



A cloud of expectation filled the air. Wide-eyed and exhilarated at the prospects that lay ahead, they discussed the next three days incessantly. Ever since they'd heard about the trip, the time had been counted down and the level of excitement had grown over the few days prior to departure until everyone was at fever pitch. What would it be like? Where would they go? What would they be doing? Yes - freedom at last. The opportunity to do all the things they'd wanted to do for so long, but hadn't been able to, because their children had always been there. But now the great day had arrived the parents were completely free. The moment the mini bus sped off along Church Road, the parties began.

And so our forty first tour got under way. An uneventful trip via Chiveley Services, a chance encounter with some of the Bath parents en route to their game at Newbury and the sight of four supporters of Accrington Stanley lost and many miles from home, eventually saw the bus arrive at Clayfields (almost) on time. Unbelievable, considering The Chairman was navigating. Clear chances were few and far between as the side worked resolutely to stem the threat from a skilful Southampton outfit, Callum Preece's aerial dominance and Mark Ford's tireless running being two of the game's three particular highlights. The best moment however arrived midway through the second half as the ball went out of play on the far side. L.R. Harvey showed a clean pair of heels as he set off in pursuit of the offending object and completed a perfectly executed drag-back before horribly slicing the thing over the adjacent fence and into the bushes behind him. Having safely negotiated the resulting four minutes of stoppage time added due to this aberration, a goalless draw was safely achieved to get IOW 2003 off to a successful beginning.

The excitement of the ferry for a good number of players the first time they had travelled on a ship was matched only by the departing parents earlier, and after a calm crossing of The Solent and momentary navigational indecision in Newport town centre, Alum Bay was reached. The chairlift over the cliff and down to the beach famous for its 50-plus different colours of sand is a spectacular affair, as is the view of The Needles at the far end of the shingle. BSD was first to try out the Canute Theory that states if you are important enough, the sea will retreat before dampening your shoe, only to find like many before him that if you stand there long enough you get very wet. Jackson emerged as top marksman, getting three successive pebbles into a floating barrel, while Harding saw his rather fetching white cap disappear over the side of his ascending chair thirty minutes later.

The hotel was excellent when it was eventually located having managed to ask three tourists (Don't live round here, mate), two very unknowledgable locals (There's no Hill Street round here are you sure it's not one of those scams - there've been a few recently?) and an Australian professor (Sorry mate, I'm from Sydney) for directions. Dinner consumed, though in Harding's case, moved round the plate several times and left half an hour running round on the beach, diaries completed, phone calls made and finally off to bed to watch The Premiership. Despite adult hearts being warmed due to the extra hour claimed as the clocks go back, first night tourists sleep for seven hours and barely a minute more.

Sunday morning dawned bright and warm, hard to believe it was almost November. First stop Blackgang Chine The Maze, Dinosaur World, Crooked House, Hell's Mouth (plenty of candidates to enter that one), Rumpus Mansion, Snakes & Ladders (Jackson setting up his own version of Moss Bros, charging people 1p a time to borrow his waterproof in order to improve their ability to slide down the snakes), Frontier Town and much more, all negotiated at twice the speed of sound before the water slides offered forty minutes of non-stop high octane fun.

Next stop Robin Hill Country Park lunch, followed by a race through the wooden maze with Harris's team comprising Heron, St Mary's and the Longlevens contingent (both actual and honorary members), going down 0-3 to Hamilton's waifs & strays, despite Ford getting lost at the first corner and in a display of true team spirit being left to find his own way out. Never have the remainder of the many acres of this park been negotiated so quickly, the toboggan slides the far off (in terms of distance, anyway) and ultimate target.

Miller was exhilarated after his spelling prowess won him a pound and another toboggan ride before the carnival moved on to destination number three The Heights Leisure Pool in Sandown. Preece was given swimming lessons by Hickey prior to a huge dinner totally devoured by Dillon, BSD, James, Sausman (I think I'm going to explode), Mace, Harris and of course Jackson. Needless to say, Harding ate slightly less and baffled everyone with his summary of his own eating display I stuck in there. Stuck in where? I observed Hamilton. Everyone in earshot nodded knowingly. Ford meanwhile revealed his darker side, caught attempting to hide half a dozen peas beneath a broccoli floret in order to reduce his points deduction by one. He failed.

Following another run on the beach to aid digestion, allegations of sand throwing were investigated and character defaults exposed. Ben Harris, Dillon and unsurprisingly Jackson all claiming to have been victims of Preece's sand throwing. The evidence failed to stand up. Preece wasn't even there. Another failed accusation against James prompted the erudite custodian to reveal he had been left internally scarred by the experience. No-one understood what he meant.

By now Miller and Harris were well on their way to claiming the prize for best room, though Room 10 would certainly have won the award (had there been one) for sweetest smelling abode, thanks largely to the Longlevens trio's huge collection of cosmetics, making their bathroom look (and smell) like the Boots perfumery counter.

Monday's 6.10am rising was not met with universal acclaim, though beans on toast and several bowls of cereal later, the bus was on the road again, making its way serenely to East Cowes ferry terminal. Not so the car, caught in a stream of very slow moving traffic, then directed by Hickey along a yellow road (no problem short cut), only to find the road ended after a mile and dissolved into little more than a farm track. No panic the terminal was reached with at least ninety seconds remaining before the Red Eagle departed, the ensuing crossing being almost totally taken up with a virtual World Cup tie between Brazil and Columbia (1-0 to Columbia late goal).

A tired looking team went one down to Gosport & Fareham in a salubrious suburb of Portsmouth - plenty of BMWs in the drives and a marked lack of socialist voters here five minutes into the second half before coming good late on, Preece equalising from the spot after Harding was fouled and Ford grabbing the winner with a fine finish following Mace's right wing cross.

Return time to Longlevens was 4.43pm and another victory in the Guess the time of return league for Harding (spot on this time two bonus points). Stories were swapped and experiences shared by the excited gathering late nights out on the town, house parties and visits to the Balti Hut. It really had been everything they'd hoped it would be and they can do it all again in three months time their children are off to London in February.

Happy Days.

GPSFA Tour Squad: Grant Dillon, Mark Ford, Courtney Hamilton, Liam Harding, Ben Harris, George Jackson, Joe James, Kieron Mace, Robert Miller, Callum Preece, Ellis Sausman, Bradley Stroud-Drinkwater.