

TT No.6: *Chris Freer* - Saturday August 11th 2012; **Blackstones** v Barrow Town; FA Cup Extra Preliminary Round; Score: 5-1; Attendance: 50 or so Entertainment value: 4/5.

There's nothing wrong with being aspirational, just as long as you don't let your heart rule your head. There's more than one football club that has re-mortgaged itself to the hilt and beyond just to try and reach the promised land, only to suffer the consequences of that folly. My own club Forest saddled themselves with an annual trading deficit but were fortunate enough to find an honest benefactor to underwrite it. The likes of Portsmouth and Rangers are now going through the mill having not been so lucky.

New owners at Forest, who despite not exactly boasting local credentials seem to have the club at heart, should be planning a course that not only takes the club back up to 'the promised land' but also a trading plan that puts as much back into the coffers as day-to-day running takes out. Maybe it's a big ask, but in what other industry - except perhaps banking - can you habitually rely on someone to bail you out?

Looking back, I think I went through an 'aspirational' phase in the early 1980s, when my first mortgage was for a dilapidated thatched cottage in Rutland. It was just before the property boom, we got it for a song, and although a lot of hard graft was involved, I quite fancied the idea of being part of the 'country set'. I'd roundly castigate anyone who suggested we lived in part of Leicestershire, and liked to do my shopping in the 'boutique' shops of Oakham - where Barbour was the order of the day - and Stamford, rather than trudging round Asda in Thurmaston. A relationship break-up and relocation to Long Eaton soon brought me back to earth!

I did quite like Stamford, though, and noting that my 'village' team of Barrow Town had been drawn away at Blackstones in the FA Cup seemed like the ideal opportunity to go back there for a day out. In fact, I aspired to it....

It's a sunny day, I've got my shorts on, and a 90-minute train ride split up with 25 minutes clicking my heels on Leicester station, takes me back to this charming Lincolnshire market town. It's the kind of place you might want to take overseas friends to, in order to experience a little piece of twee English rural life. It's not exactly a part of the world oversubscribed with charity shops or Poundland's.

Nowadays I'm more interested in the pubs, and the GBG tells me there are several in town worth checking out. The first of these is the Green Man, which I've often travelled past in previous incursions through Stamford, but never entered. I rectify that today. There are several microbrewery beers on sale, but nothing really local, a theme I am to encounter elsewhere in the town. The barman shares my concern with the amount of 'me-too' golden beers flooding the pumps these days, and

guides me towards Slater's Premium Best which is the right colour for a beer, although sadly a bit end-of-barrelish in taste terms.

Round the corner, and just past the Tesco store, is the Jolly Brewer, a big corner pub with a strong community feel. There are several beers on tap here, including a couple of powerful brews, Sadler's Mud City Stout at 6.6% and Green Jack Ripper at 8.5%. A glance at my watch reminds me it's a bit too early to experience these, so I go for an 8-Sail Millstone, a nice malty 4.5% brew with a smack of hops in the mouth. And a Lincolnshire beer at that!

I head back into town, past a busy looking pub and into the bar of the old Melbourn's Brewery. I'd done the tour of this place back in my aspirational days, and seem to recall they weren't brewing then. Well they are now, but not as you might expect. The lad behind the bar has all the sales patter but not many of the answers as I ask a few pertinent questions about the bottled fruit beers he introduces to me. There are four flavours - "a lot of people think they're alcopops" he says. "No" say I, "They're fruit beers." - and it seems that a beer is brewed here, tanked to Samuel Smith's in Tadcaster, blended with some Sam's beer and fruit - presumably a syrup - bottled, and transported back to Stamford.

The bottles have Sam. Smith labels and are served up in a standard plain half pint tulip. They really are missing a trick or two here. Why not brand them as Melbourn's - the point of origin? Why not introduce some branded glasses and promotional point-of-sale? Why not sell some of the beer that they brew here - pre-fruit - in draught on the bar of this excellent - but sadly virtually empty - brewery tap? I think we need to be told...

My next port-of-call is the Toby Norris. If this is an original interior - and it may well be - it really is quite impressive. If it's a re-construction, it's also impressive. It's certainly a place you could take your in-laws to. The beer range is typical for Stamford, consisting of micro-brewed beers from elsewhere in the UK. I go for a Moorhouse's Pendle Witches Brew, simply because I like this beer and haven't supped it for some time. My last pub of the pre-match session also has an impressive interior, but for an entirely different reason. Imagine you're on holiday in the Med, and you home in on one of those English bars decked out with 'World' paraphernalia. That would be Mama Liz's, in Costa del Stamford. There are three cask beers and I go for a Cottage Rocket Ale, another nice malty brew.

Now it's walkies time, and a 20-minute march to the Lincoln Road home of Blackstones FC, who compete in the United Counties League Premier Division. At Step 5, that's a division above that of visiting Barrow Town, who managed to get as far as the Third Qualifying Round of last season's FA Cup, knocking out higher-ranked opposition on the way to picking up a tidy sum, and just missing out on a possible tie with a League side.

Blackstones has a sizeable clubhouse facility, but sadly with no decent beer. As for food, there's nothing at the snack bar, so it's lucky I pigged out at the chippy across the road from the ground. Their curry sauce is something else! The stadium features one long wooden stand with a small section of covered flat standing

adjacent. A local with a rather loud radio plonks himself just in front of me in the stand, so I decide to relocate to a leaning position pitch-side, where I engage in conversation with several of the Barrow supporters who have made the journey. It's 35 years since I left the village, and none seem familiar to me. We are, however, united in giving the nearest linesman a hard time, especially when he misses a blatant trip in the penalty area. Presumably, because it was in the box, it can't be a foul, as that would mean a penalty.

Barrow are more than a first half match for their hosts, and are unlucky to go in 2-1 down at the break. But after conceding a third to a brilliant solo effort early in the second half, then losing their keeper to injury after using all their subs, the East Midlands Counties League side are on a hiding to nothing and 1-5 is an unlucky but inevitable final score-line.

Presumably, after last year, Barrow would have been looking to go a bit further in the competition. But there's a feeling amongst the supporters that the FA cup run probably cost them promotion, creating a fixture backlog at the end of the season which saw the team come up short. A step up for Barrow would put them on the same level as local rivals Quorn, Shepshed & Loughborough Dynamo. Not exactly the Premier League, but even aspirations have to be realistic.

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

Aspiring to be a fully-fledged website...

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