

TT No.213: Chris Freer - Sat March 26th 2011; **Croydon Double - Croydon Athletic v Cray Wanderers**; Isthmian Premier; Score: 3-1; Att: 86; Entertainment value: 3/5 **AND Croydon v Badshot Lea**; Combined Counties Prem; Score: 1-2; Att: About 30 or so; Entertainment value: 3/5.

A few years ago, when they were relegated to Level 3 and had massive financial problems, you'd have thought that the morale of the fans of Leicester City would have been at a bit of a low ebb. The watchword at that time was 'Keep the Faith' and their subsequent recovery has been significant. Whilst not being the biggest word in the dictionary, the implications of 'faith' are enormous. Most of the volatile regions of the world base their daily routines on religious faith, despite concrete evidence to support their convictions being in painfully short supply. I suppose that's what faith is all about.

I'm currently wading through a book by a guy called Richard Dawkins which I picked up at a car boot. Those that know of Dawkins will realise that the gist of the content revolves around why 'God almost certainly does not exist' and his constant run-ins with logical intellectuals who nevertheless 'keep the faith'. Me, I have an open mind on such things. I 'keep the faith' that one day Forest will get promoted via the Play-Offs. I suspect Dawkins would find that even harder to swallow.

Today I have a plan that I can get to see two games in the same town with kick-offs two hours apart. Looking down on Croydon via Google maps it looks like a short taxi hop between the respective venues either side of the town centre. I post my intent on a non-league forum inviting observations as to why it cannot fail. Folks on the ground are highly sceptical, especially if I propose to see the full 180 minutes of play. A little matter of heavy traffic. I take their views on board but maintain my faith.

The day starts a tad later than my usual London coach forays, in that I catch the 8.00am 440 from Loughborough, with the intention of returning on the 6.30pm out of Victoria Coach Station, allowing me a couple of hours leisurely drinking time in Loughborough before the late train back to Long Eaton. A simple plan, doomed to be wrecked by a TUC march and the subsequent student shenanigans. With the revised 1.00pm kick-off at Croydon I need to hit London pretty much on time if I want to get a brekkie in the Willow Walk before the 25-minute train hop to Thornton Heath. A coach detour because of the expected central London crush puts the mockers on that, and I only just have time to get to **Croydon Athletic's Keith Tuckey Stadium** as the teams run out.

At this point, with a bit of rain in the air, and the heavy level of street traffic I had been warned to expect, I have lost my faith in doing the two grounds and expect to sit tight here, enjoying a few beers after the match and catching the Wales v England game on the clubhouse telly. A quick scan of the bar reveals nothing worth drinking, however, and my plan kicks into gear again. I mull over it whilst tucking

into a chip butty 'with onions and chilli sauce' from the snack bar. Hardly haute cuisine but it hits the spot.

Home team Croydon Athletic have had a troubled season both on and off the pitch. Visiting Cray Wanderers, looking for play-off points, must be expecting an easy time of it but it's not to be, their hosts having much the better of the first half, missing chances but still going in two up. Despite getting more into the game after the break, Wanderers only have a single goal to show for it and Athletic sew it up with a late third. But by then I've gone, determined to get this challenging second game in.

Followers of my blog of old will know that I'm always up for a good power-walk, and so that's what I do, re-tracing my steps back past the station, around the south side of Selhurst Park -the characterful stadium of Crystal Palace FC - and across to the Croydon Sports Centre, home to Combined Counties Premier League strugglers **Croydon FC**. It takes me 45 minutes, I miss the end of one game and the start of another, but hey! it had to be done. I slump into the main stand, resting my weary legs, and look out over the running track to the distant pitch in a kind of future West Ham stylee.

Croydon FC are in as equally a parlous on-pitch state as their Isthmian cousins, just a point keeping them out of the bottom two. Today's opponents Badshot Lea - named after a Forest cult hero striker of the early 1990's - are looking for a top five finish so are as surprised as most when the home team take an early lead. The 'Trams' are playing well and with a bit more endeavour could easily have a bigger advantage come half time.

I presume there must be a bar somewhere - they advertise it in the programme - but it's not obvious where it is. A couple of people emerge from a hut above and behind one goal, but nobody heads over there at half time, being seemingly content to congregate round the tea bar, where bags of chips and the usual burgers are on offer. The weather has taken a turn for the worse, as a cold wind whips in, and a girl in front of me, who clearly came dressed for a beach party, shivers her way through a second half where Croydon could have clinched it with a fortunately-awarded penalty - it's missed - and then put up a desperate rear-guard action which fails to deny a late Lea rally which sees them take it by two goals to one.

I head back to Selhurst Station conscious of the fact that I've not had a beer all day. I'm on the coach which heads out of Victoria on time and into slow West End traffic. The impatient driver immediately veers off on an easterly route towards what I presume to be any number of detour opportunities to access the M25 and then home. For some reason we get as far as Whitechapel in the East End and then double back past Kings Cross and over to Lords Cricket Ground. Victoria to Lords is about 2 miles. It has taken us almost two hours to get there via his route. I calculate I have lost at least three pints worth of drinking time and am worried I might not even beat Last Orders.

But I keep the faith, diving straight into the Swan in The Rushes in Loughborough at 11.00pm to pay homage at this shrine of fine ale, where the first three don't touch the sides. The late comedian Dave Allen always used to finish his act by saying 'May your god go with you' and right now mine is called Castle Rock Black Gold!

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

Looking forward to that last pint of the day....

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