

TT No.4: *Chris Freer* - Monday 25th August 2014; **Holwell Sports** v Barrow Town; East Midlands Counties League; Score: 1-1; Attendance: Around 90; Entertainment value: 2/5.

In these days of global population movements, I must count pretty much as a 'home bird'. Despite roaming the length and breadth of Britain in search of good pubs and interesting football stadia, my home address for the first 35 years of my life always had a Leicestershire postcode at the end of it. Admittedly I'd lived in several parts of that county - even Rutland - but never any further afield. But at least that did give me a good grounding in the region, and having been in charge of the team that put together the most recent (to my knowledge) Leicestershire Beer Guide - back in 1985 - also an encyclopaedic knowledge of the best real ale haunts.

So it's a bit surprising in all my time watching my village team - Barrow Old Boys - in the early 1970s, I very rarely ever travelled 'away'. It was the same when I moved to Melton Mowbray for a couple of years in the late 1970s and spent many a carefree Saturday afternoon watching Melton Town play on Egerton Park in the Leicestershire Senior League. I never saw them play anywhere else. As was usual in those days, it was a council-owned park pitch, convenient for the town centre, and often attracted a fair crowd. When the Senior League adopted strict criteria governing ownership of club grounds, and the ability to charge an entrance fee, clubs were often obliged to up sticks and move, to the detriment of their attendances. I suspect Melton Town may have fallen into that category.

My own adopted village team certainly did. The Old Boys often drew large three-figure audiences to their home fixtures on the centrally-located - and council-operated - King George V Playing Fields in Barrow upon Soar. When they changed their name to Barrow Town and relocated to their newly-acquired Riverside Park ground (almost in Quorn), those hardy souls trudging the mile or so out of town numbered barely 40, and that was on a good day.

There were, however, clubs within the Senior League structure that already had their own grounds, because they were essentially 'works' teams with company-sponsored facilities. I remember Brush Sports, Midland Woodworkers, Cottons and Bentleys as being prominent sides, and another was Holwell Works, who played just outside Melton in the village of Asfordby Hill. It was a ground I never got to visit during my years living just a couple of miles away. So, time to make up for that now.

Just like Barrow Town, Holwell has undergone a name change, and risen through the pyramid to grace the East Midlands Counties League, a Step 6 league at the tenth level of English football. Unlike Barrow Town they are still at this level on merit, rather than benefiting from a reprieve. Barrow had suffered the all-too-common knock-on effect of a failed promotion bid in 2012/3. During the following

close season, the management team left for a better offer, taking most of the half-decent players with them, and leaving a threadbare squad to suffer the agonies of a 2013/4 campaign which cut them well adrift at the bottom of the table. They were a poor side. Following the reprieve, a new manager arrived, freshened up the squad, and has started with three straight league wins - as many as last season in total!

It's a day of almost interminable rain, which abates slightly as I arrive at the ground by car, and park right outside The Stute Social Club, which has nothing to do with the football club, but effectively serves as their clubhouse bar, given its proximity to Holwell's Welby Lane ground. The club is smart and friendly and has a working hand pump, dispensing Greene King Abbot, although my pint looks better than it drinks, having that slightly sour taste common of a barrel that is either nearing its end, or its sell-by date.

The ground itself lies adjacent to the local bowls club, and there are convenient windows in the back of the 100-seater main stand to view the action next door. There is also more cover, consisting of a shelter affixed to the front of the changing room, and a narrow strip of covered flat standing behind and to the side of one goal. I position myself here as it is also very wind-proof. There's a snack bar down by the halfway line, for those wanting a meaty pie. I have to settle for a KitKat Chunky. I amuse myself watching the officials on their pre-match warm-up routine, the young referee and assistant enjoying the turn and sprints much more than the second assistant, a man of advancing years and even more advancing waist-line. View the relief on his face when the ref calls a halt!

Although recently cut, the playing surface is hardly billiard table, and with the rain lashing down for much of the match, close control is at a premium. There are spells of action in between long periods of a midfield muddle and stoppages for injuries. Both sides miss gilt-edged chances in the opening five minutes, and it's a very even contest throughout, with the final score of 1-1 probably the fairest result.

These days I live just across the county line in an area of Dire-byshire (sic) which has the compensation of Nottingham postcodes, so I still haven't travelled that far away from my Loughborough birthplace. And that Leicestershire Beer Guide I mentioned earlier will likely have suffered a lot of deletions in the 30 years since it was published. So, if anybody ever decides to produce a follow-up, I'd be very happy to help with the product research. Provided it fits in with the Barrow Town away schedule, of course. Let's make up for lost time!

04/20