

TT No.9: *Chris Freer* - Sat September 6th 2014; **Tividale** v Mickleover Sports; Northern Premier League Div. 1 S; Score: 1-3; Attendance: 177; Entertainment value: 1/5.

One of the most enjoyable periods of my working life was spent in the 'Black Country.' Admittedly it was only for seven months, but it was 30-odd weeks helping to set up an ambitious brewing/pub/wholesaling operation which was something I'd always wanted to do. Sadly, it came to an end when the under-qualified managing director - appointed to that position by his brother, the owner - began to realise that the key operatives he'd recruited were highlighting his own inadequacies and undermining his role at the head of the business. So, he got rid of us all in a night-of-the-long-knives, the company subsequently went bust, and the owner served time for some form of financial skull-duggery. No surprise there.

But, as I said, highly enjoyable, in that I got to explore one of the most interesting beer drinking regions of the country - Bathams, Holdens, Simpkins, Ma Pardoes and more - make a lot of lifelong friends (I'm still officially a member of a Wolves Supporters Club), and discovered the delights of the Black Country Balti. And I also kick-started my long-dormant passion for visiting new football grounds, ticking off all of the West Midlands and a lot further afield, following Wolves through the lower divisions.

For whatever reason, save when Forest play at Molineux, I don't get back here that often now, so an aborted planned trip to Guernsey turns my attention to Tividale, newly promoted to Step 4, and the nearest ground of that stature I've yet to visit. So fully equipped with my new Senior Railcard, I set off to revisit Dudley, via a brief Wetherspoons Brekky break in Brum. Having landed at Dudley Port station, I foot-slog the mile and a half or so into Dudley town centre, my first port-of-call being the Foundry. When I worked in Dudley, this was about to re-open as the Queen Victoria, and I lodged upstairs in what was essentially a derelict pub for a couple of weeks. One evening, after a particularly enjoyable pub crawl, I arrived back to discover I'd lost the key. I braced myself for a night on a park bench, before deciding to summon up police support. We arrived at the pub door to find the key on the floor where I'd dropped it. Doh!

I don't linger in the Foundry, which looks and feels essentially like a youngster's music venue, with just Castle Rock Harvest Pale on hand pump. My next pub, the local Wetherspoons, is very busy but the beer choice is uninspiring and I end up at the Court House, operated by Black Country Inns, and selling that brewery's 4-strong range of ales with a further 8 guests. 12 beers in all, 8 of them either pale or golden; sadly, a sign of the times. Pig on The Wall mild is reliably dark, although to me it's more of a lightly-hopped ruby bitter.

From here I move towards the castle end of town and a Holden's pub called the Fellows. It's all been 'tarted' up to be heavy on the food, and I'm disappointed to

find that, despite a pump clip seemingly showing the availability of Holden's Mild, they only sell it in bottles. "The clip is on the pump to advertise the bottles," explains the fully-briefed barmaid. "Yes, but essentially you are advertising a cask beer you don't sell," I counter. The boyfriend at the other end of the bar gives me the eye and so as not to ruffle too many feathers, I opt for a Holden's Bitter, which is a pleasant enough drink. But it's not a cask mild!

From here it's around a 15-minute walk to Tividale's 'Beeches' ground, which is out on the road towards the M5. The gate and bar staff don't appear to be the happiest people in the world, declining to join in my banter on this, national Non-League Day. Maybe they just can't understand what I'm saying. To its credit, the bar sports two hand pumps featuring beers from Marston's, the locally (I'm guessing Banks's)-brewed Sunbeam and a Ringwood beer. I go local, and sample a beer so citrusy you might as well drop some lemons into it to mellow it down a bit.

I'm drawn into conversation by an apprentice hopper, a young West Brom fan who also follows Rushall Olympic around a bit, and is keen to add to his collection of grounds. I regale him with some of my recent exploits, as a consequence emerging from the clubhouse too late to see the opening goal, scored by visitors Mickleover Sports, the Direbyshire (sic) team. Tividale's ground essentially consists of a long thin part-seated stand running the length of one side, with some 'smoking' cover behind one goal. The playing surface is hardly billiard table, and the standard of football is poor. The highlights of the first half are a stunning second from the visitors, and the two ladies walking round selling the raffle tickets. "I do the money - she does the strip...." says one of them. "That's the best line I've heard!" chuckles a punter.

The second half is a non-event, save for a goal apiece in the last 15-minutes, but hey, it's Non-League Day, it's £4 to get in, and a crowd of 177 includes many sporting West Bromwich Albion shirts. And I'm back in the Black Country again, and all that's missing is a Balti! Hey, I can soon rectify that...!

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

It's Bostin'!

04/20