

TT No. 150: *Chris Freer* - Saturday January 21st 2012; **Walton & Hershaw v Chipstead**; Isthmian Division 1 South; Score: 1-4; Attendance: 110; Entertainment value: 3/5.

It's very rare that I feel guilty about going to a game of football but I do today. Guilty because I'm heading 125 miles south when I perhaps really ought to be heading 125 miles in the opposite direction. Having been following the Darlington saga all week, in particular the 'patient is dead, no he's still alive!' cliff-hanger on Wednesday, when I got to appreciate the up-to-the-minute-news value of Twitter for the first time, I did seriously consider throwing my existing plans to the wind today and batting up the A1 - a route I knew off by heart in the late 1990s - to do my bit for the embattled Quakers and put a bit of money in the coffers.

Without wishing to stick my neck out too much, I think it's fair to say that if Darlo FC has a long-term future, it's not going to be at the 'Reynolds' Arena. But if the club can muddle through this season, buy a little time, until some kind of survival plan is hatched where all parties feel they're getting something, then all we can do as football supporters is to try to financially support that prospect.

So why am I heading south then? Well for a start I'm going to Stompond Lane, where fans of Walton & Hershaw have their own problems, with the local council seemingly intent on moving the club out of their home of 80-odd years to allow the building of some housing. And judging by some of the existing properties in 'leafy' Walton-on-Thames, there would be some value to the council in this. The club have their own variation of this plan, the key difference being that Stompond Lane remains as a football stadium. More information - and a petition you can sign - is available on the club website.

My second reason for heading down to London today is a last chance to visit an exhibition of photographs taken by celebrity photographer Terry O'Neill, being displayed at the Proud Gallery on Chelsea's Kings Road. Terry was in the enviable 'right place, right time' position of having access to some of the greatest film and music stars of the 60s and 70s, and has dug out pictures never previously on public display. As well as the inevitable Beatles and Stones shots, there are some fascinating Bowie pics, although the one I really wanted to see - Syd Barrett taken in 1977 - was sadly not on display. If you get a chance to look at that shot, marvel at how music fashion and style would appear to go round in circles every 35 years or so, and imagine Syd fronting any one of a number of indie rock guitar bands today.

Looking at the exhibition, with Terry O'Neill asking anything up to four figures for signed copies of his pictures, I reckon my old Forest pal Nick could be sitting on something of a little goldmine. In our punk days of the 1970s, Nick was the one with the camera and I suspect his lensman's discipline for never throwing away

negatives could come up trumps if he ever delved into the depths of his attic. They'd be some good Buzzcocks stuff in there, for a start!

My route back to Victoria station takes me on a slight detour into Pimlico where, after helping a couple of disorientated Italian tourists find their elusive hotel - my first good deed for the day - I settle on the Cask Bar & Kitchen, which is a lot quieter this lunchtime than the last time I called in, a hectic pre-Christmas Saturday night where seating was at a premium. Cask is a success story in choice, with up to a dozen hand-pulled ales to suit a variety of palates, plus as extensive a bottled beer list as any a classic Belgian or Dutch beer bar. I sample a couple of darker brews from Dark Star and do an impromptu sales job on the management for a friend of mine whose brewery uniquely only produces organic beers. Hopefully my second good deed of the day!

After what seems a fairly hectic day already, I take the 40-minute rail hike via Clapham Junction to Walton-on-Thames and immediately exit into parakeet country. There's a pub/diner called Ember opposite the station, with several handpumps on display - I notice Landlord on one - but I'm not lingering as I want to get to Stompond Lane in good time. It's a ten-minute walk from the station, through stockbroker country and some impressive housing stock, to the soundtrack of those squawking little green feathery things bustling from tree to tree. The entrance to the stadium is quite attractive, with a nice little turnstile block giving access to the grounds, where you encounter a programme shack side-by-side with the food bar (only chips for the veggie) and the rustic clubhouse, a sign attached to which declares solidarity with Liverpool FC 1989. The year has obvious significance, although I remain mystified by the apparent link between the two clubs.

There's no cask beer in the clubhouse, but there are bottles of London Pride and Old Speckled Hen in the fridge, and I sample the latter as I peruse form for the game ahead. Visitors Chipstead are having their best-ever season, and take on a W&H side too close to the bottom of the table for comfort. It's a windy day as I eschew the chance of paying an extra £1 to sit in the tall main stand, and instead head round the curved open terrace behind one goal - the ground being oval to accommodate athletics facilities - and into the covered terrace which runs the length of one side.

There I make the acquaintance of a solitary gentleman in the green-and-white attire of the visitors - the few other Chipstead fans are in the stand - whose away-day role is to pin up a large flag proclaiming loyalty to the 'The Chips', and urge his boys on from the terraces, even if his is a lone voice at times. 'They call me the Flag Man' he explains. I can see why that might be.

He has plenty to shout about today, though, as slick finishing allows his team to notch four before the break, even if the sheen is diminished slightly by a home strike just on the whistle. Like many a second half following an early goal glut, it's after-the-Lord-Mayor's-Show stuff, with not a lot more to shout about as my new friend retrieves his flag and I head back into London, missing out on my good-deed

hat-trick by deciding not to wake the spark-out chap sitting opposite as we arrive at Victoria. He's probably now back in Brighton.

I look for news of Darlo and am slightly disappointed to see a crowd of less than 6,000. Given all the fuss during the week, and the number of non-aligned fan groups traveling from far-and-wide, I feel the turnout from local Darlington folk might have been better. Given the town's population of nearly 100,000, you might imagine a few more of them could have travelled the 2 miles or so down to the Arena.

Having got over my own guilt trip today, my next one comes on Saturday February 28th. My pre-booked coach trip to London to visit Enfield's new ground? Or take the Lad up to Darlo for what could possibly be the last time...? Watch this space....

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

24/7 guilt trip...

07/20