

TT No.211: *Chris Freer* - Saturday April 7th 2012; **Consett** v Shildon; Northern League Division 1; Score: 1-5; Attendance: About 120 or so, I would say; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Before I ever went to a real football match, my juvenile appetite was suitably whetted thanks to a couple of distant cousins, who would kindly pass on their copies of Charles Buchan's Football Yearbook once they had had their fill. The pages were full of players of whom I had never heard - the likes of Gil Merrick, Ron Springett and Peter Swann - but I was impressed nonetheless. And every issue also had an article about the Amateur Cup, featuring teams that didn't tend to appear on the free League Ladders chart I got from the Dandy at the start of each season.

They had good honest, working class names like Crook Town and Tow Law Town, and came from somewhere 'oop north' to play at Wembley each season. I marvelled at the teams from this distant, mythical land of 'Oop North'.

During the 1980s I happened to stumble across a signpost directing me to Tow Law as we camped at nearby Consett. Determined finally to explore this utopia of footballing legends, I took my then girlfriend into an earthy local called the Surtees, a pub where conversation ceased, the music stopped and every bar stool swung round as we walked through the door. We were not in there for long.

The Amateur Cup is of course long gone, but the North East dominance continues in the form of the FA Vase, where Step 5 teams from all over the country compete at a disadvantage against Northern League outfits invariably opting out of their football 'pyramid' opportunities. Whitley Bay's winning streak has finally come to an end, but with two Northern League sides contesting this year's final, it doesn't take a degree in rocket science to see there is an imbalance somewhere.

I mentioned the town of Consett earlier, and that's where I'm headed today. Not because I need to get me some Northern League footy, but because I have read in Groundtastic magazine that the local football club is trying to up-sticks to a new ground, leaving a good bit of history behind.

After yesterday's NCEL hop marathon it's another early start and a train journey north which gets me into Durham in time for a quick pint in the Head of Steam, a popular ale bar just down from the bus station. This steals me for the 40-minute bouncy bus ride across country to Consett, a former steel town surrounded by rolling hills.

There appears to be only one pub in town worth patronising, and that's the Grey Horse, a two-bar hostelry that I suspect was slowly dying as an urban local a few years back. The owners have reinvented it as a proper community beer house, on the back of the in-house Consett Ale Works Brewery, and an enlightened range of ales which includes imported beers, and - on this weekend at least - up to 20 guest ales as part of an Easter Beer Festival.

I only have eyes for the home-brew though, and the hard-working and not unattractive bar lady dispenses me a pint of each of the four house ales during the ensuing 90 minutes, these being Steel Town, an amber-coloured traditional bitter of 3.8% abv; White Hot, a 4.0% abv pale, citrusy beer; Last Tap, a copper coloured malty brew at 4.3% abv; and the 4.5% abv Red Dust, ruby red and slightly sweet. Along with a tasty cheese & onion roll stuffed with the free nachos available on the bar, I reckon it's one of the best lunchtime sessions I've enjoyed all season.

From here it's just a ten-minute stroll to the Belle Vue home of Consett FC, which is set back from the road in a sort of forecourt which also houses the entrance to a health gym as well as a skateboard park frequented by BMX boys. A tiny turnstile takes you under the main stand and into the ground, with a tight staircase off leading up to a cosy bar where my request for a fruit juice gets me an offer of lemonade or orange squash. I choose the former, simply to be sociable.

I explore the stadium which lives up to all of the reports I've read. Surrounded almost all of the way round by grassy banks above the flat standing, there is some albeit crumbly terracing on the main stand side. The stand itself is tall, imposing, but wonderfully inefficient, with its sparing use of plastic seats, many filled with water which I can only presume comes from leaks in the roof. A snack hut stands alone and aloof in No-Mans-Land behind the goal. There are chips but I don't fancy any.

The crowd seems to be an equal split between home supporters and fans of visiting Shildon, a couple of ladies from which town are particularly vocal. A chauvinistic local suggests that if they don't like the referee's decisions, maybe they should just cast a spell on him. The MCP in me stifles a chuckle.

They are particularly aggrieved when the Lino contentiously flags for a home goal, although the ball does appear to have crossed the line, but Shildon are level on 40 and after nosing in front at the start of the second half it's no contest, with three further strikes in the last quarter clinching the points. The cast spells have clearly worked.

The Consett regulars don't seem too downhearted. They've just about got enough points to avoid relegation, and of course there's always next season's FA Vase to think about. And that's ALL that really matters in these parts, isn't it?

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

In the land of the Vase hunters...

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