

TT No.171: *Chris Freer* - Sat February 25th 2012; **Great Yarmouth Town v Haverhill Rovers**; Eastern Counties Premier; Score: 0-3; Crowd: 73; Entertainment: 1/5.

Just lately I've been starting to think of myself as a sort of groundhopping Kate Adie. She's the former BBC correspondent who tended to get despatched to any potential trouble spot to cover the story. The joke was that people really didn't know how bad the situation was - Kosovo, the Gulf, Rwanda - until they saw Kate turn up. Then they knew they were in real bother.

My recent itinerary has taken in Walton & Hersham (fighting to keep their ground), and Darlington (fighting to stay in existence). Today I'm heading for Great Yarmouth Town, rock bottom of Eastern Counties Premier, with fellow clubs pitching in to raise funds for them to be able to complete the season, and hopefully come back stronger next year. It could be a tough ask.

To be perfectly honest, my visit also has a selfish overtone. I've read that the main stand at The Wellesley - as Town's stadium is grandly-named - is the oldest spectator structure currently at use in any football ground in the country, maybe the world. And if the resident club was to go out of business, I might be kicking myself in future seasons for not having ever sat in it to watch a game of footy. A cheap rail deal from Nottingham to Norwich - £5 each way - also does a lot to bring my plans to fruition.

As usual it's an early start and I land in Norwich at around 10.30am. For once my philosophy of avoiding a 'lack of forward planning' is found wanting as my map is wholly inadequate and I have also failed to note pub opening times. So, at my first two ports of call I find closed doors in otherwise buzzing shopping streets. It seems Norwich publicans like to open at midday, no matter how much early doors trade could be lost. An exception is the Ribs of Beef, a pub I know well from my days as a budding real ale wholesaler in the 1980s. I drop in for a pint of Elgood's Black Dog - "it's a dark beer, y'know" says the landlady, "I am aware of that" is my know-all reply - and then move a hundred yards or so to a hostelry known as No.5. The earthy interior features bare floorboards and a haphazard collection of furniture. Of the four beers on offer I go for a Humpty Dumpty Swallowtail, a swilling bitter with no real bite although it does boast a pleasant aftertaste.

Having wasted some time wandering aimlessly around the city, I decide to head back to the station in good time for the 12.36 to Great Yarmouth, and a good number of my fellow passengers are Man United fans who have arrived a day early for the Sunday game with the local Canaries. Doubtless there'll be some fun and frivolity in the bars of 'Nar'ch' and Yarmouth this very night.

My first pub in Yarmouth is the St John's Head where I chat with the Landlord and one of his customers as five Manure fans swig Stella and make much noise around the pool table. He has a number of cask beers including the latest of a stream -

judging by the pump clip collection - of beers from Burton Bridge Brewery, about 20 miles from where I live. You come all this way!

Next, I head off to the Mariner's Tavern which is a lot busier and is showing the rugby, until some pleb decides, he wants the racing on. There is an array of cask ale on tap although sadly not a lot of local stuff. I decide on a Milton Nero - brewed in Cambridge - which is a tasty, 5% dark brew. But I'm really looking for Blackfriars beer - the Yarmouth brewery - and I find it at my last pub, the Oliver Twist, which has a couple of their beers on. I go for a Blackfriars Bitter, enjoy some of the loud music flooding the pub (some Sex Pistols, Bollocks era) and admire the collection of Vespa artifacts, even though I was always a Lambretta man.

From here it's about a ten minutes' walk to the ground, which is just off the sea front surrounded by hotels, many closed for the winter. The football pitch is set in the middle of an athletics track, with spectator accommodation restricted to a low covered terrace running down one side, and the exquisite Victorian main stand, which has been recently given a spruce-up and lick of paint by the local council. There's also a clubhouse bar which sadly is devoid of anything of interest to the discriminating beer drinker, and a snack bar which offers the same level of attraction to the practicing vegetarian.

I decide that, having come all this way to experience it, I will spend the whole of the game in the comfort of the main stand, where I soon make the acquaintance of some local veterans who tell me of good old times when several thousand crammed into the ground for some FA cup tie or other, as well as a more recent FA Vase match which attracted 4,500. Today there are 73 paying customers, with about 15 of us in the old stand.

The home side's collection of journeymen and youngsters put up a good fight but don't create anything of note, and having nosed in front on 40 minutes, visiting mid-table Haverhill Rovers are never really under threat. Two more goals after the break merely emphasise the hopelessness of Town's league position, and it's not until the last five minutes that they can muster an attack of any real merit. It ends 0-3.

Having experienced the tremendous groundswell of support for troubled Darlington in recent weeks, it's disappointing to see Town's plight largely ignored by the local populace. The club maybe also missed a trick today, with all these Man United fans in town. A bit of posting on a United forum might have attracted a few of them down to the Wellesley on their free afternoon. If nothing else, it would have boosted sales in the bar.

Maybe Kate Adie rolling into town might do a bit to stir up local enthusiasm. Sadly, I doubt it. They'll just have to make do with me.

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

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