

TT No.236: Chris Freer - Saturday April 28th 2012; **GE Hamble** v Totton & Eling; Wessex Premier; Score: 2-1; Crowd: 40-odd; Entertainment value: 2/5.

Money is a subject I've touched upon several times before over the course of this season, but as it makes the world go round it's never far from my thoughts, especially after my annual round of cars (as in plural) mot/insurance/tax/servicing expenditure has left me looking for that other penny so I can rub the two of them together. With the geriatric 4x4 patched up again and ready for another Summer towing the wife and daughter to some horsey show or other, at least I can say I've done my bit to keep a smile on their little faces, even if it has drained my reserves to zero.

So, when my son pleadingly asks 'Dad, can we go to Munich to see Chelsea in the Champions League Final', my cruel reply is sadly in the negative. Just a few hundred quid too far. It's a shame, because one of the highlights of my relatively uneventful life so far was that cattle train trip from Nottingham back in 1979 to see Forest in the European Cup Final in Munich. I seem to recall it cost me £78 (that's nearly a million pounds in today's money) for the privilege of being crammed into an ancient Belgian railway carriage with my old pal Nick and four flatulent strangers for a 24-hour journey on a train with no refreshment facilities and a quickly dysfunctional sewage system. Luxury.

Today I'm not going to Munich, but instead to Southampton, and I'm especially pleased with the internet travel tickets I've managed to procure. OK, it involves getting up at 4.15am for the second time in a month, but I arrive in London with plenty of time for my traditional walk from St Pancras to Victoria which takes me 70 minutes, so I calculate it's around 4 miles, and I still have time for a Wetherspoons Brekky at the Willow Walk. Since I waxed lyrical about this place a season or two back, I've become a bit less than enamoured with the veggie breakfasts. There was a period when they couldn't get the veggie sausages, and today's examples most definitely aren't Linda McCartney's. And scrambled eggs might be healthier than fried, but I'm afraid I prefer the latter. And what's with the frozen butter!?

I'm booked on the slow train to Southampton, and so settle down for the two-and-a-half-hour journey via Horsham. I'm ultimately headed for AFC Totton, which will allow me to tidy up every ground in the top 7 levels of English football. Sadly, that accomplishment will have to wait another season, as I learn from my I-phone that the game has fallen foul of the inclement April weather cursing the country. A quick scan of the Wessex League throws up a Premier division match at G E Hamble which is a convenient 20-minute rail journey back out of Southampton city centre, and their website confirms the game as being definitely 'ON'. Hurrah.

The last time I came by train to Southampton was back in December 1988 when I made my one and only visit to the Dell. I'd arranged to meet a chap called Tim

'Mad Dog' Whelan, who was then the East Midlands organiser for the fledgling Football Supporters Association with which I was briefly active. We christened him 'Mag Dog' to be ironic, because he would have made Charles Hawtrey look like a thug. With the FSA long since absorbed into the Football Supporters Federation, I occasionally wonder what became of Tim.

There's some time to kill, and I head up to a Good Beer Guide listed pub close to Southampton's St Mary's Ground. As luck would have it, the Saints are at home today but with a 12.30 kick-off, so when I arrive at the Guide Dog, the crowds have just gone, the beer lines have been well pulled through, and I settle down with a gaggle of red and white clad armchair natives to watch the first half of their promotion-clinching game against Coventry, televised live on BBC TV.

Mischievously I ask the guy opposite - dressed head to foot in red & white - who he's rooting for.

The Guide Dog is a great beer drinking local, with a lively community spirit. They're putting up birthday balloons as I arrive, which I assume aren't for me as it's not my birthday. The range of beers includes several LocAle brews, and I plump for a Flowerpots Goddons Gold (4.8%abv), citrusy but quite refreshing, and a Flack Manor Black Jack (4.6%abv) a dark and fruity porter. I shall visit this place again.

As I head back to the station the gloomy drizzly weather relents and I wonder if maybe AFC Totton have made their postponement decision a little too hastily. Still, with their opponents Bedford having quite a trip to make, I suppose that would have influenced things. Not to worry, it will give me an opportunity to visit my first Wessex League ground, meaning that I will have been to a least one stadium in 12 of the 14 Step 5 leagues - just Essex and Sussex to go!

I soon arrive at Hamble station, which is in the middle of nowhere, but just a short 15-minute walk brings me to Follands Park, the home stadium of G E Hamble. I have a sneaking suspicion that, even if they aren't now, this was once a works team linked to G E Aviation, on whose land the club plays. Although a fence divides the ground from the rest of the complex, the pitch can be easily viewed from the main road, so a little work would need to be done if any ambitions to scale the pyramid were to be realised. There is a small area of covered terracing and a low-level main stand featuring rows of benches, but apart from the tea-bar offering meaty pies, everything else - including the players changing rooms - is 50 yards outside the ground in the clubhouse complex.

The clubhouse is large, and is clearly set up for evenings of manic entertainment. Re-assuring there are a couple of handpumps on the bar for Old Speckled Hen and Greene King IPA, although my initial cursory glance fails to spot them hiding behind a large charity lifeboat, and by then I've already plumped for a bottled OSH. Enjoyable nonetheless, and stronger than the draught!

With the home team having a reasonably productive season - fifth prior to the match with a game-in-hand which could take them to a final position of third - I am keen to see the twin 63-goal strike-force of Jarvis and Musselwhite in action,

and I don't have to wait too long as the former lobs them ahead in the first minute. It should be the cue for a goal-fest against mid-table visitors Totton & Eling, but after they are gifted an equaliser on 15, it settles into an even encounter regularly spoilt by a nit-picking referee keen to establish his authority. This routinely requires any free kick to be preceded with a lengthy lecture to the miscreant in the company of his team captain. A promising game strangled at birth.

The other half of the prolific strike-force does manage to nod the home team ahead again early in the second half, but the initial promise has long since evaporated and the game dwindles to a relatively uneventful finish.

And so, I start my journey home, which will take me eight hours, involve catching three trains and another 4-mile walk across London, and get me into bed by 1.00 in the morning. Sadly, with no time for any more beer either. But as I said earlier, shrewd internet ticket buying got me to London and back for £6.50 (Megabus but by train), from London to Southampton & back for £6.60 (Southern Railways advance fare), and Southampton to Hamble for £4.20 return (the extortionate part). That's a day out for £17.30. Which translates to about 3 shillings and sixpence in old money. Not quite Munich, but hey!

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

It's not about the money, money....

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