

TT No.14: Chris Freer - Sat September 14th 2013; **Evesham United** v Stourbridge; FA Cup First Qualifying Round; Score: 0-3; Attendance: 265; Entertainment value: 3/5.

Ah, the magic of the FA Cup, can't you just smell it?

Having been fortunate enough to walk down Wembley Way a few times on Cup Final Day, I think I am well placed to say that the only thing I could smell was the onions on the hot dog stalls, but I suppose all those pundits that go gooey-eyed whenever 'The Cup' is mentioned have a fair point in that this competition does leave some strong footballing memories. There was a time when I could roll off all the winners from Forest in 1959 up to present day, but that time was about 20 years ago and most of the 90s and Noughties is a blur, although I do seem to recall Chelsea winning it and Forest not.

I managed to get tickets to the 1985, 1986 and 1987 finals, so saw the first sending off and also the end of a long-running Monty Python joke (about Coventry City never having won it) and I graced Wembley again in 1991 when a lack of positive action from referee Roger Milford undoubtedly cost Cloughie his last chance of winning the thing. Other strong FA Cup memories include being at the legendary Leicester City v Leatherhead game in 1975 and taking in quite a few semi-finals, including of course Hillsborough in 1989.

Football Focus always seemed to begin its annual coverage by looking at the fortunes of non-league Wembley FC, who invariably never got past the qualifying rounds. Maybe it's their year this year!

My 2013/4 FA Cup journey begins today at Evesham United, a club in the Southern League Division One South & West boasting a relatively new ground, and one I'd targeted for a rail trip on a number of occasions, only to be foiled for one reason or another. Today I have the family car which is fairly economical on petrol so decide to take a sedate drive through Shakespeare country to the catchily-titled Spiers & Harwell Jubilee Stadium, which is on a roundabout on the A46, on the outskirts of this Cotswold town. For those not up on non-league footballing tales, gaining access to this roundabout caused at least a year's delay to the opening of the stadium, while they sorted out who was going to finance the tarmac. All history now.

I'm one of the first cars to arrive, and I get directed to a parking slot I probably would have chosen myself. The frontage to the stadium's admin complex is very impressive and the view from inside the ground gives me the impression of it being more like a pavilion, as it sits in the corner of the stadium set well back from the pitch, like you might see in black and white photos of football grounds of yore. The architecture, though, is definitely modern. It accommodates a sizeable clubhouse bar with a separate section for VIPs, and there's a live match on TV as I enter the bar. My eye is caught by an on-screen substitution, where a very

experienced Premier League player is being shown a diagram as he prepares to enter the fray. So what's that all about then? This is a ball, that's a goal-net, try to kick it between these posts, off you go! Cloughie must be turning in his grave.....

There's two handpumps on the bar, but sadly no cask beer on tap. The barman tells me it's usually Thwaites Wainwrights (not a *LocAle* beer that's for sure) but there's none on today. There are some cobs on the bar and I select a cheese specimen. The cheddar is very mature, but sadly so is the bread. The snack bar outside has nothing for the veggie, so the cob will have to suffice.

The stadium itself consists of concrete flat standing on all four sides, with a covered area running the width of the pitch behind one goal, and a covered cantilever main stand set back on one side, straddling the halfway line. There's a good crowd of 265 for this FA Cup First Qualifying Round clash against Stourbridge, who play their footy in the Southern League Premier, a division higher than their hosts.

Despite being 39 places lower than their visitors on the league ladder, the home side look very purposeful and are a match for most of the first hour of the game, only lacking the cutting edge that Stourbridge possess, which brings them a goal on 13 minutes, and a clinching penalty on 60. After that, you can tell that the Evesham players see the writing on the wall and although staying a game bunch to the end, a third from the Black Country side rubs salt in the wounds. The United FA Cup run thus ends at the First Qualifying stage.

But they are in good company. Wembley FC also lose today to exit this year's competition. So now the BBC will have to look elsewhere for their 'minnow's glory' story.

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

Wembley, here we come.....

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