

TT No.73: *Chris Freer* - Saturday December 15th 2012; **Sleaford Town v Long Buckby**; United Counties Premier; Score: 1-0; Attendance: 60-70 (at a guess); Entertainment value: 2/5.

Aside from football, I have a passing interest in most other sports where some kind of ball is involved. Although each has its own rules and regulations, sometimes the actions of the protagonists are very similar in that their tactics take a bit of figuring out. Like a footy team that's a goal down but makes very little effort to get back into the game. I'm thinking of this analogy as I lie in bed at 4.52 on a Saturday morning watching Sky Sports coverage of the fourth cricket Test match beamed live from India, where the home side have to win the match to level the series, but are plodding along at no real pace, with a draw the inevitable outcome. "C'mon India" I feel myself urging, "Shit or Bust!". To no avail. At precisely 5.23am I switch off the TV and go back to sleep. Nothing to see here.

Some hours later I tune back in and the funereal pace is being maintained. Fortunately, it's a Saturday, so hopefully I can get my sporting kicks elsewhere. Like maybe Sleaford! Although I am not familiar with this Lincolnshire market town, I have a companion for part of the day in my old Forest pal Nick, who can lay claim to having cycled through the place during a recent Tour De Lincs re-enactment weekend. He is to pick me up from Grantham, after I have whetted my whistle, in Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, Out, Out, Out's home town.

Arriving at Grantham station feels like an emotional return for me, as I made several pilgrimages here with my Dad in the 1960s, in order to 'tick' the Deltics as they thundered through. What beasts! Sadly, they are only memories on this route nowadays. My first port of call is the Stagger Inn, where I linger for precisely 60 seconds. The solitary handpump is not in use, and the bar-lady assures me that, although the pub was in the 2012 Good Beer Guide, it isn't in the latest one. You don't say! So, I don't get the chance to 'stagger out'. 100 yards away is the local Wetherspoons, the Tollemache Inn, where the temptation to try a pint of Navigation - a Nottingham brewery - is only tempered by the sight of Oldershaws Grantham Stout. At 4.3% abv, this is a fantastically creamy beverage I would recommend to all.

My next port-of-call is a bit of a hike to the top end of the main street. The Nobody Inn is a bright and breezy community local where the background music urgently competes with the TV for your attention. There's a pool table, dart board, and Sky Sports, plus a bank of handpumps that are top heavy with Newby Wyke pump-clips. Anybody familiar with this company will know that virtually all of their beers come in shades of gold. There are four available and I plump for the least gold of all of them - Cromwell I think it's called - which is nevertheless still a shade of gold and inevitably tastes citrusy. "It's what people like..." says the bar-man. "Not necessarily," say I. "I think you'll find that the backlash has already started...!"

Cutting round the back of the Superstore, I find the Market Place and a trendy bar called the 'Chequers'. What few seats that exist within are very plush and of the armchair/settee variety. On a busy night I suspect most customers expect to drink vertically, at least at the start of the night. There are three beers on and I plump for the Brewsters Marquis which is the right colour for a beer, if a little thin on flavour. Maybe it's a grower.

And so back to the station and a rendezvous with Nick, the short drive to Sleaford allowing us some catch-up gossip time before we park up and head into the Wetherspoons, the Packhorse Inn. Before setting out, I'd made contact with the owner of the Sleaford microbrewery, to ask where his beers could be found locally. Sadly, nowhere guaranteed, so the Pack Horse is the best bet. To be honest, the beer range here isn't brilliant, and we both end up going for a pint of Hobgoblin, which I suppose is not a bad drop if all else fails.

Sleaford Town FC plays its home games at Eslaforde Park, a relatively recent build on the Eastern outskirts of town. The ground consists of a couple of kit seated stands bolted together, situated on one side, and a covered stepped terrace immediately behind one goalmouth. The rest is all flat standing. The pitch looks like a cowpat meadow (minus cowpats) and flowing football doesn't look very likely. A large clubhouse hosts a reasonable sized clubhouse bar, where there is nothing in cask or in bottle to interest the discerning beer drinker, so I end up on J20 while Nick checks out the 'Smooth'. The sign outside the snack bar says 'Chips' although neither of us can be arsed to investigate further.

Whenever Nick accompanies me to a non-league game, he usually gets to enjoy some on-pitch action, whether its banter with a lady lino, showing appreciation for the prowess of a female physio, or cheering on both sides in a full-scale punch-up. Today doesn't quite live up to expectations, although we do get to see two red cards, one for the faintest of tickles that sees a second yellow for one understandably disgruntled lad, plus a straight red for a nasty tackle which everybody on the pitch - included the tackler himself - agrees he has to walk for. And just the one goal, scored by the home side on 15 minutes. The visitors have 75 minutes to pull it back, but don't seem to have the enthusiasm. Maybe they were all up at 4.52am watching the cricket. It can be the only explanation....

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

Not busting a gut....

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