

TT No.2: *Chris Freer* - Sat August 4th 2012; **Loughborough University** v Causeway Utd; Midland Football Alliance; Score: 1-0; Attendance: 66; Entertainment value: 3/5.

After taking in two of the UK's biggest stadiums in the preceding seven days, where better to record my 500th ground than in one of the newest - and in my home town too! In fact, there's a certain symmetry to it all, with Loughborough's role as HQ for Team GB during this Olympic gold rush effectively squaring the circle.

My qualifications as a conspiracy theorist apart, I must say I am enjoying the Olympics. I have seen all the negative stuff about the 'Games' being bad for the environment, bad for the economy, and only good for big business, but the human story powering each competing athlete deserves my attention, as does stuffing the Aussies in virtually every event. And who couldn't puff his nationalist chest out after watching our cycling teams blowing away the opposition in World Record times?

As I said previously, Loughborough is my home town, having been born in the town's hospital. Quite coincidentally, they've just knocked it down. I'm here every week to visit the mother, whose house is just a few hundred yards from my old school. Curiously enough, I've only lived in the town for about six months of my life. I like to think I must have moved on to seek my fortune elsewhere. The fortune I'm still looking for, that is.

Loughborough itself has a football heritage. There was a Football League team here - the Athletic - until it failed to gain re-election in 1900. In the mid-20th century it had a decent football stadium in the town centre. Browns Lane, with its single, upright traditional stand, was home to Midland League Loughborough United, and my school PE teacher played in goal for them. Sadly, my one-and-only visit to Browns Lane was for a charity match, so it doesn't count as one of my 500. The local council were not sympathisers, deciding to demolish the ground and build a Leisure Centre. That was in the early 1970s. Since then only Loughborough Dynamo, playing on a sports ground on the eastern edge of town, can lay claim to carrying the flag for Loughborough football, but now the University has given the town something new.

Built at a cost of several million, Holywell Park is technically on private land, erected within the grounds of the University complex. A manned barrier challenges all vehicles entering the site. Its single but impressive stand towers over an immaculate playing surface in this part of the town that features a number of sporting facilities dedicated to the student population.

It's the first day of the season for several leagues, including the Midland Football Alliance, and with my son in tow - his regular Saturday mate is crown green bowling - I decide to do things a little different today, partly out of necessity, but

essentially because I fancy a little post-match pub crawl round Loughborough to visit a few old favourites and watch a bit of the Olympics on telly.

So, after a quick lunch break at the mothers, we drive up to the vicinity of the poorly-signposted home of Loughborough University FC, pick our way through rows of trees, and arrive at the venue about 2.15. There's some evidence of groundhopper activity, as programmes are in short supply despite there being very few people in the ground. The main bar is upstairs, with access not readily identifiable apart from DIY signing. It is spacious and affords access to the seating deck, as well as providing a magnificent view of the action should it decide to rain. There appears to be no food on offer, and alcohol is restricted to cans of Guinness and bottles of Corona - the lager not the fizzy pop. Strangely for me, I decide on the latter. The lad sticks to his crisps.

The ground itself is neatly surrounded by six-foot high fencing, with the pitch protected by a sturdy perimeter fence with a plastic insert underneath. In between the two is a 7-step terrace which runs right around the ground, save for the area in front of the main stand. For some reason, what would normally be the hard-standing surface between the bottom of the terrace and the perimeter fence is covered in something akin to cat litter. I suspect the local moggies will be making hay when the crowd has gone home.

I say crowd, but only 66 people are recorded as attending this opening competitive fixture at this all-new stadium. Presumably, when the University side has risen up through the divisions, and Holywell Park has expanded to a 40,000 all-seater stadium, we will be amongst several thousand people who claim to have 'been there for that first game...'

To set that particular ball rolling, the University side will need to be a degree more clinical than they are today. Up against a bruising Causeway United side devoid of anything remotely resembling a strike force, they have lots of possession and a man in right winger Daniel Nti who continually rips the visiting left back a new botty, but all they have to show for it is a solitary goal in the 70th minute. It proves enough for the points.

And now my drinking day starts. I deposit the lad at my in-laws - they also live a few hundred yards from the ground - and take the 126 into town, stopping off first at the Generous Briton on Ashby Road. Previously a 'studenty' hang-out, it's recently been taken over by the guy who used to run the Swan in the Rushes, a Castle Rock pub where I shall call later. The G.B. - how apt - is showing the Olympics and we all get excited by the tennis, and baffled by the cycling (the Omnium). My pint of Derwentio Cleopatra is one of many golden ale's on offer - surprise, surprise - and I sup up and nip across the road to the Old English Gentleman. As near as dammit the only 'locals' pub within striking distance of the town centre, the OEG has been 'tarted' up a bit since my last visit, but still retains that multi-room feel, although sadly the snug now seems to be a pool room. Another disappointment is that the hand-pumped M&B Mild has run out, so I have to make do with Black Sheep Bitter, not a beer I really like.

Having watched the lady cyclists burn up the opposition in yet another World Record time, I head off through town centre towards Woodgate and the Organ Grinder, a Blue Monkey pub that opened in June. Only apparently it didn't. When I arrive, the doors are firmly shut, and there is evidence of recent workman activity. What's happened there then? A quick check on the Blue Monkey website says that work is not complete, a manager has not been appointed, and they don't have an opening date. How odd. Not to worry, it will give me more time in the Swan.

This pub, in the Rushes and right opposite a decent Wetherspoons, is one of my favourite haunts. It's one of those places you just feel comfortable in, and can happily watch the world go by armed with nothing but a bag of Bombay Mix and a decent pint. Despite being owned by Castle Rock, there are several guest beers also available, and I plump for an Elgood's Black Dog followed by a Burton Bridge Bramble Stout.

As I savour the latter I think back to the chest-thumping TV pictures of Olympians going about their business earlier, and reflect upon my own achievement today. That's 500 football grounds visited. Wow. I wonder if they'll give me a medal....

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

First past the post...

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