

TT No.230: *Chris Freer* - Sat April 21st 2012; **Flackwell Heath v Cheltenham Saracens**; Hellenic League Premier; Score: 5-3; Crowd: 36; Entertainment value: 5/5.

The numbers game, eh? Is it 'the more the merrier' or 'too many cooks spoil the broth'? Maybe we should just take Harry Hill's advice and settle it with a fight....

I've had numbers whirling through my head for the past few days, starting on Thursday when trying to enjoy another beer at the SIBA South West Beer Festival in Newton Abbot, and wondering why I'd hit a wall. So, I did a backward count and realised that I'd sipped or slurped 29 different ales during the judging session I'd undertaken earlier. Arduous work, indeed, and definitely tiring! Having got back from that vital mission, I'm soon on the road again to interview a group called Project Venus, who are not a bunch of planet-gazing boffins as that title might intimate, but actually a collective of Brewsters - female brewers - who gather together every three months to swap beery gossip and produce a special ale to mark the occasion.

That's why today I am motoring down to Reading (149 miles away) to a place called Zero Degrees (as in 0), where the head-brewster happens to be a German. Able to openly flout the tough Rheinheitsgebot purity laws (of 1487) which govern brewing in her homeland, she's plumped for an apple wheat beer, which all the girls - and there must be more than a dozen of them - spend the morning actively brewing. When I arrive, they're eating pizza, their work for the day complete. Such is the nature of the beast, I'll not be able to sample the fruits of their labours for a couple of weeks to so, but having been 'in' on the action, I shall seek it out with some enthusiasm.

Of course, I wouldn't dream of traveling all this way south without a Plan B, and noting that it is only 1.30pm, I swing the motor in the (27 mile) direction of High Wycombe, where I peel off towards the village of Flackwell Heath. Situated on its western edges, and just down a tight but well-signposted lane between houses, Wilks Park is the home of the eponymously titled village side who are doing rather well in the Hellenic Premier. Sadly, this won't be a Championship season, as the three teams above them are out of sight, but averaging more than two goals a game indicates this could be an entertaining encounter against lowly visitors Cheltenham Saracens, a team that have shipped a similar amount, and who I have to confess I've never heard of!

Having purchased the programme before entering the ground, I detour to the large clubhouse which is empty save a talkative barman who gives me the strong impression he's just opening up, despite it being 2.30pm. I fail to spot anything interesting on the bar but ask the 'local beer' question to which he replies "...local as in Rebellion?" Indeed, and on the back-bar are a couple of what I can only describe as 22-gallon 'cubes' for keeping and serving the Marlow-based

microbrewer's beer under gas pressure. Not exactly fitting CAMRA's definition of real ale, but then I'd rather have that than John Smith's Smooth! I sample a glass of Rebellion Smugglers, a very palatable malty brew, while my new friend tells me he also has Mutiny, and often sells their seasonal ales too. Sadly, he's preaching to an audience of one, as the trickle of fellow customers seem happy to drink national beers.

Inside the ground I grab a tray of chips accompanied by a cob, and have a look around. Although at first glance appearing to be flat standing, there's actually a single step terrace around much of the ground, with limited cover behind each goal and the seated stand straddling the halfway line. The pitch undulates somewhat, and I overhear the groundsman explaining the 'rolled but not cut' appearance of the pitch by saying his No1 mower is kaput. You don't say!

What turns out to be a really compelling game kicks off with both sides looking up for it, but when a defensive mistake lets in the home team's No9 for the first, and a second is then harshly chalked off shortly afterwards, it looks like the floodgates are about to open. But it doesn't develop like that, and three shared goals leave it 2-2 at the break. Early in the second half, the lively visitors have the temerity to take the lead, but then second gear kicks in for Flackwell Heath, and their strike force takes complete control. Slick inter-passing, cool under pressure, constantly leaves the Saracens defence in turmoil, and goals start to flow, with the final score-line of 5-3 being an accurate reflection of a very entertaining game.

As I head back to the motor for the (126 mile) return journey home, I reflect on 8 goals, 2 penalties, 1 red card, 1 yellow that should have been a red, and a crowd of 36. And I hereby decree that my new ground number 497 will be my last at least until No.498 next week.....

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

300 grounds and counting...and counting...and counting...

07/20