

TT No.42: *Chris Freer* - Sat November 23rd 2013; **Whitstable Town** v Corinthian-Casuals; Isthmian League Div. 1 S; Score: 3-1; Attendance: 119; Entertainment value: 2/5.

As someone who is frequently accused of 'Groundhopperism' - where do people get that notion - I feel obliged to operate to certain standards, and pay homage to a series of self-imposed conventions governing my branch of this hobby (for hobby is what it is). A match has to be a competitive fixture for me to 'tick' the ground; a game has to at least kick off for me to count the tick (even if only a minute is played); and although a programme isn't essential, it's certainly desirable.

Aside from that, I've learned one or two lessons over the years, such as preparing a ready list of alternatives if the target game is subject to a late cancellation. Another custom I invariably practise is, if I'm using a city as a transport 'hub' I get back there as quickly as possible after a game, just in case there are any unforeseen complications. Because you can bet your bottom dollar if you don't do that, something will occur.

Which is why today, when my match day is done and I foolhardily decide to check out one more of the local pubs prior to heading back to London Coach Station for my return 440 to Loughborough, I'm standing in Whitstable station staring at the departures board with the word 'delayed' prominent, and the very real prospect that I am likely to miss my booked bus from London back home.

The day starts well as I arrive in London in good time to pay a prince's ransom to purchase a South Eastern trains ticket to Whitstable in Kent. Arriving in the seaside town with just enough time for a couple of pints prior to heading for The Belmont Ground, I initially eschew the Black Dog micropub to visit the GBG-listed Pearson's Arms, where I'm hoping to find a pint of Gadd's Ramsgate beers. Unfortunately, it's a popular foody pub, with most tables laid out for dining, and of the four beers on hand-pull, only two are local-ish and neither is from Gadds. I decide not to dally and head back down the road to the afore-mentioned Black Dog.

This relatively new venture is in the classic micropub style, with just the one room and the beers served by gravity dispense from the chill store visible behind the counter. The seating is in the form of high benches and the decor very smart in dark green and burgundy, with some unusual picture decorations. The beers are mainly Kentish, and I choose a Wantsum Imperium, an excellent ruby beer, shortly to be followed by a very fruity Kent Brewery Porter.

My route to the ground takes me past several inviting looking Shepherd Neame pubs, the cask ale-equipped Whitstable Labour Club, and the art deco 'Peter Cushing', a Wetherspoons refurbishment of an old cinema. I vow to return there later, to my cost!

As I enter the Belmont Ground, the programme man asks me if I'm a groundhopper. Can you tell? I enquire. Look in the mirror, he replies. Luckily, I can't locate one, but vow to don a frogman's outfit and adopt a Tim Howard facial hair configuration in the unlikely event I ever return here. The stadium sports two old stands plus a 'kit' terrace stand, the latter behind one goal. At the other end the ancient covered terracing is set well back from the pitch, while down one side is an unusual affair of a vintage stand where the step terracing serves for either seating or standing purposes.

Opposite is the clubhouse which, although offering no cask beer, has bottles of London Pride and Old Speckled Hen in the fridge. The nearby snack bar is cooking chips, but all the pies, sadly, are of the meaty variety.

I'm not expecting a cracking game today, with Whitstable Town and visitors Corinthian-Casuals both struggling near the bottom of the table. But the standard in the first half is pretty poor, with both sides habitually giving the ball away in turn. It doesn't really liven up until 25 minutes, when a goal-bound drive is spectacularly parried by the home shot-stopper. Sadly, he's wearing the No3 shirt and the red card that follows is not entirely unexpected. C-C convert the resultant penalty and at 1-0 up facing 10 men, you have to fancy them.

So, it's something of a surprise when Whitstable manage to level on 32, again from a penalty, and it's still all-square with ten minutes to go. And that's where the real action starts. Making of a mockery of their numerical disadvantage, the home team lay siege to the visiting goal and score twice late on to take the points. And there's still time for the visiting No3 to emulate his home counterpart by enjoying an early bath after kneeing an opponent to earn his second yellow. In the resultant round of afters following the decision to send him packing, the Corinthians No11 calls the Linesman "a f*cking cheat" and his team mate No6 offers to see the lino 'outside the ground half an hour after the game'.

Maybe these miscreants should visit their club website and read the section marked 'The Corinthian Spirit' which includes the sentence 'to bear aloft a cheerful countenance under disappointment'.

Which is exactly my frame of mind as I stand on Whitstable Station, trying to get some sense out of the woman on the National Express helpline, and sweating as my prospects of getting home at a reasonable hour rapidly recede.

Happily, for me, my 'Corinthian Spirit' prevails and I make it just in time.

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

Always played in the right spirit...