

## **FARNBOROUGH OLD BOYS GUILD SENIOR VETS TOUR TO TONGEREN, BELGIUM 25-28 MAY 2017**

The venue was Zwembad De Zeemeeuw (Swimming Pool the Seagull), Tripelenweg 14, 37770 Millen. There were three full-size grass pitches in excellent condition and the requisite supporting facilities, changing rooms, showers, toilets, parking, first aid, a huge beer tent, BBQ, marquees, live musicians etc. The whole event was billed as an International Football Happening with dozens of Vets teams, including several from England. Matches were played over two days, from midday until 9 PM. The whole operation for this annual event was very well run.

Phil Anthony was Tour Organiser; Mick O'Flynn was Tour Manager and Peter Harvey was Tour Captain. The Tour Company was Phoenix Tours and the Coach Driver was Hitesh Patel.

### **Theme tune**

It was fitting that the theme tune for this European adventure was the UEFA Champions League anthem – even if the whole point of it was to remind Arsenal fan Steve Blanchard that his European games will be on Thursday nights next season. I think, though, Steve had the last laugh on Saturday. This theme tune was written by English composer Tony Britten in 1992, as a serious classical piece, heavily influenced by Handel's Zadok the Priest. The recording used in the television transmissions was performed by the London Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and sung by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chorus. We used the version performed on the recorder by Nicholas Michael.

### **Accommodation**

We stayed at the Eburon Hotel, an establishment which Trip Advisor rated the best hotel in Tongeren. The building had an airy, monastic feel. It had been originally the Sint-Jacob's guesthouse, established in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century as an inn for pilgrims on the road to Santiago de Compostella. Now it has Schindler's lifts. It also had an interesting way of promoting its bar with an invitation to "try to alternate our blackout times so we can piece together our nights". This was sound advice which a drinker of Red Bull and vodka should have heeded.

### **Tour Party**

The party of sixteen players was a combination of (mostly) FOBG Senior Vets, CENT YMCA Vets and players who have played for both teams this season. We all wore especially designed polo shirts with the Farnborough badge and (on the back) nicknames of our choice. The room pairings (and player nicknames) were as follows:

Phil Anthony (Sniper) – Ian Lyons (Lionel)  
Colin Brazier (Biggles) – Steve Palmer (Palmer)  
Ian Coles (Male Model) – Steve Blanchard (Shaggy)  
Mick O'Flynn (The Filth) – Patrice Mongelard (Intellectual)  
Sinisa Gracanin (Sidney) – Lee Henderson (Hendo)

George Kleanthous (Zorba) – Danny Mullins (Mullins)  
Kypros Michael (Kyp) – Peter Harvey (Great Big Hampton)  
Barry Summers (Bazza) – Colin Mant (Aardvark)

### **Getting there (25 May)**

There was a serious danger of running out of beer on the coach, on our way to the Eurotunnel terminal such was the traffic on the M20. But we made it to the bar in the terminal where more refreshments were available. One of us, who will remain nameless, had six beers on only three peanuts. I blanched at the idea.

There was greater danger of death by Phil Anthony's jokes – sample "How does the rabbi make coffee? Answer: He brews it"

As often happens, getting there seemed to take longer – the train delay did not help, it was dark for much of the time, there were two pit stops and the satnavs on our phones did not always agree with the one our driver Hitesh was using. But we got there safely.

### **The matches – three in two days, with games 1 and 2 played consecutively on 26 May, and game 3 on 27 May, in 30° C+ temperatures**

I "They don't like it up them"

We were up against the Union Sportive Fontoy from France. We were fired up for this one – must have been the French team singing in the changing rooms. We were all over them and really should have been 2-0 or 3-0 up by half-time. Kypros Michael and Peter Harvey had good chances which they could not finish whilst Kypros did his bit for the Paphos Taxi Drivers Betting Syndicate by rounding the keeper and hitting the post from a yard out. George Kleanthous gave us the lead we deserved towards the end of the first half. He intercepted a pass on the edge of the box, advanced towards a French defence that surrendered and parted like the Red Sea before curling a low shoot into the bottom corner. We needed to defend well for the rest of the game to keep our clean sheet. Barry Summers' scything actions could have been punished more severely but the referee made Mick Gearing look like a spring chicken. We held on, sacrificing finesse for muscle, to win 1-0.

