

TT No.77: Chris Freer - Saturday March 8th 2014; **Runcorn Linnets** v Colne; North West Counties Premier Division; Score: 3-4; Crowd: 396; Entertainment value: 5/5.

Just like my second only ever trip to Padiham last week, the Cheshire town of Runcorn hasn't seen a lot of me during my near six decades on this earth. In fact, only on three occasions can I recall exploring its streets and pubs, the last of these only briefly as I eschewed the main town centre and headed out to Runcorn Town's ground a couple of winters ago. Prior to that it was a match at the old Canal Street stadium of now-defunct Runcorn FC, where Darlo were the visitors in an FA cup encounter in the 1990s. And before that on a narrowboat trip where we moored more-or-less alongside a row of pubs. That we actually got that far was something of a miracle, as the start of our voyage lasted barely a minute before our 'skipper' - a lad called Keith who professed to having a modicum of experience of how such things worked - managed to cast us off from our moorings only to ram the narrow boat nose first into the bank opposite. It got better from thereon in.

Today I'm avoiding the narrowboat, and heading by train and bus to the Millbank ground of North West Counties Premier League pace-setters Runcorn Linnets, whose lineage is descended from the afore-mentioned Runcorn FC. As their stadium is well out to the east of the town centre, I have no need to renew my acquaintances with those pubs previously enjoyed, and instead decide to do my watering in Warrington, another Cheshire town with which I have been sparingly intimate.

I arrive courtesy of trains to and from Crewe, the first of which is shared with an amiable bunch of - I presume - stag-weekenders heading for Liverpool, dressed as Harry Enfield Scousers. I presume the natives' legendary wit will take this in the spirit in which it is intended.

There's a ten-minute walk from Warrington Bank Quay station to the Friar Penketh, one of two Wetherspools I spot in the town. This must be the 'quiet' one of the two, as despite its capacious interior on two floors, there's barely 20 souls in it, which makes breakfast service quite quick. A pint of Frodsham's Friars Ale, a light amber bitter, washes that down before I move onto my next hostelry, pausing only to read the inscription in the main shopping thoroughfare to the two youngsters killed by the Warrington bomb back in the 90s.

This next pub, the Lower Angel, is a town centre gem. A real locals haunt, two earthy bars and a choice of mainly Locale beers, including those brewed at the resident Topsy Angel brewery. Helpfully, the landlord has indicated the colour of each beer on the price board, which helps me to choose the Mild (probably obvious anyway) and the stronger Angels Folly, both hitting the dark ale spot. I consider lingering for a third pint, but want to check out the Tavern, a little further out of the town centre. It's a pub full of sports TVs set at angles where you can generally watch two matches (as today) wherever you sit. There's a good choice of cask

beers but sadly the only one available from the resident 4T's Brewery is strong and gold, which I don't fancy so I go for a Revolutions Dare, billed as a dark lager. I'm not so sure about that, but it's a tasty pint nonetheless.

Then it's time to head back to the station and the short rail hop to Runcorn East station, from where I experience the weird and wonderful Runcorn Busway, a complete road circuit around the town resplendent with white lines and street lighting, which can only be used by buses (though I suspect it must become boy racer territory after dark!). Worryingly the driver on my No1 bus has never heard of the Runcorn Linnets football ground, but I request the Halton High School stop (with which he IS familiar) and recall the club's website instructions, walking through the woods and across the road to the ground entrance, adjacent to the Halton Arms pub. The latter acts as the licensed part of the clubhouse, and although there is a handpump on show, it's not pump-clipped so I don't linger.

The actual clubhouse is just inside the turnstile, but is a little out of the ordinary as there's no bar servery, and just a hatch from which food is sold. As I arrive there's a spot-check underway by the local Environmental Agency people, but their departure following a renewed 5-star approval rating signals lunchtime and though I only had breakfast about three hours ago, I gleefully wolf down a tray of cheese & onion pie, chips and mushy peas.

The ground itself is a short walk from the clubhouse and opens out onto an arena featuring a modest main stand on one side, two 'bus shelter' style covered standing areas opposite, and a stepped covered 'kit' terrace behind one goal. As Linnets are top of the table going into the match, there's a good turnout of almost 400 punters on a mild and dry day, amidst expectations of a good win over mid-table Colne.

However, it's soon apparent that the visitors have done their homework on the Linnets, as the home keeper's propensity to wander out of his area at every available opportunity is exploited early doors with a clipped lob from fully 30 yards. He's caught out again by a quick break and appears to be the culprit once more when Colne, having been pegged to 2-1, score direct from a floated free kick. For this goal the referee over-rules his assistant, apparently flagging for offside, on the grounds that nobody touched the ball. Amazingly, there's almost immediately a similar scenario at the other end, the ball ending up in the Colne net from a free kick, but this time the man in black decides an offside attacker DID touch the ball.

It's all too much for the Linnets No9 who argues his way into the book, and when he goes straight through a defender a minute or two later, there's only one direction in which to walk.

So, at half time, 1-3 down and reduced to ten men, Runcorn have a steep hill to climb, but within 15 minutes of the second half are level, courtesy of a penalty and a fine header. The story book ending would have it that they go on to take the spoils. Sadly, for them, it's not to be, as Colne sneak a 90th minute winner to take the points out of town and back to Lancashire. And if that's by coach, just watch

out for those boy racers on the Runcorn busway - and maybe even the odd, stray narrowboat...

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

On the highway to Mill(bank).

04/20