

TT No.92: *Chris Freer* - Sat April 12th 2014; **Chatham Town** v Maldon & Tiptree; Isthmian Division 1 North; Score: 1-0; Crowd: 131; Entertainment value: 2/5.

As followers of my blog will know, collecting stuff has been a habit of mine for much of the past 60 years. Whether that be physical objects such as insects, butterflies, birds eggs, Tri-ang locos, Action Men or Subbuteo teams through my primary school days, or else virtual things such as car, bus, train and plane numbers as I was growing up, there was always something there for me to 'tick'. That collecting bug got marginally more sophisticated into my working years as I started drinking my way through the pubs in the 1977 Leicestershire Beer Guide (yep, did all 1,000 of 'em, at least a half in each) and then brew-pubs in the Good Beer Guide as they started to spring up in the early 1980s, doubtless inspired by the success of the Firkin chain, Dogbolter et al.

Such was the nature of the beast, the brew-pub trips took a gang of us to all parts of the country, invariably in a camper van we'd hire from some unsuspecting operator, on the pretext we were a Venture Scouts group or something equally plausible, as we suspected that the true purpose of our visit being to go out on the lash might deter them from handing us the keys. A particular favourite destination was always the tip of Cornwall and the Blue Anchor at Helston, after which we'd camp nearby for the night, sleep it off, and work our way back home over the next few days taking in every other brew-pub we knew about along on the way.

During one particular trip to Sussex and Kent, we decided to book ourselves into a hotel for a change, there being a suitable candidate in a Medway town called Strood. There was method in our madness, because in those days opening hours were still tightly controlled and the only way around 10.30pm closing was to become a 'resident'. As a result, and to the probable chagrin of the bar staff, we enjoyed the beer that this hotel brewed on the premises - for that was the main purpose of the visit - to the very early hours of the morning. Sore heads all round.

To be honest I'd forgotten the name of the hotel until a chance conversation in a pub during my Kent trip today, a day which started out as per all my recent London-based ventures with the 5.29am 'Megabus' train out of my native Long Eaton and into St. Pancras - the things I'll do for a £15 return ticket! After my usual cross-London walk - making sure to avoid the dodgy paving slabs after hitting the deck a couple of times in recent weeks - I settle into my recently-adopted London office, this being the 'Lord Moon of the Mall' Wetherspoons pub on Whitehall, which never really gets busy until later in the morning. I can enjoy a good veggie breakfast, a couple of cups of filter coffee, and my first pint of the day in relative peace and quiet before setting off elsewhere.

That elsewhere today is Chatham Town, one of those grounds that's been on my 'reserve' radar for years but has now reached the top. The train journey today has to end at Strood - hence my earlier reminiscences - as there is a replacement bus

service across the River Medway bridge and into Rochester, adjacent to Chatham but where all the best local pubs are. And most of these are outside of the town centre, and the first of them is the Man of Kent. Undeterred by the 'Closed' sign hanging on the door - they must have spotted me coming down the road - I enter a classic drinkers pub devoted to the county's brewing art. All of the ten beers on handpump are from Kentish brewers, and the landlady talks me through the pump policy of achieving a balanced offering of the different styles of beers, a lesson many other self-proclaimed, 'specialist, real ale pubs could learn from.

I go for a Goachers Best Dark (in a jug, as I'm offered the choice) and would stay for longer if I wasn't a man on a mission. There are a handful of knowledgeable punters present and we discuss the merits of several Belgian brews before I ask the question about the former home-brew hotel in Strood. 'It was the South Eastern' recalls one of my new companions, and a question that has been nagging me for the last few days is answered. My next port of call is just around the corner, and is called the Good Intent. There's a large bar with a pool table and five bar stools, each occupied by one of the only five people in the pub, and obviously locals, judging by their familiarity with the bar staff. The beer here is served straight from the cask, and there are four- on offer, although none of them 'Locale'. The Bespoke Brewing 'Going Off Half Cocked' is a palatable enough brew, and is fuel for the uphill journey to my next pub, the 'Who'd Ha Thought It' which is tucked up a side street off the main road.

It's a splendid building with a distinctive frontage proclaiming its former life as a Woodhams & Co Ltd brewery house. This Rochester brewery was taken over in 1918 and subsequently ceased operations, but the landlady - who spots me taking notes and engages me in conversation - says the brewhouse building survived until recent times (on Victoria Street in the town, you can certainly identify it on Google Street View). There are four beers at this friendly beer house where I enjoy a pint of Old Dairy Spring Top while chatting to her about football, as she's a Southampton fan. On discovering I follow Forest she offers to switch on the TV game (Forest at QPR) but despite my protestations that this would amount to cruelty, given my team's current form, I'm overruled by another customer, and we have to endure it!

From here it's a good half hour walk through undulating urban terrain and although I have to break the journey to spend a penny at the General at Sea, a Shepherd Neame cask ale house on Balfour Road, I arrive at the Maidstone Road ground of Chatham Town in good time for kick-off. I'm impressed by what I find, with facilities clearly capable of sustaining a club at a higher level. There's a large admin and changing rooms complex behind one goal, in front of which is covered terracing complete with crush barriers. Down most of the length of one side is a covered stand featuring wooden bench seating, while opposite there is a smaller covered stand with plastic bucket seating. Only the area behind one goal is undeveloped, and even that features a couple of concrete terracing steps. I have a quick peak into the busy clubhouse and although there is no cask beer, I espy

bottles of Shepherd Neame Whitstable Bay ale in the fridge. Snack bar fayre is the routine stuff with chips on offer.

As much praise as I pour on the stadium, sadly I can't bestow on the pitch, which looks in need of a good close shave. I'm well aware you won't find too many snooker tables' surfaces this time of year, but this looks likely to provide plenty of uneven bounce today. And to be honest it's not really a great game between Chatham and their mid-table colleagues from Maldon & Tiptree, with most of the interest centred around the numerous dodgy challenges which make it a niggly match, and lead to two penalties, both awarded to Chatham with only the second of the two converted - by the excellent Matt Solly - on 53 minutes. No amount of huffing and puffing from either side threatens to affect the score-line and 1-0 it stays to the death.

And so, I set off back down the hill into Rochester and a walk across the bridge into Strood. Now where's that South Eastern Hotel? I could do with a late-night session....

There's more on my blog at <http://flynn123.wordpress.com/> - the blog that's always there for the beer....

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