

TT No. 18: *Chris Freer* - Sat September 1st 2012; **Harborough Town v Barrow Town**; FA Vase 1st Rd Qualifying; Score: 3-1; Attendance: 60 or so; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Leicestershire sides have acquitted themselves well during the history of the FA Vase. Not quite in terms of the Northern League's success rate, but that's another story. My first experience of the competition was back in the mid-1970s when myself and another guy latched onto Friar Lane Old Boys for some unknown reason. FLOB - as they were affectionately known in those days - showed an appetite for the competition, reaching the semi-final stage in successive seasons before falling at the final hurdle.

When we went to the 5th Round home game in 1974/5 against Middlewich Athletic, a crowd of more than 2,000 filled the ground and the adjacent railway embankment, much to the bemusement of rail travellers passing by. In the following season, we went to both legs of the semi-final against Stamford, managing to avoid the kicking that some FLOB fans got from the more hostile of the locals, who had wisely failed to put in an appearance in Leicester for the first leg. We were tucked safely under the stand as a sole policeman legged it across the pitch to where a kerfuffle was taking place.

A couple of seasons ago a group of us made it down to the new Wembley to cheer on another Leicestershire side, Coalville Town, who were attempting to nick the crown from Whitley Bay's head. They were the better team but lost out to the better finishers.

Today I am fresh back from holiday, and in the car for a relatively short hop to Market Harborough to see two Leicestershire clubs start out on this season's F.A. Vase journey. Home team Harborough Town are a Step 9 club plying their trade in the United Counties Premier, whilst visiting Barrow Town from the East Midlands Counties league are Step 10. But they have enjoyed a good start to their campaign, whilst the home side's form has been indifferent.

My journey to the game takes me from Junction 20 of the M1 through the village of Walcote and past the old Black Horse pub, now closed and being converted to a residence. Back in the late 1970s the pub was run by one Mike Tinker, who operated one of the only genuine free houses in the county. All of the available micro-brewed beers of that era would have passed through the Black Horse's pumps, and people would travel for miles for these and the excellent ethnic food cooked by Mike's Thai-born wife. A pioneering gem of a pub that is no longer with us.

Harborough Town's ground is in a new complex built to the south of the town, and incorporates a leisure centre and rugby club alongside the football stadium. The impressive frontage of the building which houses a large clubhouse belies the ground itself, which disappointingly features just a kit stand and a converted lean-

to as its spectator accommodation. Probably the bare minimum for Step 9. The clubhouse bar has no hand-pumped beer, but bottles of Black Sheep Ale and Old Speckled Hen are available, either chilled or room temperature. There is a snack hatch adjacent to the bar, with the menu featuring the usual burgers, but also fried new potatoes, a variation on the chip, I suppose. There is also a pool table and bar football table.

After the billiard table smooth pitches of the Isthmian League I experienced over the weekend, it is back to the long grass of East Midlands football with Town's playing surface really needing a hair-cut. There's a slight slope with a breeze blowing down it, helping visiting Barrow Town dominate the first half, creating a number of chances which should have seen them go in at the break with a healthy lead. But they also manage to use up all three subs by half time, and are beginning to suffer walking wounded as Town finally show their mettle in a more even second half. Despite this, Barrow do pinch the lead on 57 minutes but it doesn't last long. Harborough finally recognise that the long diagonal ball to raiding wide strikers is the killer, and three goals in 20 minutes puts the tie beyond the plucky visitors, despite a late rally.

An entertaining game, frustrating for the Barrow fans, but relief that they can now concentrate on promotion to a Step 9 league. Harborough go forward to carry a Leicestershire flag into the next round, but somehow, I can't see them following in the footsteps of Coalville Town. Or indeed the mighty FLOB.

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

We're (not) on our way to Wembley....

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