

TT No.54: Chris Freer - Sat September 24th 2011; **Airdrie United** v Stirling Albion; Scottish League Division Two; Score: 1-1; Attendance: 709; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Like many women of a certain age, my wife is constantly threatening to go on a diet. 'But there's nothing on you!' I exaggerate, but it's to no avail, she's convinced she's overweight and although I must concede there is a slight level of chunkiness, I have seen a lot worse, probably most days round Long Eaton where I live. My own problem is not with weight - although my stomach has known sleeker times - but with the dreaded cholesterol. For the umpteenth time I've had doctors hectoring me that, despite my vegetarian lifestyle and only the ODD pint or two, a course of statins is unavoidable. Oh, and I must get some exercise. "Are you involved in a sport," they ask. Well I do a lot of football....

My football exercise today is a first visit of the season north of the border as these next few weeks should see my list of remaining Scottish grounds virtually halved. As usual I take an early morning drive to Crewe for a Virgin Pendelino at affordable prices and land in Glasgow at just after 11.00. Having spent some time in this city in recent years, I have to say that the girls in Glasgow have the best-looking figures in the UK. Clearly the acknowledged Scottish national trait of deep-frying everything they eat must actually be GOOD for the diet. I'm amazed that scientific studies haven't thrown up this glaring discrepancy in our health counselling.

I sample some of the cuisine in the Crystal Palace Wetherspoons where I eschew the deep-fried Mars Bar and Chips option for my usual large vegetarian breakfast washed down with a pint of over-warm Kelburn Dark Moon which is tasty nonetheless. Celtic are at home today and this part of town, which boasts a Celtic shop, is overrun by green and white hoops. So after a quick nose around Fopp - I am still trying to upgrade my vinyl classics to CD, even as the world moves to I-tunes - and picking up some Blue Nile and Bowie, I head for the Pot Still on Hope Street where I know I can get a quieter pint at this time of day. Although not my top Glasgow watering house, it's a darn sight more central than the Bon Accord and the beer is usually good, albeit with a heavy Kelburn Brewery bias. Today that bias is total, as all three ales are from the Glasgow brewer which I respect for its propensity to produce proper-coloured beers, against a national trend for churning out 'me-too'

lager substitutes. A pint of Carte Noir, another one of their dark beers, is a little over-cold but still manages to hit the spot.

The rail journey from Glasgow Queen Street low level station to Airdrie takes about half an hour and costs £4.10 return. Without wishing to be too judgmental, a quick assessment of this North Lanarkshire satellite town is that it has seen headier days and this is reflected in the price of a pint - £1.40 for the real ales and £1.65 for swilling lager - in the local Wetherspoons, less than half what it has just cost

me in Glasgow. The positioning of the rapid-cheque-cashing shop just across the road from the 'Robert Hamilton' is probably also more than just coincidence. I sample a pint of TSA Sheriffmuir, a red beer of 4.5% which seems to lack something in the bite, although the aftertaste is pleasant enough.

The Excelsior stadium is about a 20-minute walk from the town centre and I approach it via a criss-crossing system of roads on a hillside estate betwixt town and ground. A little history. This ground, built to SPL specifications and opened in 1998, was the new home of Airdrieonians until they went belly-up four years later. With their place in the Scottish league structure filled by Gretna - whatever happened to them! - the town of Airdrie was faced with having a smart new arena with no team to play in it until the old Clydebank F.C. was moved lock, stock and barrel to this part of Lanarkshire and renamed Airdrie United. Shades of Wimbledon / M.K. Dons and tough luck if you were a Clydebank fan.

The downside in 2011 is that the club has a smart 10,000 all-seater stadium with current crowds hovering around the 700 mark. Makes Nott's County's Meadow Lane ground look positively rammed each week!

With three sides of the ground closed we all sit in the Jack Dalzeil stand and there's still plenty of free space all around. Just my luck then to end up sitting next to the ground moaner. Actually, it's more of a whine which builds up to a crescendo as the game progresses and United are unable to build on a third-minute lead. When visiting Stirling Albion have the temerity to equalize before half time it's all too much for him and we are assured that the result is a 'disaster' and a 'calamity' for his beloved Diamonds. Some blokes behind me latch onto the fact that this guy is not actually the full ticket and start to offer some contrasting pearls of wisdom in response which serves to add a smile to a game which isn't actually too bad. Despite just the two goals, it is end-to-end stuff for much of the 90 with both teams playing some decent passing football and it's a good advert for Scottish Division 2. As is traditional after the game, I am treated to a chorus of the Scottish 'Boo' (the one that sounds like a cow with a cold) lead by my whining neighbour. What fun!

Usually, on my rail journey back south to Crewe, I ignore my booked seat and head for coach E, were there are no reservations and it's usually empty - save me - as far as Carlisle. Not today. Several groups of English-based - and by their accents mostly English-born - Celtic fans invade my space, set up a karaoke session, and booze their way, albeit harmlessly, back south. Aside of the Craic, I muse why it is that otherwise sensible English guys should travel all this way to support a team that only plays four meaningful league games a season. And then I remember those Glasgow girls and all that lovely deep-fried cuisine and I have my answer. They do it for the exercise.

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

The football diet...

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