

TT No.83: Chris Freer - Sat March 22nd 2014; **Barnet** v Hereford United; Conference National; Score: 2-0; Attendance: 1,497; Entertainment value: 1/5.

Although the subject of racism never seems very far away from the footballing headlines, I can honestly say it was never an issue when I was a schoolboy. Indeed, if we ever did get a new pupil whose ethnic origin was clearly not that of a 'native' Englander, we would go out of our way to embrace his presence, quiz him eagerly about his background, and make sure he was included in all of our sports and games. There was often method in our madness, to coin a phrase, as some of the Indian lads were pretty damn good at cricket, which was always a plus at our seat of learning.

You may notice I'm referring to the him as opposed to the her, as one thing we did practise regularly was overt sexism. We were children of that age. Boys played sport and girls...err... didn't. As simple as that. Now I have teenage children of my own, I'm often reminded that there's no place for sexism in modern society. Of course, I have been known to utter the occasional banality, just to wind up my daughter you understand, but it's all in good jest. Women drivers, though, now that's another matter....

Today I'm making yet another trip to London, courtesy of the cheap Megabus early morning train into town. And this time I'm climbing slightly higher up the pyramid than I normally go as I've yet to visit the Hive, the new stadium of Conference side Barnet, despite having passed it on the tube line a number of times, in its various stages of construction. I only ever made one trip to the club's previous ground, Underhill, to see Darlo play towards the end of the last century, but the London club's troubles have been well documented. Even now their new West Stand is under threat, so I judge it to be an astute time to watch a game at the Hive and indeed from that very stand.

Because I'm staying within zones 1-4 today, I have the freedom of a Travelcard so first of all I head east to Liverpool Street for some brekky, as I know the Hamilton Hall opens at 7. Their beer list today looks uninspiring so after 9.00am I head down the road to another 'Spoons, the venerable Crosse Keys on Gracechurch Street, where I know there will be a better choice of ale, and indeed there is, in the shape of many dark beers including the two that I sample, Portobello Market Porter and Windsor & Eton's Conqueror Black IPA, two excellent if entirely different dusky brews.

Suitably refreshed, and armed with my Travelcard, I then head off up the Northern Line to Kentish Town and the first of two highly recommended hostelries, this being the back-street Pineapple. It's a U-shaped single bar pub with sturdy, traditional seating and five hand pumps. There's a mix of local and national beers but because I tend to take a 'when in Rome' attitude to beer drinking I go for

Notting Hill Red from the London-based Moncada Brewery, which turns out to be an excellent fruity little number.

From here it's a five-minute walk to the Southampton Arms, which is trendy whist also being very basic. Food is minimal, and includes some massive scotch eggs (the one regret I have about being a veggie!) while the beer is served in handled jugs, unusual in this day and age. The girl on the bar doesn't seem to know her stuff and tries to sell me Dark Star as a London beer, so to save any further to-ing and fro-ing I request a pint of London Fields Black Forest Stout which is as it says on the tin.

From the nearby Gospel Oak station, I get the over-ground line to West Hampstead and then the Jubilee tube line to Queensbury from where it is a 15-minute walk to the Hive. Mention of the Jubilee Line jogs my trivia memory about one of those facts I'm tucking away for the day I end up on a TV quiz show. Did you know that line was originally going to be called the Fleet Line until they realised it would be ready for opening in 1977? Thought not, 1-0 to me...

Most hoppers will recall that the new stadium at the Hive finished off what was a stalled project instigated initially by Wealdstone FC. I don't know all the ins and outs but Barnet were handily placed to pick up the ball and run with it and despite the mutterings have turned it into a stadium more than adequate for the lower levels of the football league, the problems with the new stand allegedly not meeting planning regulations notwithstanding.

The ticket office is outside the ground and similarly to my experience at Ross County earlier in the season, they sell me the duff seat. Fortunately, the crowd is sparse and I move a short distance for a much better view. The capacious West Stand apart, the ground boasts identical covered terraces at either end, and several rows of seats tacked on to the back of the main administrative block opposite the West Stand.

Barnet are on the edge of the play-off race, and today are up against lowly visitors Hereford United. And would you believe it, as if fate knew the lead theme to my blog, the league has appointed a female official, Amy Fearn, to referee the match. I was present when Amy was the first ever lady ref to take charge of a Football League game, albeit by chance when she came on as sub at the Coventry v Forest Championship fixture in 2010. And for this game everything goes well for her as the home side shave an evenly contested first half to go in two up at the break courtesy of a brace from Keanu Marsh-Brown, the game's stand-out player.

After the interval the contest degenerates into a midfield dirge which gets the crowd a little more restless. And when one or two decisions start to go against the home side, the ugly face of sexism rears its head. It was only around 15 years ago that I once stood on the terraces at Feethams when several youths started up a monkey chant aimed at an opposing black player. Sadly, no-one around them raised any issue with this, indeed many apparently found it entertaining. That wouldn't happen today of course, but it very much looks like openly sexist behaviour still can. "You, stupid cow" screams the long-grey-haired middle-aged

West Stand bigot at the referee. “Get off home and do the ironing...!” Those around him find it all highly amusing, including the steward not 20 feet away.

It reminds me of the occasion a few years back when TV chef Gordon Ramsey was on Soccer AM. His campaign then, he declared, was “...to get women back into the kitchen’...”, adding as a rider “...and off the roads.” to a wild chorus of cheers from the assembled ‘boys’. Oh, how we guffawed.

Football, eh! That last bastion of sexism.

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

Just behind the ironing pile.....

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