

TT No.2: *Chris Freer* - Sat 15th August 2015; **AFC Darwen** v Washington; FA Cup Extra Preliminary Round; Result 1-2; Attendance: 203; Entertainment value: 2/5.

I've been following the recent debate on a certain online forum regarding organised groundhops. To be honest I'm not sure what the fuss is all about. To me they're very much a 'win-win' situation, with hoppers getting the opportunity for several ticks over a short period of time - offering travel cost savings to boot - while the clubs involved enjoy a much-increased attendance on the day, with knock-on benefits in bar and food sales, not forgetting club merchandise. And yet there seems to be unrest in the ranks with most critics going for the jugular of a multiple groundhop organiser who happens, coincidentally, to be based in the same town as myself.

I know the guy and like all of us he has his faults, but he also spends a lot of time organising his events and so is entitled to some reward. After all, travel agents don't arrange and sell holidays for the love of it, do they? Part of my job is to produce magazines for breweries. Now they could quite easily do this themselves - all they need is the expertise and the time to do it. And therein lies their problem. Which is where I come in and I naturally get a financial reward for doing it. Simple! Presumably Mr. Groundhop Organiser's critics are principled enough to never ever go to a game that has been rescheduled due to his intervention. That would go without saying, wouldn't it?

Actually, one of the personal benefits to me of going on a few of his trips is that I have evidence to present to my wife that I am not the only silly bastard spending his time and good money in the pursuit of something intangible. I've made a number of new friends and acquaintances over the past year or so, though I am indeed lucky that's hopping is mainly a sad old man's kind of hobby, because if my new chums were called Jackie and Jane rather than Jack and John then I could foresee my travel privileges being hastily withdrawn.

Today I type this as I sit in the Wetherspoons in Burnley, a glass of something local but awfully blond in front of me, at half time in the Burnley v Birmingham Championship match, having deposited the aforementioned Jack outside the gates of Turf Moor in order that he may achieve one of the handful of Football League ticks he still requires. Having been 'On the Turf' several times previously, I decide to save myself £30 and watch the game on my iPad, courtesy of Wetherspoon's wi-fi.

Reunited with my chum at 2.20, we are clear of the town ten minutes later, and entering the environs of the Anchor Ground, home of North West Counties Premier newcomers AFC Darwen, at 2.45pm sharp. We meet up with a quartet of other East Midland based hoppers we know are coming to the match, an FA Cup encounter with Northern League side Washington. It's the Extra Preliminary Round of the competition, although that fact appears to have escaped the editor of the match

programme who has merely put 'FA Cup game' on the cover. Or maybe he just couldn't be arsed to type 'Extra Prelim.. etc'.

Darwen moved to the Anchor Ground in the days well before they adopted the prefix. The previous incarnation of the club was of course a Football League side more than a century ago, playing on a site a couple of hundred yards down the road on the opposite side, and now covered by industrial buildings. So sadly no 'Peel Park' type legacy for hoppers to investigate. The Anchor Ground itself is more than a century old, and benefits from elevated step terracing - albeit of the sleepers-filled-with-sand variety - around three sides, with a substantial main stand on the other, adjacent to a very plush clubhouse which sadly has nothing for the discerning beer drinker. I investigate the snack hatch where the pinned-up menu reveals the existence of pies, but on enquiry I am informed that each of the various options includes a meat ingredient of some sort. Oh, for those lovely cheese & onion variants available at nearby Colne FC!

There's a reasonable crowd of around 200 today including quite a few visitors from Washington, their accent being a dead giveaway. Amongst their ranks is a young lady of some stature whose ability to stay upright is gravity-defying. Not that we noticed.

From the start it's clear that the visitors favour a more powerful approach to the game, particularly at set pieces, and it's two bullet headers from corners that settle the tie. In between time the home side manage to peg them back, but at no stage ever look likely to claim the honours. Washington won't win this cup, of course, but the cash for getting to the next stage, the Preliminary Round, will come in handy. And after all, everybody deserves recompense for a job well done. Or not, depending on which Forum poster you happen to agree with.

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

Top heavy at best...

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