

TT No. 195: *Chris Freer* - Tues 20th March 2012; **Ramsbottom United v Silsden**; North West Counties Premier Division; Score: 3-0; Attendance: 131; Entertainment value: 2/5.

The problem with living in the middle of the country is that you're never quite sure whether you're from the north or the south. When people talk about the 'Great North/South Divide', which one should I be rooting for? I've heard it said that anybody living north of Watford is a 'Northerner'. Equally I suppose there are great swathes of the population who think folk from south of Sheffield are namby pamby 'Southerners'.

As a beer drinking man, I tend to prefer my beer with a head. Does that make me a 'Northerner'? Yet on reflection some of my favourite brews have been headless. Harvey's Best Bitter from about as far south as you can get is my champion quaffing ale. And I think back to my youth and the original Ruddles County, with just a trace of beer scum on top, but divine to the tongue.

Something I do find attractive about the north, though, are the place names. While southerners trudge off to work in conurbations as mundane-sounding as Slough and Croydon, their northern compatriots can venture into exotic habitats such as Mytholmroyd, Heckmondwike, and Rawtenstall. And who wouldn't want to live in Ramsbottom!

I'm 'Oop north' today on an afternoon business visit to an ambitious microbrewery not far from Leeds, and my evening options include watching Forest at Elland Road (bound to be a boring 1-0 defeat says the visionary) or somewhere in the North West Counties Premier. My eyes descend on the Ramsbottom United v Silsden fixture. 'Rammy' are clear at the top of the division, and it's a good chance to explore this compact Lancashire town, following very brief previous visits as guests of a local brewery. One of those involved a trip on the East Lancashire steam railway, the station for which is very close to United's Riverside Stadium.

I arrive in Ramsbottom a couple of hours prior to kick-off, and conscious of the fact that I've some driving to do later, allow myself the luxury of just one half-pint, so it needs to be researched carefully! First of all, though, I need some food, and as Wetherspoon's has not yet opened a branch in the town, I call into Taylor's chippy just up from the station, where a sit-down fish supper sets me back just a fiver. There are a number of pubs within walking distance of the ground. These include the Oaks, modern and busy, selling Thwaites beers; the Grey Mare, which looks very much like the 'locals' pub, again selling Thwaites; the Grant Arms, an imposing pub/hotel on the crossroads, selling Thwaites and a Moorhouse's beer, and the Railway, down by the station, with DIY pump-clips and some clips turned round - not very enticing.

But I stumble upon the First Chop Bar & Kitchen on Bolton Street, a single room beer-cafe style of operation. Despite a struggle to get in past a group of regulars

hogging all the seats by the door, and clogging up the entrance with their coats and dogs, I have a brief chat with the enthusiastic barman and from his range of northern microbeers go for the 'house' ale, First Chop Bitter brewed by Outstanding of Bury. The pub also has a small but interesting range of bottled and imported draught craft beers and seems to me very much like an interesting place to spend many a long evening.

It's time, though, to head back down to the ground, and the car park has filled up considerably since I dumped my motor about an hour before. There's no bar in the ground, but the site is dominated by the local cricket club and their clubhouse appears to be open. On investigation there's a line-dancing session going on, and the bar shutters are firmly closed. Punters do start to drift around the back about 7.00pm, and I check out the attraction. A bar is indeed opening up, but you'd have thought a tad late to attract much pre-match business. There's a Thwaites Wainwright handpump on the bar, but I've no idea if the beer is on, as I've had my quota and am merely nosing around.

On entry to the ground the players are out on the pitch warming up in virtual darkness. In fact, visibility is so poor it's not really safe to venture any further than the tea hut, which also doubles as the snack bar and club shop. At 7.15pm precisely an almighty roar fills the night as a generator powers up and the floodlights flicker into life. I can see the stadium for the first time, and observe a large covered stand - boasting the best legroom I think I've ever enjoyed - with a smaller stand adjacent, plus a covered terrace running the full width of the pitch behind one goal. Curiously most of the punters in attendance seem to prefer to use the flat standing on the tea-bar side of the ground.

Ramsbottom dominate the first half of the match against mid-table visitors Silsden, but only have a 25th-minute headed goal from a free kick to show for it. A promising game degenerates somewhat after the break, with a series of lengthy injuries affecting any real flow. When the ball is in play it's more often too high up in the air for my liking, providing both sets of central defenders with plenty of heading practice, but not really exciting the crowd. It takes until five minutes from the end for 'Rammy' to wrap it up with a second, adding a third for good measure in injury time.

There's a good chance that United will win this division, and - ground grading issues aside - will be taking the grand old 'northern' name of Ramsbottom to a higher footballing level next season. As I leave the thundering roar of the generator behind, I head out of the car park ready for my 90-minute home journey back to the south or maybe I'll still be in the north.

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

Footy wi' an 'ead on it...

07/20