

TT No.49: Chris Freer - Sat December 21st 2013; **Burnham Ramblers** v Waltham Abbey; Isthmian League Div. 1 N; Score 0-2; Crowd: 75; Entertainment value: 5/5.

They say there's no such thing as a sure-fire winner. A nailed-on certainty. A dead cert. But as I forlornly consider the weather prognosis for my match-day Saturday I've already written off my chances of seeing a game today. I've got a cheap 'Megabus' rail ticket to London booked, with an early start, but I am so confident that my chosen fixture in Essex will be called off, I compile a list of every other Level 8 & 9 matches scheduled to take place in the Home Counties, just in case one should escape the predicted deluge affecting the South East of England. To appear doubly efficient, I also jot down the location of all of the Capitol's museums, plus maps of good drinking territory, in the increasingly likely event that I have a day to kill.

After giving it some thought, I decide to set up camp at the Hamilton Hall Wetherspoons at Liverpool Street station, where the first job is to order a veggie breakfast and a never-ending cup of filter coffee. Next, it's time to whip out the old iPad and monitor the pitch inspection times of all of my target games. I am heartened to see that the Burnham Ramblers fixture - my No1 choice today - is still on with no inspection time displayed. So, I email the club secretary who responds that the pitch is currently in a playable condition as rain has not over-blighted his part of the world. A Twitter feed on the club website confirms the game is still on, and I settle back to a couple of pints of splendid dark ale (Adnam's Old and another whose name has subsequently escaped me!) before catching the train to Burnham on Crouch.

As my transport edges ever eastwards, the skies darken and the rain begins to fall. When I alight at my destination it's coming down some, and I get well-soaked negotiating a 200-yard journey from station to the New Welcome Sailor pub. I am grateful to see a vacant table immediately in front of a TV showing the live game, and also three handpumps on the bar, one of which is dispensing Wibblers IPA, a lovely copper-coloured session bitter brewed just three or four miles up the road. The pub itself is a local's haunt, but very welcoming and comfortable nonetheless - the way a village local should be. I slowly dry out whilst keeping one eye on the endless precipitation outside and for the second time today, I write off my chances of seeing a game.

Mercifully, around 2.00pm, the rain eases and I venture out on a fifteen-minute walk to the Leslie Field Stadium, home of Isthmian Division 1 North newcomers Burnham Ramblers, where the good news is that the game is still ON. There are soggy patches along the linesman's runway but otherwise the pitch is not so bad. Fingers crossed that the rain stays away, I sit in the clubhouse nursing a bottle of Old Speckled Hen watching the clock tick round painfully slowly to 3.00pm.

The facilities at the ground are pretty good for this level. There's a fair-sized main stand tacked onto the back of the clubhouse, with a nice elevated view through the upright posts supporting the roof. The wind is howling across the pitch, but fortunately emanates from behind the stand so we are well sheltered. A few hardy souls stand in the covered single-step terrace opposite. Behind one of the goals there is some ancient three-step uncovered terracing, but nobody braves this part of the ground today. There's a snack hatch in the clubhouse selling chips, but service is slow and I give up after ten minutes in a small queue which refuses to diminish.

Today's visitors are fellow mid-table side Waltham Abbey, and in a fairly even contest they still manage to have the better of the first half chances, with the home keeper taking all the plaudits. Ramblers have their moments, but after the break it's the visitors who continue to look the most potent as the game becomes stretched and goes end-to-end. With good honest defending invariably winning out, it looks a nailed-on 0-0 until a lino's flag confirms that the ball has crossed the line during a frantic scramble, and Abbey are ahead on 75. They seal it with a breakaway goal late on, as Ramblers go all out for an equaliser.

If it had ended 0-0, I would still have rated it one of the best games I've seen all season, bearing in mind the heavy pitch, the howling wind, and the deluge of rain which recommenced during the first half. Full marks to both sets, of players. As the game draws to a close, a section of perimeter fencing cartwheels out of the ground, demonstrating the strength of the elements.

So, I get to see a game I'd given up on twice, proving there's no such thing as a dead cert. A fact neatly summed up by an article in the day's paper, recording how a punter had staked £100k at 50/1 ON, that Phil 'The Power' Taylor would brush aside his novice challenger in the second round of the World Darts Championship. History records Phil crashed out. It's a sure-fire bet the punter was not amused...

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

Come rain or shine...

04/20