

TT No.66: Chris Freer - Sat December 1st 2012; **Heather St. John's** v Stourport Swifts; Midland Football Alliance; Score: 2-4; Crowd: 42; Entertainment value: 4/5.

From time-to-time I get approached by individuals and organisations wanting my blog to participate in some joint project or another. My standpoint on this was hardened a couple of years back when somebody purporting to be representing Samsung got in touch to offer me an 'opportunity' with the company. Upon investigation it turned out to be nothing more than they just wanted me to provide a link to their 'commercial' site.

Sorry, that's not what '300 Grounds & Counting' is all about. Indeed, even if Holland & Barrett offered me all the pork-less pies I could ever devour, it wouldn't sway me. The links on my site are to other blogs - it's a 'hobby' site, I don't want and need to link myself to anything commercial, no matter how tempting or worthwhile the cause. If you spot me slipping from that pedestal, please feel free to give me a slap!

I did get one approach this week that I felt able to respond to. A gentleman about to launch a new 'non-league football magazine' asked me to answer a few questions as part of a regular feature on 'Groundhoppers', which I was happy to do. It may well be a commercial venture, but I reasoned that if it might get me a few extra 'hits' no harm is done. In fact, providing my thoughts on things like 'best ground', 'favourite goal', 'funniest experience' and the likes proved quite an enjoyable task, even though a lot of my anecdotes involved Football League grounds, and this is for a non-league magazine. Hey, I'm working my way down!

Being referred to as a 'groundhopper' can be a tad disconcerting. I suppose I 'tick' most of the archetypical boxes except I don't own an anorak. To me 'collecting' football grounds is just an extension of the car/train/bus/plane spotting phases I went through as an adolescent. Even in my early adult years I set myself the task of visiting every real ale public house in Leicestershire (there were about 1,000 at the time) and drinking a half in each. Sometimes this involved a gang of us in a car-powered pub crawl taking in around 15 or 16 hostelrys in a day, the driver getting increasingly irritated as our levels of inebriation escalated all around him. Great fun!

Now, rapidly approaching my 'senior' years, I get my kicks from a day out to a new stadium, taking great care to factor a few tasty beers into the equation as I travel around. Today, however, is an exception to the norm. A requirement to be on hand to applaud my daughter's prowess at doing horsey things means I need to be at a presentation evening in the middle of rural Leicestershire. And what's more, I need to be sober as there's some driving involved. So I have to call in one of my stand-by local grounds, the ones I save for such an eventuality. And today that is Heather St. John's, of the Midland Football Alliance.

Just west of Loughborough, it's about 15 miles from where I live, so is quite handy for today's agenda, as I can also visit mother who lives in the University town. From there it's an easy 20-minute drive to the sleepy village of Heather, where St. John's Park is just on the northern edge of the conurbation. The ground itself benefits from a modern clubhouse designed to be a community asset. Although there isn't any real ale or bottled craft beer on sale, they do have CANS of Old Speckled Hen in the fridge. Cans of OSH? Not come across that before. Just outside the clubhouse is a snack hatch, with various cold cobs on sale, plus chips and the usual burgers.

The stadium itself has a small but perfectly-formed main stand straddling the halfway line, plus some tarpaulin stretched over scaffolding behind one goal. The rest is uncovered flat standing. An unusual feature of this ground is the tannoy announcers box elevated above an arch through which the players are obliged to emerge. The announcer himself is quite chirpy, despite uttering a series of crass inaccuracies involving team names, such as Loughborough United (no such team, does he mean Loughborough University?), Lower Gornal (no such team, does he mean Gornal Athletic?) and - during the half-time scores round-up - Notts Forest (no such team, does he mean Notts County, or Nottingham Forest?). Methinks a little research/education is in order.

Heather's opponents today are Stourport Swifts, recently relegated from Step 4. These perennial relegation-scrappers have discovered some kind of form in the MFA, and sit in second spot prior to kick-off. The home team, in mid-table 9th, might have a game on. And so, it proves, with a competitive and occasionally explosive 90 minutes providing good entertainment on a bitterly cold December day. The visitors have the better strike force, and always seem in control from the moment they edge ahead on 15 and increase on 25. Although on two occasions Heather peg the difference back to one, it only ever seems a matter of time before the Swifts respond, and it finishes 2-4.

And so, it's back to the other side of the county. I don't even get to experience the two Heather pubs that still exist, the Crown and the Queen's Head. Having said that, I most certainly paid a visit to both during my Leicestershire pub-collecting days of the 1980s. Now if only I could find my copy of Ian Allen's Combined Volume of Leicestershire Pubs...Ind Coope Bitter anyone?

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

No commercials please....

04/20