

TT No.69: *Chris Freer* - Saturday October 15th 2011; **Tilbury** v Waltham Abbey; Isthmian League Division 1 North; Score: 3-2; Attendance: 93; Entertainment value: 3/5.

I have a stock phrase which I am prone to use on any of the numerous occasions that the wife or other members of my immediate family set out on some task or mission with inadequate planning or preparation.

‘A-ha!’ I affirm sagely, ‘Clearly a lack of Forward Planning...’

Of course, I am never ever guilty of such a misdemeanour. Everything I do is thoroughly researched and executed to a fine art. OK I might have ended up on the wrong tube train on one occasion, and on another found the rugby ground at Wigan rather than Springfield Park, but they were a long time ago and I don’t really talk about them.

So why am I about to buy a train ticket to Sittingbourne, when there is no game taking place there today? Hey, I’ve had a busy week!

Actually, it’s lucky that I decide to snatch a quick look at the Isthmian website as I approach Victoria Station on my way to eat some breakfast. I usually buy my rail ticket before the queues build up later, but something nags at me to check online that there are no problems with my intended fixture, Sittingbourne v Worthing, in Isthmian League Division 1 South. There is a problem, a fairly big one. The game isn’t taking place. The only solution to my dilemma is to sit down in the Willow Walk - which is bound to be quiet this time of the morning - and evaluate my alternatives. I arrive at the pub to find it full to the rafters with ex-pat Welsh and French rugby fans cheering on their sides in the World Cup Semi-Final. Ah, forgot about that....

As well as the inevitable renditions of ‘Bread of Heaven’, the ladies in Welsh colours also break out into a sustained version of the Beach Boys classic, Sloop John B, which I find a little bemusing.

Having found a spare corner to sit in, my request for the large Veggie breakfast meets with more bad news. The Linda McCartney veggie sausage shortage crisis that burst into the headlines last week is apparently worse than I feared, and I still can’t have any. It’s extra hash browns or nothing. They give me one, and about ten more beans. The Welsh get a man sent off and the French are whooping. There’s berets and onions flying everywhere, and I still don’t have a match to go to.

In between mouthfuls of hash brown, the odd bean, and a slurp of my Vale Long Dark Knights - one of the plus points of the day so far - a plan takes shape and I deduce that my best bet is Tilbury in Isthmian Division 1 North, which necessitates a trip across London to Fenchurch Street station, a stone’s throw from St Paul’s. As you know, I’m always up for a good walk, and the 4 miles between the two stations

seems a good way of eating up an hour or so, as well as helping the hash browns go down.

The train from Fenchurch Street to Tilbury takes about 40 minutes, and goes past the Lakeside Shopping Centre where most of the passengers get off. My I-phone Good Beer Guide App shows nothing for Tilbury and I debate whether to alight at Grays, a mile or so up the line, or take pot luck. I decide on the latter, but almost come to rue my judgement. For in the mile or so between Tilbury station and the Chadfields home of Tilbury FC, there is not a single pub. Lucky for me then that the clubhouse at the ground is not only open when I arrive just before 1.00pm, but already fairly full of locals watching the Liverpool v Manure game on the big screen. I gratefully buy a bottle of Bishop's Finger from the bar and join them. I marvel at the large group of middle-aged gentlemen who must have travelled all the way down from Manchester to cheer on their local team in this non-league clubhouse in rural Essex. They've even adopted 'Sarf-East' accents in deference to the locals. True devotion to the cause. I join the ranks of the ABMU's - Anyone but Man United - and secretly hope Liverpool stuff them. They don't, of course.

Chadfields, despite being situated on the outskirts of town, is a venue with quite a bit of history, going back to just after the Second World War. The main stand, although only built in 1970, looks much older and comprises a concrete structure with 'windows' looking out over the pitch from a position above the changing rooms. Today it is fenced off and unused, due to - according to neighbouring gossip - a recent fire. I suspect it's because nobody goes up there because the view is crap. A low-slung seated stand opposite - flanked by matching covered terraces - is the new magnet for those that want to sit. There is some uncovered raised terracing scattered elsewhere around the ground, with both ends seemingly unpopular due to the large nets situated between the goals and the terracing, affording a view akin to that suffered by away fans in Holland.

It's a lovely Autumn day and we settle down for what should be an entertaining game between two teams on the fringe of the promotion battle in Division One North. Tilbury currently lie fourth in the table while visitors Waltham Abbey, although in 15th spot, are only five points adrift. The game isn't a classic, but the home side have the better of the first half and go in two up, courtesy of a smart free kick and some opportune poaching. A third after 50 seems to settle the match, but Abbey - roared on by their four fans - get the boost of an OG with 20 to go, and have pegged it back to 3-2 before the referee blows for full time and I set off back to Tilbury Station.

On the train back to Victoria a startled elderly lady suddenly has a panic attack and asks us all if the train goes to Grays. Yes, we say. Does it stop there? Yes, we add. Of course, she should have checked that before clambering aboard. A lack of forward planning, I'd like to tell her. You'd never find me guilty of that...

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

Always expertly planned...

