

TT No.77: *Chris Freer* - Saturday October 22nd 2011; **Stenhousemuir** v Brechin City; Scottish League Division 2; Score: 1-1; Attendance: 681; Entertainment value: 2/5.

Regular readers of this blog may have noted that I do like a beer or two and see an essential part of my traveling to be the sampling of the local ale. Being a 'Northerner' - to anybody south of Leicester, anyway - I do tend to go for a proper 'Northern beer wi' an 'ead' and I have a particular penchant for Scottish brews, even some of the golden ones (not many, mind...).

The beer scene north of the border is a lot better than it used to be, with an abundance of new breweries and a few more enlightened pubs. I recall my first visit to this land in the early 1980s, busting a gut to get to the Winking Owl in Aviemore, the only real ale pub for fifty miles in any direction, and finding Ind Coope Burton Ale on the bar. Not a bad drop, but brewed about 20 miles from where I lived. I certainly expected something a little more 'Celtic'!

Even today, though, the best pubs for cask beer in Glasgow are the ones I was going into five years ago. Nothing new - apart from the inevitable latest Wetherspoons opening - ever seems to crop up on the radar. There are about six free houses in the city centre you'd make a point of going to, but after that...?

Today I am targeting Stenhousemuir, who are based in the Falkirk satellite village of Larbert, or at least that's where the nearest train station is. I note in the latest Good Beer Guide that there are no pubs listed for Larbert, but there is a brewery, Tryst. I take the trouble to email them, asking where I can get a pint of their stuff near to the ground. The bad news is that I can't, at least not in a pub, but the only lifeline is there is a shop nearby selling Tryst beers in bottle. At least something to sample when I get home!

But first Glasgow. My Virgin Super Voyager from Crewe has a couple of Celtic fans on board, the type who might just not know that their game has been postponed until Sunday, but is otherwise quiet as we slip into an overcast but dry city and I decide to investigate another Wetherspoons instead of the Crystal Palace. The Camperdown Place is adjacent to Queen Street station, is not especially big, and is virtually opposite its stablemate, the Good Beer Guide listed Counting House. It does however have a good range of beer, very quick food service, and a really nice bargirl with bright red hair, who doesn't tut when I stop her as she's about to pour me the cider I mistakenly ordered. Well Black Dragon doesn't SOUND like a cider, does it? I switch my choice to Maxim Anderson Scotch Ale, which although brewed near Newcastle tastes like a Scottish brew and is well recommended.

I've time on my hands - with no pubs identified for Larbert - so I head into the Merchant City area of Glasgow to two pubs that I know from previous trips, the Blackfriars and the Babbity Bowster. The former was rammed with beer drinkers the last time I was here, but today all the tables have place settings and lovely

scented candles. Urghh! A pint of Strathavon Avondale at 4.0% is golden-ish but not too citrusy and I resolve to drink this quickly and move on to somewhere a little less foody. That would be the Babbity, where the landlord with a patch over one eye is bantering with the customers as a traditional mine host is wont to do. This pub feels more comfortable and I settle down with my latest book and sample a pint of Inveralmond Thrappledouser which is a little more citrusy-golden than I would have liked but palatable nonetheless. I am a little disappointed that it is served in a Tennents glass, to the detriment of my street-cred...

I take a late train from Queen Street to Larbert, a thirty-minute journey or so, and immediately notice a big 'Real Ale' sign as I get off the train. The Station Hotel does indeed sell the stuff, with three handpumps devoted to Scottish brews. Sadly, no Tryst, though, and I resolve to get my bottles later. A car pulls up, and an elderly Scottish voice asks, "Are ye going to the game, would ye' like a lift?". Very civil of him, especially as he doesn't know me from Adam, but I accept his offer and small talk the half mile or so to Ochilview. The ground smacks of more than a century of occupancy with evidence of much sticking plaster being applied as time has ticked by. An old terrace with a new roof at one end, a cantilever main stand on one side, but the other two sides showing evidence of once having been gainfully employed but both now lying fallow, save for some five-a-side courts. The good news is the snack bar is selling macaroni pies, and although in all honesty

I'm really still stuffed from my veggie brekky a couple of hours earlier; I feel obliged to devour one.

My seat in the stand turns out to be next to the only other English-speaking person in the ground, most of the others around me conversing in a language I only normally get to experience when watching Rab C Nesbitt. The dialect here is far more impenetrable than that in Glasgow and I pick up barely the odd word. Fortunately, my neighbour is a Yorkshireman retired to the area, and he gives me a few pointers regarding the home players. The teams are out and kicked off within a minute, as is the Scottish way, and a fairly cagey opening springs to life when the referee awards a penalty for what looks a soft challenge. Those around me protest or concur the decision - it's hard to tell which - but the visiting Brechin man nets and the away side are a goal up. Ten minutes later they are a man down, a straight red for a crude looking challenge. Within another ten minutes it's one-apiece as the home left-back thunders a cross-shot into the far corner and by half time we have the makings of an enthralling second half.

The tannoy announcer asks if anyone has lost a pair of spectacles, and a wag near me shouts out "They're the referee's...!" which brings a few guffaws from the crowd. He may have had a point, as a surprisingly drab second half looks likely to run its course until a major call right at the death. The home no 11 weaves his way into the box, stumbles over a stray leg, and the man-in-dayglo-yellow (this being a Scottish ref) puts the whistle to his lips for the clear-cut penalty, then decides not to blow it. He bottles it.

Which reminds me, I must pick up that bottle of Tryst on the way back to the station....

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

It's gotta, lotta bottle...

07/20