

TT No.182: *Chris Freer* - Saturday March 10th 2012; **Tipton Town v Westfields**; Midland Football Alliance; Score: 1-1; Attendance: 74; Entertainment value: 2/5.

I think we'd all agree there's no place like home. But if you're like me you've probably got one or two other locations that could easily pass as a 'home-from-home', parts of the country - the world even - where you tend to feel most comfortable, and look to go back to as often as possible. I must confess to having one or two, but a particular area of the UK to which I have a certain affinity is the Black Country.

For a village-loving boy brought up on climbing trees, going fishing and birds-nesting, this grimy industrial region to the west of Brum shouldn't tick an awful lot of boxes. But having had the good fortune to spend a year working there in the late 1980s - and making life-long friends in the process - I immediately took a shine to the place. Maybe it was the sheer number of good pubs, the Balti houses, Desperate Dan Cow Pies, the endearing local accent, the fact that nowhere was too far away. For whatever reason, I loved the place.

As a guy charged with the task of selling beer to pubs, my working day often continued into the evening, propping up the bar in some boozy hostelry or other, before venturing into Lye or even Birmingham for a damn good Balti. We were in Azim's on the Lozells Road not long after the Handsworth riots, marvelling at how his premises had survived the wrecking spree. Come to think about it, they weren't that daft - even rioters have to eat, and where better than Azim's?

So, a rare excuse to go back to the Black Country for the day - aside from an occasional trip to watch the Wolves - is always most welcome.

My target ground today is Tipton Town, not far off the pace towards the top of the Midland Football Alliance, facing a stiff task at home to league leaders Westfields, the Hereford-based outfit. My first port-of-call is central Birmingham, where a Wetherspoons brekky is in order. A quick look into the Briar Rose, where it's two-deep at the bar, means I have to call the 'Spoons Ap on my I-phone into action, directing me towards the Square Peg on nearby Corporation Street. It's busy here too, but I manage to get served and settle down with a pint of Purity Ubu, their token - but tasty - malty brew. A sign near the door says average food waiting time this week is 9.49 minutes. Mine arrives in 29.49 minutes, but at least it gives my next pub, the Post Office Vaults, time to open.

Normally I wouldn't visit Brum without going into the Wellington. But having checked their online beer-board, and noted that 15 of the 16 beers on offer are rated as A or B (gold or golden) I don't think I'll bother. Surely offering a 'range' of beers should be just that - a range of different styles. It's just about as bad as going into your typical city centre 'style' bar and looking at all those foreign bottles in the fridge - every one of them based on the pilsner style. A wide choice but no choice.

So, I seek out the Post Office Vaults, which shares an owner with the Wellington, but is smaller and stocks a wider range of imported bottled beers, and not just pilsners! I go for one of the half-dozen cask ales on handpump, an excellent pint of Hobson's award-winning Mild, and listen to the landlord - who seems very keen if a little fond of himself - telling anyone who cares to listen his views on all things beer and the world.

Train time, and the half-hour sprint from Birmingham New Street to Cozeley. From the latter station it's about a 30-minute trek east to the Tipton Sports Academy, home of Tipton Town FC, but first I have a mission to walk a similar distance west to the Beacon Hotel, Sedgely, exalted home of the Sarah Hughes brewery. I was in here on the night in 1987 when Sarah's grandson John Hughes officially re-opened the brewhouse after 30 years in mothballs. The only home-brew at that time was Dark Ruby, a powerful mild based on the original 6.0%abv recipe, and a pint I have enjoyed several times since whenever I - and my wife, equally a Dark Ruby fan - can get back here.

As I arrive, I marvel at the fact that the place still hasn't changed. OK, they have built a new toilet block out back - the old one was in all honesty a tad basic - but the pub itself is still intact... multi-room, wood panels, that back-breaking low serving hatch, customers from all walks of life - some of whom are delivering an impromptu barbershop ditty as I take my seat - and the Dark Ruby itself. What a beer, and what a pub. They just don't build them like this anymore.

So, I have set myself a 50-minute three-mile walk from the Beacon Hotel to the Tipton Sports Academy, which I accomplish with the help of a couple of comfort stops along the way (the downside of a fondness for the ale) before arriving at the ground with a half-hour to spare. The first thing that strikes me as I approach the stadium is that it is possible to watch the match from the road overlooking the ground, not to mention an almost grandstand view from the adjacent Asda car park. I presume this would prove a serious drawback to any Tipton aspirations for a higher level of football. The ground itself is a multi-purpose sports stadium, home of the famous Tipton Harriers Athletic club, and boasting a smart grandstand but very little else for the spectator.

The bar is outside the ground and although spacious has a predictable line in drinks, so I don't dally. The snack bar opens around kick-off time and although doing a roaring trade in meaty burgers has nothing for me, so I pig out on the two Pork-less Pies I bought from Holland & Barrett earlier, for just such an eventuality.

It's a relatively mild day save for a strong chill wind blowing from right to left, and when it gets up the corner flags are really giving it some. It might also explain why most of the play in the first half is heading downwind towards the Westfields goal, as the league leaders show little of the form that has presumably served them well thus far this season. The home side have much the better of the play but are wantonly wasteful in the final quarter, resulting in them facing a single goal deficit at the break courtesy of a goalkeeping fumble. Westfields don't really deserve to be ahead, but it's all about taking your chances.

But after the break, my wind theory is blown right out of the water as Tipton - now kicking into it - continue to dominate and manage to equalize through the persistence of the substitute winger, who follows up his own parried shot to score. And from here to the close, much of the play is in the Westfields half, but solid defending keeps the home team at bay. In fact, I watch the last five minutes from the road overlooking the ground, as I have a tight train schedule to whisk me back to the only place that competes with a home-from-home. And that's home.

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

Home is where the beer is....

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