

TT No.22: *Chris Freer* - Saturday October 11th 2014; **AFC Totton** v Bridgwater Town; Southern Div. 1 South & West; Score: 1-1; Attendance: 321; Entertainment value: 2/5.

It's a fact that, over the years, one or two football grounds have their level best to stay out of my clutches, although few have proved so tricky as the Testwood Stadium, and yet it's only three years old!done

On holiday in the New Forest in 2011, I eschewed the chance to visit the newly-opened home of AFC Totton in favour of nearby Sholing. At the end of that season I got as far as Southampton only to discover that Totton's pitch was waterlogged. Since then a lack of cheap rail deals on Southern Trains has deterred me from the long trek to the South Coast. But still that 'TO DO' next to the club's name on my blog has served to be a red rag to a bull. Until now.

Newly armed with a Senior Railcard and a National Express Coach-card, it suddenly looks do-able, and for under £25 too!

So I'm treading my familiar route; early train to St Pancras, vigorous walk to Victoria via a bit of sight-seeing in Covent Garden (the floating building - saw it on the News) and a Wetherspoons brekkie in the Lord Moon of the Mall, before catching the National Express coach service from Victoria Coach Station to Southampton. The last time I was in this city I checked out a few of the pubs up towards St Mary's football ground. Today I decide to go north-west, initially to the Wellington Arms, a back street local with around a dozen hand pumps. It's an unspoilt pub with two separate bars and although empty of this Saturday lunchtime, still exudes some character. My beer is Butts Mudskipper which has a bit of the first-pint-pulled-today about it.

A little down the road from here is the Key & Anchor, which is decked out as a shrine to music. The background muzak boasts a wide variety - including 'Love You More', my favourite post-Devoto Buzzcocks track - and I settle into a comfy armchair to sample my pint of Ringwood Forty-niner, watched attentively by the pub dog which has more than a passing interest in my bag of cashew nuts.

I then head back to the area around the station and catch the X7 Salisbury bus, which en route passes the Testwood Stadium, just the other side of Totton.

As you might guess, this is an ultra-modern lower league ground, into which much thought has been given regarding the design. A large clubhouse complex dominates an area to the end of one side, with a good-sized, tall seated stand straddling the half-way line. Today's guest-of-honour Lawrie McMenemy has a good view, when his line-of-sight is not hampered by autograph seekers and the glare from the sun. On the opposite side of the pitch is a smaller, longer, thinner and shallower seated stand which is where I sit, in a fairly unoccupied area. Virtually all around the

pitch there is a four-step uncovered terrace with areas running up to 7 or 8 steps. As I said, a thoughtful design.

The clubhouse itself has Sharps Doombar on hand pump and the snack bar is offering chips.

Today's game is against Bridgwater Town, and with both teams more-or-less in the mid-table mix, I'm not sure what to expect. I soon realise why my end of the stand is sparsely populated. A nearby elderly steward seems far more preoccupied by the game than his stewarding duties and endlessly barks out a series of indecipherable instructions to the players at a machine-gun rate. It mainly sounds like "Use it!" which is a bit mystifying especially when Totton don't have the ball! Fortunately, he tires as the game goes on.

The visitors have the better of a tight first half, but with both defences prone to gaffs it's surprising that we only have it at 1-1 at the break, Town having gone ahead on 20, missing a penalty on 40 and paying for that by conceding a sloppy equaliser on 42. There's much huffing and puffing in a goalless second half, the highlight of which being a mass brawl on 72 which results merely in a couple of bookings, when video replay might easily have identified a couple of reds.

As I say my farewells to the Testwood Stadium I suddenly remember that this won't be the last time I travel this route. Poking over the perimeter fence are the floodlights of Little Testwood Farm, home ground of Wessex League Premier side Totton & Eling FC, also on my radar. I just hope my eventual 'tick' there doesn't prove to be quite so elusive.

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

Always getting there in the end...

04/20