

TT No.143: Chris Freer - Mon January 3rd 2011; **East Midlands Double** - 12.30pm - **Ibstock United** v Barrow Town; East Midlands Counties League and 3.00pm - **Boldmere St Michaels** v Coleshill Town; Midland Football Alliance.

Match No.1: at 12.30pm ko - **Ibstock United** v Barrow Town; East Midlands Counties League; Score: 1-4; Attendance: 88; Entertainment value: 2/5.

Many years ago, I lived in a village. Actually, I've lived in one or two villages, but I did spend my key adolescent years in one called Barrow-upon-Soar, set in the Soar Valley of Leicestershire. A pretty ordinary place only famous of sorts when a complete plesiosaur skeleton was dug up in a nearby gravel pit, and for very little else. But when I moved there in 1968 it did have a pretty good village football team. Riding high in Leicestershire Senior League Division Two, Barrow Old Boys (as they were then known) played on the public 'rec' in the centre of the village and virtually everybody turned out on matchdays to cheer them on.

We local youths adopted the school end as our 'kop' and it's fair to say that the players - unpaid amateurs to a man - enjoyed minor celebrity status within the community. Promotion to Division One was followed by an immediate relegation struggle, the last throes of which included a thumping at the hands of Enderby during which - in folly - I tried to count the crowd, giving up at 600 with a whole side of the ground to go. Heady days. A few years later league rules changed, the club was forced to buy its own ground which happened to be nearly in Quorn, and the link with the village was effectively severed.

I recount all of this because today I have planned a double header which will allow me a rare glimpse of Barrow Town - successors to the Old Boys - who have enjoyed unparalleled success in recent years, moving up to the newly formed East Midlands Counties League. They are playing at Ibstock United, who I seem to recall were known as Ibstock Penistone Rovers in their Senior League days. Unlike Barrow they have retained their village centre ground, and the lad and I are amongst the 88 hardy souls present for the 12.30 kick-off on a cold but happily frost-free Bank Holiday Monday.

Ibstock's ground is enclosed but basically flat standing, save for a small covered stand with some bench seating, set so far back from the pitch that nobody seems to use it. Others gain some elevation by standing on the narrow balcony of the changing rooms complex but we adopt our usual behind-goal position to allow the lad to indulge his passion for stray-ball chasing. Sadly, for him, the slope behind the goal makes the return of the ball to the pitch fairly automatic, and he remains gainfully unemployed.

The first half is a messy affair, with both sides trading scrambled goals, and at half-time we retire to the nearby Ibstock Welfare Club to check out the beer situation and get our feet warmed up. There's nothing worth drinking, although Live Sky TV footy passes the minutes whilst our thaw sets in. The second half sees

the visitors begin to dominate, but scoring chances are spurned with laughable regularity, the Barrow No 9 having a particularly bad day at the office, one of his notable efforts almost bringing the house down. When Barrow do nose in front, the shot is so badly mishit that it spoons into the top corner, well out of the reach of the home keeper. Two further strikes near the end seal it and my old village team have the points.

Match No.2: at 3.00pm ko - **Boldmere St Michaels** v Coleshill Town; Midland Football Alliance; Score: 0-1; Attendance: 70; Entertainment value: 1/5.

There's no time to spare as we head cross-country and down the M42 to reach the Church Road ground of Midland Football Alliance side Boldmere St. Michaels. It's one of those places that, if you so wish, you can see most of the action whilst sitting in your car, but despite the chill we get out and head for the bar, which is accessed pre-match from outside the ground. We stay just long enough to ascertain that there is nothing of interest to the craft beer drinker, and our next port-of-call is the snack bar, which opens just as the game kicks-off. A skeleton hanging on a wall gives me slight misgivings about ordering but we give it a stab. Sadly, my attempts to talk the local language fail miserably as the women behind the counter battle with my request to see a menu. They eventually respond by putting one up and I grunt and point at the Chip Butty wording. This is served between two slices of bread and is virtually impossible to eat without spraying stray chips everywhere.

Whilst battling with this dilemma, we see the ball fly into the back of the net and visitors Coleshill are an early goal up. Bodes well for the next 87 minutes, or so we think. The pitch has a wicked side-to-side slope and looks a bit heavy, but the teams tackle it equally well, both proving to be completely inept at doing the simple things and we are treated to fairly mundane fayre with just the odd bit of excitement thrown in. Despite a final flurry during which the home keeper ventures upfield, Coleshill's fairly sturdy back line closes the game out, even missing a penalty in the process, and that early goal proves to be the winner.

If I do ever get to move back to a village, I always presumed it would be one with a cracking pub at its heart. That goes without saying. However, renewing my acquaintance with Barrow Town today has prompted another key prerequisite. My new home village would have to have its own successful football team, yes indeed. And maybe then I can get to re-join the kids on the kop.

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

Watching footy with the Village people....

07/20