

TT No.23: *Chris Freer* - Saturday 5th October 2013; **Herne Bay** v Merstham; FA Trophy Preliminary Round; Score 0-0; Attendance: 208; Entertainment value: None.

There's a 'buzz' word in many industries, and in the one in which I work - the drinks trade - it is currently 'micro'. Everything is done on traditional lines, but on a much smaller scale - at least initially, one presumes. So, where we once had national and regional breweries serving us up our daily pint, now there are hundreds of 'microbrewers' scattered the length and breadth of the land, in general coming up with some very tasty brews (apart from the ones that smack of lager and lime!).

And now the latest phenomenon is the 'micro' pub, usually a converted showroom or retail unit where many an owner or tenant is taking advantage of relatively recent changes in the licensing law to exploit (and I don't mean that in a sneaky way) the boom in cask and craft beer. We have a few springing up where I live in the East Midlands, but the heartland of this 'New Wave' of micropubs definitely seems to be in Kent.

I say 'new wave' because this isn't really a ground-breaking idea. Indeed, yours truly ran a moderately successful prototype in Leicester back in the 1980s. It had one small room, sold 4/5 cask beers but no lager, played no music to its customers, and the only entertainment - other than conversation - was a Subbuteo table we rolled out from time-to-time. To witness a closely fought game between a pair of bespectacled and suited accountants and a couple of leather clad bikers was a sight to behold!

So today, with an early morning rail ticket to London, the weather set fair, and the whole day ahead of me, I head for Kent, the 'garden of England'. As is my norm, I trek out from St Pancras Station to make my traditional walk across London to Victoria station, pausing only to take in a breakfast at the Lord Moon on the Mall, the Wetherspoons pub on Whitehall. I once complained about this place to Tim 'Mr Wetherspoon' Martin by way of letter, on the basis that it never opened as early as the company website said it did. I got a polite but apologetic letter back from one of his gals, and since then it's been a bit more punctual.

Suitably refreshed I head to Victoria, and am soon on the South Eastern Railways train to Herne Bay, with my first micro-port-of-call scheduled to be the Firkin Frog. Mine Host is behind the small bar of this former kitchen showroom, and he informs me that he was indeed at one time the showroom manager, before eventually deciding to check out this micropub thing. He sells four cask beers - usually two local and two from further afield - which are served by gravity dispense. I tackle a Millis Kent Best, a proper copper bitter at 4.0% abv, followed by a Goachers Green Hop Ale at 4.2%. Green hop ales are like the 'Beaujolais' of

the beer word, using hops in the brewing process within 24 hours of them being picked.

A couple of hundred yards away is the Bouncing Barrel, a former ground floor office unit which now serves as essentially a one-room micropub. This time there is no bar-counter as such, the patron simply greeting you as you walk in, pointing to the beer boards, and asking you what you fancy. There are 5 cask beers on sale - again served straight from the cask - and I try a pair of Essex-brewed Mighty Oak brews, the Mild proving to be exceptionally palatable. There's a lot of community spirit in evidence in both micropubs, with customers donating artefacts for the walls, and with mature conversation rife. In effect, what you used to get in your old village local, until blaring TVs, kids in prams and Karaoke did away with all that.

Having stopped for a couple of pints in each, it's time to walk a half a mile or so to Winch's Field, home of Herne Bay FC, relative newcomers to Isthmian Division One South. Today they are in FA Trophy action against Merstham of the same division, with neither side pulling up trees so far this season. The ground is quite developed, with cover on all four sides, although one stand is exclusively for the use of officials of the competing clubs. The bar doesn't sell any cask beer, but there are bottled mainstream brands like Bishops Finger in the fridge. The snack bar, however, is just up my street, advertising Cheese & Tomato Toasties, Cheese & Onion Rolls, and Fillet of Fish baps on the menu - way to go!

The game itself is a non-event. 90 minutes of turgid football, with very few chances, each of those spurned with wasteful abandon. On two occasions promising moves founder as the attacker manages to fall over his own feet rather than get a shot away. A lad in front of me turns around and enquires whether there's any extra time. "I bloody well hope not!" I respond. 'Like watching paint dry' is another reaction I hear as we all head for the exit.

You'd have much more fun watching accountants and bikers playing Subbuteo. Perhaps we're missing a trick!

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

We flick to kick...

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