II "Merci Monsieur Blanchard"

There was hardly any time before our second game was upon us. There was enough time though for four or five of our opponents in our earlier game to join a Belgian team, Fc Holcim Obourg, to have another crack at us. Those of you who follow our games will know we have some own goal specialists in our midst. The Blanchard-Palmer combination did not disappoint. Steve Palmer called for an incoming cross did not get to it before Steve Blanchard applied his head with purpose and guided the ball expertly beyond our out of position keeper. We thought we broke through twice from within our half but were harshly called back for dubious offsides by the Portuguese referee. After half-time we equalised with a trademark Paphos Express run from Kypros Michael driving deep into the box and finishing low into the bottom corner. We fell behind in the last quarter of the game after Steve Blanchard was deemed to have brought a French attacker down in the box. The penalty was

scuffed, almost saved by Steve Palmer, but went in to give the French a 2-1 lead that they held to the end.

III “Next time bring your dads and granddads”

Our third match was the most eventful. After Steve Palmer refereed a game we took on a team of local lads, FC Wrakken – and I mean lads, in their early twenties who had replaced a Dutch team in the programme. But this was no mismatch. We took the lead in the second minute when Kypros Michael finished emphatically with a close range volley after Danny Mullins had flicked on an Ian Lyons’ throw-in. We held our own for most of the half until the introduction of substitutes. A not fully fit Phil Anthony had sliced a clearance in the wrong direction, and Barry Summers took out his own keeper to set up a tap-in for the opposition. We then had a moment of confusion when Sinisa Gracanin went missing in action – he had to go off to the big tent do a massive one as he had not been for three days.

Early in the second half we re-took the lead when a defender charged down a Kypros Michael shot with his hands in the area. Kyp undercooked the spot-kick but a surprisingly awake Lee Henderson was on the scene to convert the rebound from close range. Kypros tried to claim that his boot hit the ball too at exactly the same time as Lee’s did – an interesting one for the bookies I thought. The youngsters soon equalised when one of their big lads got his head to the ball from a corner which Steve Palmer palmed on to the post and then on to Colin Brazier’s head into the back of the net and we had scored our second own goal in two games. After yet another Barry Summers foul the Belgians edged ahead from the resulting free kick. And that was it.

### **Remembrance**

On the way back to England Mick O’Flynn – who knows his military cemeteries, led the tour party to pay tribute to the fallen in the Adinkerke Military Cemetery. The ages of the soldiers recorded on the headstones were not much older than those of the Belgian team we played.

### **Gifts (apart from the own goals)**

We took club pennants for our opposition, to be handed over by a smiling Peter Harvey. The first French team we played gave us a bottle of Mirabelle de Lorraine – a 45% yellow plum liqueur which they insisted we sipped before the start of the game in the centre circle. The Belgian team gave us a bottle of something called Lummense Kastelenborrel (if I recall correctly) – a sort of local liqueur made from heather, pine cones and blueberries.

On the way back Mick O’Flynn presented Phil Anthony with a little something as a thank you for organising the tour. There was also a well-deserved collection for our driver, Hitesh.

### **Tour Awards**

In the bar where we watched the FA Cup Final we held our tour award ceremony. The winners were:

Players' Player of the tour– Danny Mullins  
European Golden Boot – Kypros Michael  
Managers' Player of the tour – Steve Palmer

### **No man left behind**

This was not strictly true because not everyone came back. We paused at Brussels Airport to deposit Barry Summers there as he was catching a flight to Barcelona for a family half term holiday. I will not reveal what was said after he left the coach, but the idea that he would manage to catch his flight to Barcelona, or have his passport with him, seemed fanciful.

