

TT No.59: *Chris Freer* - Saturday November 10th 2012; **Elgin City** v Berwick Rangers; Scottish Division Three; Score: 3-1; Attendance: 790; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Jokes about the Scottish diet are legendary. Most run along the lines that showing a lettuce to a Scots-person is akin to shaking garlic at a vampire. Apparently, they like to deep fry anything that used to move, or in the case of the Mars Bars, never actually did.

A couple of years back I got a wake-up call when my GP booked me in to see a Lipids consultant, as he was alarmed at the levels of fat in my bloodstream. This was a surprise to me as I presumed my vegetarian diet would take care of any of that nonsense. Plus, the amount of alcohol in there must surely be displacing everything else.

In short, I was advised to go on statins which, for a variety of reasons I determined to resist. The only alternative was to intensify my diet, which happily for me did the trick. I also lost a stone in weight in the process. But I still have to bow in deference to Auchtermuchtie (formerly Eagle) Bobster, the ex-Boston publican when I meet up with him north of the border. He's lost FOUR stone just by cutting out beer - a bit of a drastic step methinks. More of the Bobster later.

I like travelling to Scotland by Virgin Rail. No, I'm not in the pay of Richard Branson, but his trains are smooth and comfortable, have plenty of legroom and eat up the 300 miles or so in a little over 3 hours from Crewe, and all for less than £25 if you book well in advance. I for one will be well pleased if they eventually do get to retain their franchise.

Glasgow is a bit overcast on my arrival so I head straight for the Crystal Palace, a Wetherspoons I know from numerous previous visits. I order up brekky but will have a wait for ten minutes to buy a pint as they have an arbitrary start time for alcohol of 11.00am. Really? It's the back end of their twice-yearly beer festival so all their cask ales are English. I try the paradox that is Titanic Golden Porter about which I will reserve judgement!

A walk out to near the motorway is in order to the Bon Accord, usually one of my favourite Glasgow pubs, but it's Friday lunchtime and vast areas of it are either set aside for diners, or have reserved signs slapped on the tables. There's about ten people in the pub and I end up having to perch on a stool at the back. Not impressed. Despite the name connotations, the Orkney Raven ale is not black but golden and is typical of its type.

Back in town and the good old, reliable Pot Still. Quiet as a library and very male-orientated. Perfect! I can read my book and enjoy a great pint of Williams Bros Cock of the North, a classic red ale.

The rail journey to Aberdeen takes around two and a half hours by Scotrail and although affording some spectacular views of the countryside and coastline of north-east Scotland, drags a bit when the sun goes down and there's little to see. The only bonus is the £19 return fare, courtesy of Scotrail's Club 55 scheme which allows the over 55s (which sadly includes me) to travel anywhere between two points in Scotland for that price. I believe that also includes travel from Carlisle and Berwick, and you can go as far as you like on the Scottish rail network. It's not always available, but when it is, use it!

After stocking up on water for two nights of boozing, I check into my cheapo Travelodge hotel and hit the town, starting at the Brentwood Hotel, where the cellar bar is a bit sterile but has up to ten ales on. Unfortunately, 7 are English (when in Scotland I prefer to drink the local stuff!) and of the three Scottish beers, all are golden. My Highland Island Hopping is, as the name suggests, of its type. From here I move to the railway station area and Aitchies Ale House which, despite its moniker, only has two cask beers on. Fortunately for me, one is Orkney Dark Island, one of my 'faves', and in this genuinely shouty pub, I can settle down in a quiet corner with the latest When Saturday Comes and savour both.

A bit of a walk now, to the intriguingly-named Under the Hammer, which turns out to be a busy basement bar in a residential area. There are two golden beers plus Caledonian 80/- which reminds me what a cracking good traditional pint it is. Just down the road is the Grill, with its classic frontage and wood-panelled interior. A local-tries to engage me in conversation but sadly we are fluent in different languages and so I get stuck into my Orkney Red MacGregor and carry on with my football reading. And then back to the hotel to end Day One.

Day two starts bright and early with a breakfast in the Justice Mill, the nearest Wetherspoons to my digs. Spoons have changed the veggie sausages they use from Linda McCartney to something that tastes worrying too much like I remember meat tasting. I'm wondering if some twisted soul at head office is having a laugh at my expense. The train journey from Aberdeen to Elgin takes about an hour and a half, but the scenery is interesting, and I land in this highland 'city' with time for a bit of ale exploring. First port-of-call is the Sunninghill Hotel which is just up the hill from the station. It's a twee residential house catering mainly for senior types that lunch, but there are two hand pumps, one of which sports Cross Bay Dusk, which I think is brewed somewhere in North West England, which makes it not exactly local. But it's a red beer, and it's not Deuchars, so that makes it all right by me today.

Sadly, Deuchars rears its ugly head in my next pub, the Thunderton House in the middle of town. With the other two beers being Old Speckled Hen and Doom Bar, I decide to stay local but don't really savour the experience. The good thing about this pub is that they are showing the Forest TV game at Leicester. Whey-hey! I settle down for the long haul. A bloke behind me professes to have been a Forest fan since Ian Gillies was the manager. Must have been Matt's twin brother, then!

It's about a ten-minute walk from here to Borough Briggs, the home of Elgin City FC. It's a fine old former Highland League ground, with a covered stand straddling the half way line, and a large covered terrace running virtually the whole length of the opposite side. Behind each goal is an area of raised uncovered terraces, surrounded by grassy banks for those rare good days. Segregation is minimal, although myself and the few other Berwick fans in attendance gather in the semi-enclosed pen at one end of the covered terrace. I can also report that the snack bar does a good line in Macaroni Pies!

With Elgin having a better season so far than the 'Wee Gers' they're expected to make the running, and do move into an early lead, but are soon pegged back by a flowing Berwick move. The home side continue to look dangerous and a mazy run by the skilful left winger restores their advantage on the half hour. After the break, Berwick have far more of the play but fail to convince anyone that they have the firepower to turn it around. Granted, they do hit the woodwork twice, and have a good penalty shout waved away, but they are leaving gaps at the back which inevitably Elgin exploit, eventually grabbing a third to set the seal on their victory.

I have time to kill after the game, and check out the local Wetherspoons, the Muckle Cross. They have one of the 'foreign' beer festival beers on - the one whose Japanese brewer is now based in Guam. It's a copper coloured pale ale of modest strength, and quite palatable. Then it's back on the train and into Aberdeen, to meet up with Auchtermuchtie Bobster, who's had to miss the match but has not forsaken the evening session!

We check out the other Aberdeen Wetherspoons - the Archibald Simpson - which is inevitably rammed, and then cross the road to the much cosier Old Blackfriars. The Moorings Bar, down by the waterfront, has a biker band on, so we give that a miss as we don't really look the part, and head up to Aitchies for another pint of Dark Island. We don't bother queuing to get into the Justice Mill - although I know they have the three strong foreign Wetherspoons Beer Festival beers on at £1.49 a pint - and instead cram into the Grill, before claiming the obligatory Macaroni Pie Supper to finish off the day.

I tell you all of this post-match stuff to demonstrate my firm commitment to the Scottish diet. 48 hours, two gallons of beer, three Wetherspoons breakfasts, two chip suppers, and numerous sandwiches on the hoof. And had I come across a deep-fried Mars Bar I might even have tried that as well. Don't tell my GP.

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

Pass the lettuce, please....

04/20