The only goal of the game, when it comes, is the result of a wayward shot falling at the feet of an unmarked striker. The final whistle comes as a relief to us all.

The thirty minute walk back to Hastings Station (Ore is nearer) is not quite as demanding as the earlier journey but I'm still happy to get on my Victoria-bound train so I can get some enjoyment out of football - in this case finishing the copy of The Damn United that I started last week.

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

A jaundiced look at footy grounds from the viewpoint of the only veggie in football

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06/20