### **Symmetry**

The tour started with a pint in the Woodman in Farnborough Village and ended the same way. Similarly, we had a bit of bother when we got to the hotel through no fault of ours, when one of our nine allocated rooms was found to be occupied. Belgian hospitality came under strain as we were leaving too.

Things could have turned ugly when Barry Summers and Colin Mant found someone sleeping in their room (Room 241) at 2am but the hotel management commended us for the way we dealt with the situation. Barry used a camp bed in Peter Harvey and Kypros Michael's room – after heavy use of the toilet a couple of feet from Peter's head. Manty slept on the floor in Ian Coles' and Steve Blanchard's room. After a rough night he was not quite himself the next morning, as he rolled off a pouffe in the hotel lobby. It was all sorted though and we got a free round of beers and a bottle of bubbly from the hotel for the inconvenience.

Things could have turned even uglier when we found our coach boxed in by two vehicles with churlish owners refusing to move so we could leave. In their view, we had encroached on space designated for them to set out their stall of second hand furniture for the Sunday morning antiques market – which is a huge event in Tongeren. They did not want us there, thought we should not be there, but were quite happy to keep us there until 8:30pm, until the end of the market. Thankfully, Steve Blanchard and our "Goodwill Ambassador" Peter Harvey smoothed things over and our driver Hitesh extricated us skilfully with only the depth of a Belgian peasant's cupboard to play with. With all the Nazi memorabilia on sale in the market, I felt these Belgians could have been better disposed toward a coachload of Brits.

### **Other Tour highlights**

We shared cold showers with our French opponents, an experience which was much appreciated by Mick O'Flynn.

Steve Palmer's 49<sup>th</sup> birthday – and he bought two rounds, and got an own goal as a present from Steve Blanchard.

Colin Brazier joined the WhatsApp generation. In fact, WhatsApp came in very useful to keep the tour party informed and reasonably synchronised (except Barry) and post pictures – even if some players were not always clear who was running things and

whose team it was. Colin Mant was not on WhatsApp but it did not matter on the first night, at least, as he did not have a room.

By George, we saw what happens when a lot of Red Bull and vodka overwhelm a West Ham fan with decades of frustration against London sides, all sides in fact.

In the main town square we saw what the 80s pop group Bananarama will look like in fifty years in time, on a night out. Some of the lads were very kind to the elderly, until 4:30am allegedly.

Discovering the Cafe au Phare in the main town square – with over 130 Belgian beers, colour and flavour-coded and strength-rated. Not many tried the Rochefort 10 at 11.3%.

### **Tour Quotes**

There is a beer for the reader who can attribute the highest number of the following quotes correctly:

*“We are all characters”*

*“Lads, I have found the Irish pasta bar”*

*“Did it take long to rebuild Tongeren after the war?”*

*“Would you like to see a picture of my Porsche?”*

*“Actually he drives an Austin Allegro”*

*“I don’t like vodka”*

*“At what point does that man stop being a liability?”*

*“Manty, say hello to the family”*

*“Where is my passport?”*

*“Where is Barry?”*

*“Who is Barry?”*

*“That man is polishing his helmet”*

*“What was the West Ham/Spurs score in their last match? What was it? What waaaaaaaaaas it” (insert gagging and frothing sound effects)*

(Editor’s note, for a broader historical perspective - Spurs and West Ham have played each other 205 times, with 92 Spurs wins, 62 West Ham wins and 51 draws)

### **Getting back (28 May)**

We came through the tunnel at about 3:45 (local time) with “The boys are back in town” playing. It was raining cats and dogs on the motorway but the journey seemed to take much less time than we expected. Peter Harvey knew he was back in England when he lost his broadband connection.

### **What goes on tour stays on tour**

I wish I could tell you more. If I did I would be banned from next year’s tour. Mrs M already thinks that as a pensioner I am going to have to cut back, and picking up bad habits from others on tour, like eating and drinking too much, will not help my case.