

TT No.159: *Chris Freer* - Sat February 11th 2012; **Runcorn Town v Congleton Town**; North West Counties Premier; Score: 3-2; Crowd: 107; Entertainment value: 4/5.

I can't pretend to be any kind of expert on the implications of global warming, but I sort of see where Jeremy Clarkson is coming from when he pontificates from his soapbox about the 'benefits' of it. I suppose the plus side is that we'll get no more mornings like today! That is, scouring the lower league fixtures in the hope that some club within reach can get a game on.

When the weather forecast for the weekend was showing very little promise earlier in the week, I stared mournfully at the prognosis for Scotland which - unusually for the UK - was expecting milder temperatures. A quick check of the Virgin rail fares soon ruled out a trip north of the border. Then I remembered that, whenever you see a national weather forecast on the TV, there always seems to be a slightly milder 'halo' around the country's coastline, as if every cold front likes to venture a few miles inland, before it cuts up rough.

So, after perusing all the step 4 & 5 leagues within rail-day-trip distance of HQ, my attention was drawn to Runcorn Town's home game against Congleton in the North West Counties Premier. With Town's Pavilions ground effectively on the 'coast', a gut feeling convinced me that this match might be the one to beat the freeze.

Despite a battery of information vehicles on the Runcorn Town website - News bar, Facebook & Twitter - nobody seems to be updating any of it, and Congleton's site is no help either. As usual I email the home club asking about the chances of the game being on but get no reply. Other league websites - the Northern Counties East for example - are way ahead when it comes to providing up-to-date information like kick-off times and postponements, but that of the NWC is usually late to the party. And when they do get round to telling you what's off, it never occurs to them to let you know what is definitely ON!

So, on Saturday morning I am resigned to another match-day sat in front of the telly, with the promise of Saurez v Evra and England chasing eggs in Rome. Then I spot that something finally has been posted on Runcorn's site - the game looks like it could well be on. My hunch has proved to be well-founded. Within the hour I am wrapped up for Arctic survival, and standing at Long Eaton station waiting for the train that will whisk me to Crewe. That latter station is a god-send for me. I can get there for under a tenner return, and it's a great jumping off point for anywhere north and west, including Liverpool, usually for less than another ten-pound note. Admittedly, the Derby to Crewe train is hardly the Tokyo Bullet, but you do get there eventually, and quite comfortable whenever Stoke happen to be at home, or there's a race meeting at Uttoxeter. Neither is occurring today, so it's just grizzling kids and competing buzzing headphones serving to disrupt the serenity.

I decide to take a stopover in Crewe to buy some time on the off-chance that the game is subject to a late postponement. So, I walk the mile or so to the Borough Arms, on the outskirts of the town centre, which is a neat and tidy little local that doubles as a Belgian-style beer cafe. Most of the punters are gathered in the 'real ale' room where a row of a half-score or so handpumps and live TV footy form the joint attractions. The beer choice is from far and wide, which I suppose is handy if it's your regular haunt because you get to try a lot of different ales. As a visitor to the town though, I would be expecting to see a few more of the local brews, including those of the nearby Off Beat brewery. Sadly, I am disappointed on that score although I have to say that the Borough Porter - brewed onsite I believe - is excellent.

Suitably refreshed, I'm back at Crewe station for the 20-minute journey that takes me to Runcorn. As I get nearer the lying snow fades and it's looking very green everywhere. Promising, even though it's still bloody cold! Pausing just briefly to check out the Railway pub close to Runcorn station - sadly keg only - I take a 25-minute walk in the direction of a large industrial complex in the shadow of which lies Pavilions, home ground for Runcorn Town FC.

Pavilions is slightly unusual in that it actually hosts two floodlit grounds, each used by a different club. Neither is what you would exactly call a state-of-the-art stadium, with each boasting an element of spectator cover that doesn't really maximise its potential. At least the larger of the grounds, that used by Runcorn Town, also has a seated main stand, with the additional benefit that you can peer over the wall and watch the players of Runcorn Albion go about their Warrington & District Premier league business courtesy of their 2.30 kick-off, to save on floodlight electricity.

Inside the Runcorn Town ground, signs direct me to the bar and lounge which is a bit of a misnomer as it is actually just a tea-room. The gentleman behind the counter looks a bit club-official-ish and having spotted the Castle Rock Brewery logo on my hat - I picked the woolliest one I could find this morning - enquires what brings me all the way to Runcorn this good day. The chance of some football I explain, following up by expressing my surprise that the match is actually on. Ah yes, he says, we don't usually have a problem, being so close to the ICI factory. He points out the giant chimney opposite which looks capable of belching out some serious stuff. It usually means game on, the 'plus' side of global warming!

According to my new friend, the club is to feature on an upcoming TV programme about 'quirky' grounds. I can see why - two games for the price of one, a bar and lounge that doesn't sell any beer, a covered terrace reminiscent of an unused garage, and over-soil heating provided by ICI. They sure don't build 'em like this anymore!

And so, to the game, against Cheshire neighbours Congleton, a town famous for only three things. One, it has a bear; two, it has a brewery (Beartown, quite coincidentally) and three, it was once the source of an outbreak of Congleton Sock Mania. The fact that virtually every resident of Congleton wouldn't know this is

because it was only ever featured in Bill Tidy's 'Fosdyke Saga' strip cartoon in the Daily Mirror in the 1970s. Hey, I remembered it!

The home side are having a good season - higher in the league than better-known local rivals Runcorn Linnets, points out the man in the tea-bar. They have a front three well capable of scoring goals and go into the match against mid-table Congleton in 5th spot, with a chance today to go up to 4th, as no-one else is playing. And they start off brightly, with a goal after 10. Although frost-free, the pitch is providing an uneven bounce, and a lot of good work by both sides falls down where a good first touch and an accurate pass is required. The visitors are briefly level before Runcorn edge ahead again, and they have the better of the first half.

After the break Congleton come much more into it, and deservedly equalize on 65. And they have the better of the chances as the game opens up and becomes an entertaining spectacle. You suspect only a great strike or a bit of luck will settle it, and that's how it turns out as a speculative through-ball finds the Congleton defence wanting and the bemused Runcorn striker recovers his composure to find the empty net. Harsh on the visitors but that's football.

And so, I get my footy 'fix' on a day where I suspect I will be in the minority amongst the groundhopping fraternity. Smug satisfaction about that is only tempered by a realisation that I'm so cold I might fearfully break out into a chronic shiver, despite the layers of clothing I bestowed on myself earlier in the day. To hell with global warming, what I really need now is some central heating - where's the nearest pub!?

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

Heart-warming stuff...

07/20