

TT No.205: Paul Roth - Sat 31st March 2012; **Staveley Miners Welfare** v Dunston UTS; FA Vase Semi-Final, 2nd leg; Res: 2-2 (Dunston UTS win 3-2 on aggregate); Att: 1050; Entry: £5; Programme: 32-pages, £1.50; Altitude and global location: The Welfare Ground, Inkersall Road, Staveley, is 77m (252.624 ft) above sea level; at latitude 53 degrees, 15.8 mins N; 1 degree, 21.3 mins W (position derived from centre circle); SAT NAV: S43 3JL; Weather: Overcast; Club shop: No; Local MP: Toby Perkins (Lab); My day's CFL: 13.6.

'It's grim up t-North'!

But exactly where constitutes north? Let's face it, had I been travelling with Dunston UTS FC from Gateshead today I'd have considered Staveley 'down south'! And is there some ethereal meridian that deigns where 'north' starts and ends?

Of course, there isn't, and of course, it isn't grim up t-North. Wherever that may be. Far from it in fact; indeed, whenever I've ventured anywhere latitudinally more north than Watford I've always thoroughly enjoyed the places I've visited and the wonderfully hospitable people I've met (except maybe for that invidious cad who tried to mug me outside Liverpool Lime Street railway station all those years ago).

For only the second time in eight years - last season I went to the Galpharm Stadium to watch Dover Athletic's FA Cup 3rd Round Proper clash with Huddersfield Town, and previous to that, in March 2004, to visit Maine Road FC - I'm at a club us southerners (living on the Isle of Thanet I'm really more a Frenchman!) would certainly consider up t-North, namely Staveley Miners Welfare FC.

The reader might be surprised to find me attending another Vase match so soon, given my derogatory comments having attended such a lugubrious 1st Round Proper tie at Ellistown FC earlier in the campaign. This nicely poised semi-final however is an altogether different proposition, comprising as it does the triumvirate of credentials us travellers so hanker after; i.e. a new ground and two never-previously-encountered football clubs. Such a grandiose occasion also makes one fully appreciate otherworldly places like Bungay Town's Maltings Meadow and Sturry's Quarry Park.

You often hear people today commenting how the FA Cup's lost some of its glamour, and that the competition's not what it used to be. Well the same could surely be said of the FA Vase, its halcyon days in my opinion long since gone.

That only 974 souls rocked up to watch the first leg of this semi-final, that would ultimately see one or other side step out at Wembley on May 13th - also in what is supposedly the Geordie-land hotbed of football - is a damning indictment of its current appeal. Whilst I'm on a roll, how's about a fitting sentiment that summates the FA Trophy - hideous!

That moribund tournament, to me at least, never possessed a semblance of glamour since its inception in 1969.

After a 7.40am rendezvous, we were soon powering up country. Of all my northerly 'hopping adventures, this is the first time I've had the pleasure of the Seismologist's company beside me in the car's ejector seat. Alan's has a penchant for the FA Vase, and having witnessed Herne Bay's 2-2 draw with West Auckland last Saturday, was keen to run the rule over the other two combatants.

This was also a not-to-be-missed opportunity for my learned friend, and in some detail whilst en-route he explained to me why this part of the country (Nottinghamshire, east Derbyshire and South Yorkshire) is of such great seismological interest to him: it so happens apparently that the earth's tectonic plates hereabouts grate against one another more frequently, and more violently, than anywhere else in the British Isles. His is a fascinating, if somewhat esoteric hobby, but as Alan's constantly reminding me "it's better than being a practicing necrophiliac". Yes, I suppose it is!

At this point I would just like to say how refreshing it was to have a passenger aboard who wasn't a distraction because of what he or she was wearing. No disrespect to Geoffers or Raksha (have I ever mentioned she's a distant relation of the late Leslie Crowther?), but their garish outfits are so eye-catchingly menacing that they're distinctly off-putting not only to myself and other road users, but also to pilots of low-flying aircraft.

Nearing our destination, welcome tinctures were gleefully guzzled at three hostelries plucked from the Derbyshire section of this year's Blessed Book - namely the Shoulder of Mutton, the Britannia Inn and the Arkwright Arms at Shirland, New Tupton and Sutton cum Duckmanton respectively - before we advanced to take up our forward positions, expectantly anticipating a rumbustious, thrill-a-minute, blood and thunder, no holds barred cup tie. I should coco...

Entry cost a mere £5 (£3.50 for concessions); a further £1.50 gleaned us the 32-page programme. So, quid's in were we, that the two of us splashed out on repast of Chateaubriand bake, pomme-frites, and what is termed in some quarters avocado dip - all for just £2.50: It's cheap up t-north!

Staveley's ground is described in consummate detail elsewhere within this website by FGIF's respected correspondent Mike Latham, following his visit to the club in November 2009. All I can add is that the encampment is still a spick and span cornucopia of blue and white, that has been further enhanced by the construction of new concrete terracing on both sides of the grandstand, and behind the far goal. Also, where rough ground we presumed once stood, fresh-smelling asphalt has been laid in copious quantities.

The two clubs have met previously (apart from last week's match) in the Vase, during the 1998/99 tournament. Back then the Geordies came away from Inkersall Road two nil victors.

All augered well for a cracking match when, following a neat passage of play, the striped-shirted homesters took an early lead, cancelling out Dunston's slender first leg advantage. Ten minutes later No. 10 Andy Bulford poked home an on-the-day equaliser, only to be then sent-off for a second bookable offence soon after. Staveley drew level on aggregate once more with another well-worked goal courtesy of Chris Hoy, and looked odds-on to progress to Wembley with the extra man now telling.

Disappointingly after the break the match petered out as a spectacle. Staveley inexplicably ran out of ideas, as the more accomplished 10-strong visitors took control. Too many errant passes, coupled with an admittedly difficult bobbly pitch, made extra-time seem inevitable. The tie then turned on a second dismissal; this time it was the Miners' No. 10 who saw red, for an elbowing offence. Luckily for us, the visitors carved out one gilt-edged chance, which Steve Goddard took with aplomb with just minutes remaining. Unbelievably no injury time was added by referee Dean Mohareb, who scurried off to the sanctuary of the dressing rooms at the end amidst understandable scenes of Dunston delirium.

It all sounds like exciting stuff, but in truth it wasn't. The lack of matchday atmosphere, a dreary second-half and standing in close proximity to a group of loud-mouthed away fans to our left, and on our other flank an elderly gentleman who would be a shoe-in if the British Olympic team ever need to find participants for the discipline of long distance spitting, made the final whistle's retort a merciful release.

A memorable day in most respects, but I'm left wondering what the attendance for the final might be, given where the two finalists hail from. Could it be Wembley's first sub four-figure audience!

It's at last dawned on me the Vase is no longer my bag, and it's time to let it go. So, I'll leave you all with a question - Is it time to wheel out the FA Samovar?

FGIF Star rating: 5*.

07/20