

TT No.152: *Chris Freer* - Saturday January 8th 2011; **Bootle** v Congleton Town; North West Counties Premier; Score: 4-0; Attendance: 80; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Like many people of my generation, I was brought up to love the music of the Beatles and was in awe of this musical metropolis known as Liverpool. When some friends came over from Holland a few years ago, the first place they wanted to visit was, not London, but the birthplace of the 'Fab Four'. Liverpool seems to be a city apart, with its own culture and curious dialect, and a natural magnet for mature music fans. They've also had some prominence in the football world over the years, as I found to my cost during numerous encounters whilst following Forest. Sure, we won a few, but we also lost plenty as well.

My occasional excursions to Liverpool city centre have usually coincided with some cataclysmic event or other. In April 1998 the wife and I were stopped in the street and interviewed by local radio about the freshly-announced Good Friday Agreement. I trust the natives could understand us. On the afore-mentioned trip with the Dutch Beatles fans, it was the day after England had won 5-1 in Germany, and banners around the city were proclaiming 'Germany 1, Liverpool 5', a nod to the goal-scorers who all wore the domestic colours of the 'Reds'.

Today I've decided to undertake my long-planned Scouse pub-crawl, and the 'Big' news in town is that Roy Hodgson has got the boot. We had been at Anfield a few days ago when Wolves hammered a nail into his coffin, and now I'm back in town to hear the last rites.

It's a rainy start to the day but the temperature is above freezing so I'm quietly confident that Bootle's home game with Congleton Town will go ahead. I'd emailed the club the previous day to ask about pitch conditions, but the relatively unattended look to the website leads me to believe I won't receive a reply. Needless to say, I don't. I make the journey via Crewe, this being the cheapest way of travelling from my gaff at Long Eaton to Merseyside. There's a bit of hanging around in Direby - where I gorge on a Greasy Spoon brekky - and Crewe, but I arrive in Liverpool before 11.00 and dive straight into the Ship & Mitre, a free house near the mouth to the Mersey Tunnel.

I enjoy a cracking pint of Phoenix Mild and resolve to return here on my next trip. I move onto the White Star in the 'Beatle District', a cosy little local where I'd previously dragged my Dutch friends, having just about convinced them that the 'Cavern Club' up the road wasn't worth going in to, because it wasn't the original, but just a recently-established tourist trap. Hodgson's departure is the talk of the pub, and the conversation is colourful, with barely an expletive left out.

From here I walk down to the Baltic Fleet which overlooks Albert Dock. It's my first visit to a pub that has always fascinated me with its name, shape, and lonely position out of the town centre. I'm a little disappointed by the interior, which

looks like it was gutted at some stage and subsequently re-stocked after a busy day at a church clearance auction. The beer is from the local Wapping Brewery and my pint of bitter, inevitably of the latter-day golden variety, is a little so-so. Next, it's a cut through the back streets to find the Swan, a music pub which obviously gets its trade through reputation, as nobody appears to live in the vicinity. It's dark and loud with mainstream heavy rock pumping out. I like my rock a little more 'prog' than AC/DC but content myself with poring through the excellent MerseyAle CAMRA publication whilst supping a pleasant pint of Liverpool Organic Brewery stout.

My last port-of-call is a barn of a place on Renshaw Street, opened up by Isle of Man brewers Okell's as the 'Fly in The Loaf'. The ale is good and there's live footy on the telly, as the landlord busies around in true Indian restaurant manager style, asking each customer if they're OK and enjoying their beer. He's keen!

I pass other cracking pubs on my short hop to the Central Station, but my mission now is to get out to Aintree and find the home ground of Bootle FC. The Delta Taxis Stadium is one of those infuriating grounds where you can see it but have to walk a country mile to get into it - a bit like the away end at Watford! I'm looking through a tall, impenetrable fence, but I just know I've got to retrace my steps, go round the block, and approach from a totally different direction. When I do get in, I'm greeted by the news that there's no programme. Apparently, all the stuff's been sent to the printers, but they haven't come up with the goods. As I buy and sell print for a living, experience tells me there's always a reason for that.

In the past I'd have been a bit freaked out by a programme no-show (I'm thinking Brodsworth and Worksop from days gone by) but I'm now equally happy with a printed team sheet, and a nice gentleman in the bar kindly offers me his copy. I linger long enough to establish there's nothing worth drinking on the bar, then move to the snack bar next door where the Cheese & Onion pies are palatable, if a trifle over-heated.

Today's game is between two teams on the fringes of the title race. I saw Congleton at the back end of last season, when they put one over on Champions-elect Newcastle Town. Here they look a very lightweight side, and are lucky to go in at half time at 0-0, after nearly going behind in the first minute, allowing the home team so much space that they try to walk the ball into the net on several occasions. Their luck can't last and it doesn't, the first twenty minutes of the second half seeing Bootle go four up, and Town implode as they are reduced to ten men. Another one leaves the field before the end, and it's a resounding home win on a heavy pitch.

The handful of Town fans gathered behind the goal heckle the referee as he leaves the pitch, but in truth their side didn't really turn up. Methinks it will be a long and winding road back to Congleton.

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

Let it be....

