

TT No.78: Paul Roth - Sat October 22nd 2011; **Ellistown** v Peterborough Northern Star; FA Vase 1st Round Proper; Res: 0-2; Att: 60; Entry: £5; Programme: £1 for 16 pages; Altitude and global positioning: Terrace Road is 168m (551.863 ft) above sea level: at latitude 52 degrees, 41.3 mins N; 1 degree, 21.6 mins W (position derived from centre circle); Sat Nav:LE67 1GD; Weather: Sunny and mild; Club shop: No; Local MP: Andrew Brigden (Con); CFL :13.6.

By definition, those things which are brand new have a quality all of their own. A just-off-the-production-line car's bodywork gleams; freshly baked loaves of bread smell delicious for the short while following their extrication from a hot oven; a newly-decorated room begs to be admired; a new-fangled adventure to foreign climes holds the thrill of serendipitous expectation. Inevitably though with the passage of time, lustre fades, mould decompose, glossy paintwork peels and foreign climes are perceived too distant.

In 1974, with many amateur footballers receiving payment for their employ, The Football Association scrapped The FA Amateur Cup in favour of a new competition, The FA Vase. 200 clubs took part in that inaugural tournament, with Hoddesden Town FC emerging as its unlikely winners.

The competition's launch also happened to coincide with Bob's and my first tentative groundhopping ventures. The Pandora's Box that is the Vase opened up the world of Non-League football to us. Never-before-heard-of destinations such as Appleby Frodingham; British Timkin Athletic; Frecheville Community, the eponymous National Westminster Bank; Wigston Fields, plus countless other far-flung outposts at once beckoned.

In those early years we'd select our venue of choice at random from the FA's competitions' handbook (no Internet then of course - I'd send a sae, which the FA always kindly returned unused, for a copy) during pre-season drinking sessions. Our MO was to follow our chosen team all the way to Wembley, wherever that arcane and twisting trail led us.

It was however never just about the football. It was the friendship and virtual non-stop laughter of two inseparable mates that made those halcyon days so unforgettable. Bob's time-honoured and sonorous greeting...."Alright my old cool", whenever we met up, was always a pre-cursor to the forthcoming madness.

If we'd travelled by train, a bibulous day ensued. At Willenhall Town in 1981 - for the occasion of that club's semi-final tie with Irthlingborough Diamonds - my all-time liquid nadir was achieved: 24 pints (Bob still regularly exceeds that quantity).

At Newport Isle-of Wight, in 1987, the two of us were searching out the clubhouse for another drink, when we mistakenly stumbled into the directors' room. A hot meal was instantaneously laid before us, which we gleefully consumed, never letting on that we were in no way connected to visitors Whyteleafe! The

Guisborough Town FC/Windsor & Eton quarter-final of 1980 saw us joined for the lengthy northward journey by my friends Gary and Steve Jennings. Dubbed 'The Brothers Grimm', the booze-fuelled trip was too much for the always-bickering siblings. Outside the Three Fiddles, on the town's High Street, their squabbling erupted into a full blown fist-fight; this only served to leave Bob and me rolling around in fits of laughter once again. My abiding memory of the day though is of confusing the two teams; I was convinced the southerners had made it through to the last four. It wasn't until the semi-final draw was published in The Daily Telegraph on the following Tuesday that it dawned on me that the Cleveland-based side had in fact won. At the time, it did amaze me how well supported the Berkshire club were!

Whenever I drove (Bob is no longer allowed to take the wheel of any motor vehicle having been banned from driving for life in August 1978, despite never having passed a driving test) such was the side-splitting joviality inside my RS2000 at times, that I'm ashamed to report that I did once or twice lose control: didn't we all in those days? Of more concern was that often when I did take my foot off the Escort's accelerator, the rev counter's needle would remain stuck open at 7000 revs whilst the car's engine continued to roar. Very scary I can tell you.

I'm proud to say I never lost control on a motorway though. My concentration was always honed on the job in hand, the priority being to get us back down to The Smoke as quickly as possible for evening opening time, or as soon as possible afterwards. With the relevant year's most up to date Automobile Association A to Z map of London numerically annotated with those GBG pubs we'd previously not visited, the scenario, as we approached the capital (no M25 don't forget) often had my partner in crime uttering the immortal words..."Pub number 137 is but 15 minutes and eleven seconds away". Cue more hysterical laughter.

We've been presented with club ties at Irthlingborough; Christmas luncheon at Anstey Nomads; coffee and biscuits (anathema to my alcohol-only friend) at Thringstone Miners Welfare; the cost of our travel at Rainworth Miners Welfare and club badges at so many welcoming venues that I've long since lost count.

On the occasion of St Neots Town's meeting with Watton United, at the club's former Shortlands ground, in 1979, we infamously bought all 179 penny chews from the refreshment hut at half-time, to the chagrin of those queuing for victuals behind us: the efficient tea lady dutifully counted out each and every one! Diss Town, Stansted, Wimborne Town, Brigg Town (twice), and still-unbelievable to me at least, Deal Town are amongst the Vase's numerous, now-legendary champions. Some of them have gone on to better things; many have not.

Those early Vase days were unbelievable fun; an unimaginable giggle, an 'Adventure' in every sense of the word.

At a stroke its allure sadly evaporated when in season 1990/91 it became mandatory for clubs to possess floodlights. Gone in a twinkling of an eye were those teams that were the very essence of its fascination.

The last match I witnessed in the competition before today's tie at Ellistown FC, was the 2007 final at the rain-sodden 'New Wembley', when Truro City overcame AFC Totton. My problem is that to visit a new Vase ground nowadays I have such a long way to travel. Living on the tip of east Kent has many advantages; being a groundhopper isn't one of them! But it's not only the distances involved that is to blame for my personal falling out of love with the Vase. To a greater extent it's my own advancing years, coupled with my own etiolated patina for the tournament. The mystique has gone, and along with it my ardour for it.

In an attempt to rekindle some of the former magic, I thought it might be fun to give the Old Lady another whirl. It wasn't. Hopefully the attached photographs at least portray Terrace Road as it is today, and depict something of today's encounter, played out in the epicentre of the former Leicestershire coal mining belt. A résumé of Ellistown FC's facilities, if so desired, can be found elsewhere within this website. I won't bore the readership either with a detailed analysis regarding this prosaic game's thrill-a-decade action: be assured, it would be of no interest to anybody - it wasn't of that much interest to myself!

I realise the latter part of this missive could be perceived as nihilistic; that's because it is. Nevertheless, on a more positive note, there must be many amongst you who are cutting your teeth on, and thoroughly enjoying, the Vase in its present format. I wish you all years of joyous happiness in that pursuit.

But I'll tell you this: things ain't what they used to be, and I for one won't be watching another tie any time soon.

FGIF Star rating: 5* (for the Three Horseshoes at Whitwick).

07/20