

TT No. 109: Chris Freer - Sat December 3rd 2011; **Brighton & Hove Albion** v Nottingham Forest; F/L Championship; Score: 1-0; Crowd: 20,358; Entertainment value 3/5 (despite what the BBC website said!).

'Doing the 92' is probably the ultimate challenge for any football supporter. I've come across a few guys who have managed to do it - or nearly do it - by following just one team. Now that's something! My original '92' was achieved about twenty-odd years ago by some extreme 'hopping', often making a 300-mile return drive of an evening to some far-flung stadium. This was in the days when I was between relationships, had just sold a house, and had some money to burn.

I was reading the latest copy of *Groundtastic* which records the number of new Premier and Football League stadiums built since I first completed the set. The list numbers around 30, which illustrates the current challenge to members of the 92 club. And that's keeping the achievement up-to-date. A couple of seasons ago I made the first League game at Cardiff's new ground my first stop of the season, which necessitated me becoming a club member - I still get the weekly emails - and last year it was Chesterfield (easy) and Morecambe (a bit of a drive).

The latest is the AMEX of Brighton & Hove Albion, and given the gates they've been getting, somewhat more of a challenge. I did consider following the lead of a fellow blogger, who did the 'away fan' route with some club with a traditionally low following. Then I thought about targeting the 3rd round of the FA Cup, hoping Brighton would get drawn at home against a side not likely to attract a massive crowd. But the solution lay right in front of my eyes. With Forest due to play at Brighton on December 3rd, why not go there with my own team? With a 2,500-ticket allocation and some left for general sale, I snapped up two of the last, and re-completing the 92 is ON again!

The two tickets because I'm taking the lad with me. When I was that 'lad' the prospect of a four-hour coach trip would have been something to relish, seeing new parts of the world, bonding with my fellow supporters, and maybe enjoying a sing-song or two. Today's youngsters don't see it that way. Although I equip him with a word-search book and a copy of a football magazine with lots of free gifts, his only thought is to borrow my I-phone so he can play pool against himself, or toss paper into a waste-bin. Eee!

The last time I travelled with Forest to Brighton we were making good time until the Police held us up for a hour on the outskirts prior to conveying us to the Withdean. This time there's none of that hassle as we arrive outside the AMEX at just after 12.15 and we have some time to kill. I've done my research and know that a trip into Brighton could be a problem, with reports of over-crowded trains coming back out. So, I decide we will go in the other direction, and take the ten-minute rail journey into Lewes, a small country town that's home to the exceptional Harvey's Brewery.

A quick negotiation of the back streets brings us to the Gardeners Arms. This is the free house that sits right opposite the brewery, and where the landlord reportedly dug his heels in when the operators tried to evict Harvey's Best Bitter from the bar. The Harvey's stayed on, and in fine form it is too as I enjoy a pint as we stand in the adjacent alley. The landlady says she doesn't have a children's licence but the law says that 14 and over is OK if drinking soft drinks. But I respect the publican's right to make the rules as they see fit, so we end up in the alley, despite there being a nice cosy corner in the pub where we might well have stayed on for a second drink. Hey ho.

Our journey back to Lewes station is interspersed with visits to every deli that the lad thinks he spotted on the way to the pub. He's in search of the ultimate sausage roll - despite consuming two on the coach journey south - but he's out of luck and has to settle for a hot dog back at Falmer station. He's praying that someone will come up with a 'Good Sausage Roll Guide' app for my I-phone - first customer assured!

From previous locations shots I've seen I imagine that the new stadium would be set in some kind of a valley. Not a bit of it. It stands high above the A27 in an elevated position and its design smacks very much of the Bolton and Huddersfield model. Inside, everything else is dwarfed by the three-tier main West stand, but other than the South Stand which holds the away fans, the other two sides and the empty corners give an impression of quite a bit of wasted space. Doubtless the designers have their reasons. But you can't fault the spectator facilities, with the live TV game on the concourse screen, and a choice of refreshment which includes gravity-fed casks of Harvey's real ale and quite a bit for veggies too, with veggie-burgers and the vegetarian pie which I plumped for. Plus, padded seats with adequate leg-room. Now if all new grounds were like this...

We are seated a couple of rows back from the pitch, with little kids in front, so our view of the action is unimpeded by the usual nuisance element who like to stand up throughout the match. Each to his own, but I find that when these guys are stood up in front of you, your choices in the matter are severely limited. Today we don't have that problem and we can enjoy the game. Which largely we do, with Forest being encouraged to attack by a surprisingly negative home team who like to ensure that their keeper gets the maximum amount of touches on the ball, even when the defence is under no particular pressure.

Having reached half time with no sticky moments, Forest take the game to Brighton in the second half, creating four cracking openings before discovering that the only way to win games is to find the back of the net. That the home team do so with one of their Mr Kipling (exceedingly rare) scoring opportunities, and right on the whistle too, is absolutely sickening.

So, I complete the 92 again, for probably the umpteenth time, and I refocus my sights on other targets, such as the Scottish 42 (8 to go), the Dutch Eredivisie (halfway there) and my ultimate 357, the top 8 levels of English football (24 to

go!). That's until next season, when other new grounds come on stream and newly promoted clubs fall under my radar.

It's one of those tasks that never seems to have an endpoint. Like painting the Forth Road Bridge. Mind you, I did read recently that, despite that old adage, they have actually finished painting the bridge. So when all's said and done, I am actually glad I'm a hopper, and not a painter!

07/20