

The true burger king

DAN ROBERTS has tasted the best and worst of footy “cuisine” on his travels around the nation — he’s forgotten more about baps than we’ll ever know

Now I wouldn’t class myself as a football scientist in any way but I believe I have carried out the requisite research to put forward a theory that will rock the world of football to its very core – and probably bag myself some kind of uber-prestigious award (Nobel prize?) in the process.

The theory in question? That the standard of food available at a football ground is directly proportionate to the club’s standing.

And in particular, that the bigger and higher placed in the league the club is...the worst the culinary fare.

Like all scientists worth their magnesium I have carried out extensive research to get to this momentous viewpoint.

To explain I’ll have to take you back to the 2003/4 season when I was one of a band of hardy souls who followed Chesham United, south Buckinghamshire’s second highest placed team in English football (from that boast you would be correct in assuming that the region is not a hotbed of football excellence).

Non-league football offers the fan a different world than their Premier League counterparts. You can have your witty insults not only heard by the opposing team’s donkey of a centre half, but have it replied to – usually in the style of the offer of a fight after the game.

Another attraction is that the food on offer is not the bland muck handed over higher up the pyramid.

A fine example of this is the old woman who had a stand at Hitchin Town where you could buy penny sweets. You could either select them yourself or, for the bargain price of 50p, get a ready picked bag.

mmmm...heartburn



As food (and drink obviously) was a major part of the away day experience a couple of us decided that we would sample the food on offer at each ground (Chesham were in the Ryman Premier at the time) and then write about these gastronomic experiences in the style of the food critics that we patently were.

Food was marked out of ten in various categories – taste, sauce availability (the record was 16 different types at Barton Rovers) and value for money.

The final piece of information

you need to know at this point is that all this information was then passed on to fellow Chesham United fans in the form of a regular column in the match day programme under the nom de plume Hat-trick Burger (get it? Yeah, food criticism and high class comedy in one place!).

As Chesham were in the Ryman League at the time a lot of the away trips meant enjoying a trip out to Essex.

This was usually as enticing as it sounds. The seemingly monthly trip to this part of world meant a journey through a featureless

“An old woman at Hitchin Town had a stand selling penny sweets.”

landscape. This may make it sound like a desolate plain dotted with cool roadside diners you only see in American films. In reality it was a journey through a desolate plain dotted with dodgy cafes, the like of which you've only seen in Watchdog food specials. To be fair since those times I have actually driven through more of Essex and found it to be an entirely charming county but back then it was a trip to dread.

Saying that, some of the smaller clubs from the allotment of England managed to tantalise our taste buds in ways rarely experienced since.

One such beacon of burger brilliance was found on a trip to Great Wakering Rovers.

After we enjoyed the hospitality of a small yet perfectly formed bar with a couple of pints and a free portion of chips (they must have recognised the official food tasters in their midst) we waited until the end of the first half to enjoy the best that the club could offer.

The burger did not disappoint – it was a thing of meaty wonder with melted cheese (not as common as you'd think!) and a tomato soup that didn't burn the insides of your mouth but managed to keep us warm as the wind blew in from the Arctic.

With any scientific experiment into proving a theory (yes, I really am continuing to flog this metaphor) you need a 'control'.

Luckily at Chesham United we had Bill's Diner – a burger van that parked up on the terrace to the right of the Cricket Ground End goal and supplied us with a burger that was of a consistently fine standard without ever reaching any culinary heights. This was perfect as we could easily compare another clubs' grub against our home ground's offerings.

Unfortunately a sizeable amount of our away trips – and subsequent Hat-trick Burger reports – were showered in more of a negative light.

Memorable missives from the field of food war that chronicled our misfortune include Aldershot.

The 'phoenix from the flames'

Aldershot were on their way back up the ladder at the time. Maybe the club's efforts were being pushed towards their promotion charge rather than serving their fans with edible eats, but this is one place I will always remember for the excruciatingly low standard of food. Actually the trip there was also fondly remembered for one of our party calling the police to report home fans who had not taken kindly

"A trades descriptions worrying sausage was placed in a bun."



Some fans take this food-testing lark a little too seriously

to our victory and subsequent celebrations.

The boys in blue eventually gave us an escort to the train station! But I digress. At this time I think we were under the false illusion that bigger clubs would have more money to be pumped into match day snacks. How innocent and naïve we were.

First of all, no burgers. At all. This was going to be a hard one to score. We plumped for the hot dog in the vain hope that it would be up there with Billericay's superb pork product (I told you there were a lot of Essex trips).

The size of the bun should have tipped us off.

If Subway does a foot long and a six-inch option, this was three inches at best (insert own joke here).

A trades description-worrying sausage was placed in said dwarf bun before being topped by shaved onions that amazingly had as little flavour as they did colour.

There were, of course, absolute treats on our travels.

Fans still speak in hushed awe about the steak baguettes – with mushrooms – we devoured at Gravesend and Northfleet one balmy Tuesday evening.

This was obviously before the foot and mouth crisis, which drastically altered their menu the next season.

Another highlight was the Fleet Burger at Purfleet. This immense 'snack' was basically two of everything – burgers, bacon, cheese and (proper) onions in a lovely white bap.

The meat was so rich you could feel your arteries actually clogging up with every tasty bite. This was a burger so good that even when the club changed their name to Thurrock they refused to change the name of the piece of meat heaven.

My away trips are bit more few and far between these days and Chesham United's fans no longer have the joy of reading Hat-trick Burger in their programme, but whenever I do make a game I always check out the burgers. Purely to continue research into the theory you understand?