

TT No.219: Chris Freer - 'East Midlands Double' - Mon April 9th 2012 - **Blackwell MW** v St Andrews; East Midland Counties and **Arnold Town** v Scarborough Athletic; Northern Counties East Premier.

Match 1 - Monday April 9th 2012 (midday); **Blackwell MW** v St Andrews; East Midland Counties; Score: 2-3; Attendance: 62 (25 up on Saturday's 37); Entertainment value: 4/5.

Apart from a ball and some players, one of the most important ingredients for staging a game of football is to have a pitch. You don't even need goalposts - coats will do - but wherever it is, you need somewhere to play. An abandoned building site and nearby cowpat meadows were where we kicked around as kids and we thought they were Wembley and Old Trafford. Sure, there were a few lumps and squelchy patches, but any stains were what mums and twin-tubs were invented for.

When I graduated to watching big boy's football, it was in an era where groundsmen appeared to be at a disadvantage. Many pitches had grass at the start of the season, but after grim 1960s winters there was very little sign of vegetation come April. Filbert Street, for instance, was often likened to Skeggy beach with the tide out. One game I can recall, if my memory serves me correctly, was a promotion cruncher between Leicester City and Blackpool, played on a bed of sand. If you were REALLY lucky, a layer of snow would cover your sand.

In the last couple of weeks, I've been to the Darlington Arena and Stamford Bridge, and on each occasion marvelled at the grass carpet that today's cosseted professionals get to work on. You just wouldn't know it's nearly the end of the season, as signs of wear-and-tear are miniscule.

Of course, it's not like that at all levels. Today I'm stood in one of the quaint little adjoining stands at the Primrose Hill ground of Blackwell Miners Welfare. They ply their trade in the East Midlands Counties League, probably the 10th level of English football, although there is some discussion regarding this amongst the Hoppers at the game. And the pitch looks decidedly uneven. There are patches of grass longer than other patches surrounding them, and you suspect the bounce might be a little unpredictable. Either the mower is broken, there isn't a mower, or the grass is too wet to mow.

Club officials, evidently, are still fiercely protective of their surface. As I arrive, a collie dog is sitting on the pitch watching the pre-match kickabout, as his owner chats to the turnstile operator. An aggressive, booming voice from fully two hundred yards away suggests in no effing uncertain terms that the dog shouldn't be on the pitch. His owner responds in kind and for a few minutes it looks like the protagonist - who turns out to be the home team coach - is on his way across for a confrontation. The dog edges to the touchline and the tension eases.

There's rain about today as I survey the ground, which boasts a shipping container for a tea-room - doing a roaring hot food and drink trade because of the soggy conditions - and a portacabin as a 'Marketing Suite'. The nearby Miners Welfare serves as the clubhouse, but is outside the ground and I decide to stay undercover. A number of other Hoppers are present - most treating this midday kick-off as the first of two games for the day - and I strike up a conversation with a couple of them.

Bearing in mind the thoughts I expressed about the hopping fraternity at large in my Good Friday post, I'm wary of getting sucked into discussions about obscure county league club secretaries or some equally boring subject, but the conversation today is much less intense, and adds substance to an enjoyable 90 minutes of football, served up by two teams near the top of their division. The home side roar into an early 2-goal lead and look like walking away with it, but visiting St Andrews claw their way back into the match, are level by half time, and score the only goal of a closely-fought second half to take the points.

Match 2 - Monday April 9th 2012 (3.00pm); **Arnold Town** v Scarborough Athletic; Northern Counties East Premier; Score: 3-0; Crowd: 178; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Most of the other hoppers are now headed down to Heanor Town for the top-of-the-table clash with Borrowash Vics, but despite dire warnings of the soggy hell awaiting me at Eagle Valley, I stick with my original plan to take in the Arnold Town v Scarborough Athletic match in the Northern Counties East Premier. There is a lot of rain about when I get there, but the match is on and I kill some time in the spacious modern clubhouse bar which is stocking Nottingham Brewery EPA in bottles and what a refreshing brew it is too. The ladies - and gent - in the snack bar are working overtime, making up a lot of the stuff to order, including my cheese & onion cob, with the old boy having to butter the roll and chop up the onion as I wait ravenously. The chips and peas I have at half time are also gratefully chomped.

Eagle Valley has two 'kit' stands, one with seats, and another opposite for those who prefer to stand under cover with the rain swirling about. Once again, the pitch looks likely to provide a barrier to good, passing football, with an uneven surface and those prominent clumps of grass. Visitors Scarborough Athletic have brought a few fans with them, and they are not slow to offer advice to the referee, both linesmen, and Arnold's veteran striker Chris Freestone who greets their abuse with a smile on his face. AND he has the last laugh, scoring the first of three unanswered, wind-assisted first half goals, and then doing his bit in a second half rear-guard action that successfully defends Town's three-goal lead.

Two games, eight goals, soggy and windy conditions, dodgy playing surfaces, no quarter asked, none given. What English lower league football is all about.

About 20 miles away, in similar inclement weather, a match in the same division is abandoned, with the home management apparently taking their players off, stating safety concerns. That they are 0-6 down at the time may have had nothing

to do with it. What a pity Filbert Street is long gone. They could have borrowed some sand and finished the game.

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

Just hopping in the rain....

07/20