

**TT No.87: Chris Freer** - Saturday November 5th 2011; **Sittingbourne** v Chipstead; Isthmian League Division 1 South; Score: 2-2; Crowd: 123; Entertainment value: 2/5.

Although I am essentially a football nomad these days, I still class myself as a Forest supporter first-and-foremost and follow their fortunes closely. Quite recently there was a bit of shenanigans regarding the coming and going of a high-profile former England manager, and a sudden realisation at the club that its loss-making lifestyle might be one of many coming under scrutiny as and when new, tough football financing laws are introduced. Just down the road at Leicester, the sugar-daddy owners have decided to ignore that prospect in an all-or-nothing attempt to buy a Premier League place. It may well end in tears.

I have a bit of experience of this shit-or-bust approach to football, having witnessed the coming of the 'messiah' that went under the name of George Reynolds at Darlington, my 'other' team. "Good on yer, George..." I said as I patted him on the back at an away game at Scunthorpe, as he walked amongst the crowd distributing loaves and fishes. He built a spanking stadium for the 25,000 that were busting a gut to follow Darlo to the Premier heaven and as we waved goodbye to a much-loved Feethams some of us must have thought the sky's the limit. I personally suspected it had to end in tears.

Only a few years earlier I had locked up my pub in Burton on Trent and headed down to Eton Park to see young Nigel's Albion take on the 'Manchester United of Non-League Football' that was Sittingbourne, whose wheeling and dealings involved several million pounds and who were expected to surge up through the divisions. They brought a healthy number of fans all the way up from coastal Kent and the locals gave them a fair bit of grief as the home team triumphed 1-0. A few years later it all ended in tears.

To its credit the club has survived and still plies its trade in the 8th tier of English football, and as I travel down to the 'Smoke' on the National Express 440 I decide to head off to Kent and see how the intervening years has treated them.

For a change today, I decide not to bother with a 'Spoons brekky, and stock up on Holland & Barrett 'Veg-Out' Scotch Eggs and Porkless Pies instead. My first target is the Cask Pub & Kitchen in Pimlico, just a five-minute walk from Victoria Station. This modern corner unit has been transformed from an apparently lifeless estate local into a veritable mecca for beer fans, whether your poison is English micro-brewed beer or imported bottle or draught. There's a Norwegian Beer Festival on today and although I play safe and settle for an excellent pint of Smokehouse Porter brewed by Bristol-based Arbor Ales, a fair few of the customers are studying the beer list and sampling the Nordic niceties. If you're a beer fan, this is a pub not to be missed, and instantly goes into the Top Ten, of my mental list, of must-revisit, hostelries.

My train from Victoria to Sittingbourne takes just over an hour and costs £18, which by Kent rail prices must count as a give-away. My online search for decent hostelries in the town throws up the inevitable Wetherspoons but not much else except a pub called the Old Oak, which allegedly sells its cask ales on gravity dispense. Maybe it once did, but sadly I discover it closed and up-for-sale, one of many in the town enduring a similar fate. So, it's off to the Wetherspoons, the Summoner, where there's a smoke cloud blanketing the door as the cheap beer men take time out for a chuff. A pint of RCH Firey Liz, a leftover from the recent beer festival, is surprisingly palatable, given that it pours golden but thankfully eschews those American hops that I find so nauseating.

From the town centre there's a half-hour walk out to the football complex that is home to modern-day Sittingbourne F.C. As you near the club's modest Bourne Park ground, you pass the imposing Central Stadium, now home to Sittingbourne dogs, but where the footy club was based when times were good in the early 1990s. It was designed as one of those multi-functional grounds, an oval with a large main stand complex and smaller stand opposite, but with either end remote from the action. The unavoidable decision to re-locate to the nearby training ground, retitled Bourne Park, at least gave the club back its soul. It's a proper lower-league stadium, with a chunky main stand for those who want to sit, and Heath Robinson covered flat-standing for those that prefer to stand, lean and bellow.

The pre-fabricated Clubhouse behind one goal is reasonably spacious but in a spartan sort of way. There's no real ale on the bar and nothing of any artisanal interest in the fridges, so I don't linger. Next, I check out the snack bar which interestingly is advertising fish and chips. Well, we are near the coast! As I stroll the perimeter of the ground, I am intrigued enough by the sight of huge yellow waste bins to decide to count them all. I make it 33 but feel free to post a correction. Either way, this has to be the most litter-conscious football ground in the UK.

Today's game is a mid-table clash with Chipstead. The home club has suffered a few hammer blows in recent weeks, with the management team legging it with a few of the players, and some of those remaining seeing red on Tuesday night as the 'Brickies' finished the game at Burgess Hill with just 8 men. So, it's a somewhat depleted Sittingbourne outfit that nevertheless take the lead in the first half but then suffers the misfortune of conceding two penalties either side of half time, both of which are eventually converted. With few chances being created in a dour match, only a superb piece of dead-ball accuracy rescues a point for the home side late on and a draw is probably a fair result.

Sittingbourne will doubtless prove tough enough to survive in the Isthmian League this year and have probably found their level. I check the scores from elsewhere and Forest have slumped 0-3 at Portsmouth. As for poor old Darlo, the mid-week cup trouncing at mighty Hinckley United seems a million miles from the future we were once promised by good old George. Mind you, as I said, I thought it would all end in tears. Football has a nasty habit of doing that to you.

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

Don't cry for me, Ike & Tina....

07/20