

**28/11/05 TT No.119: Stephen Harris - Hastings United (Ryman League Division 1)**

Saturday 26 November 2005; Hastings United 1-4 Dulwich Hamlet; Isthmian League Div. I; att. 286, programme issued, admission £6.

I have to declare an interest here as a Hastings supporter. The Pilot Field was the first British ground I ever visited (I had previously seen two games in Nigeria) way back in 1974 and I was a keen follower of the old United club back in my early teens before being seduced by the charms of Leyton Orient. I have followed the fortunes of the various Hastings clubs ever since and still manage to get down to the coast a couple of times a season. Looking back on those far off days of the mid-70s it is striking to realise that many of the grounds we used to travel to for Southern League games are now gone I'm thinking here of the old homes of Canterbury City, Dartford, Waterlooville, Tonbridge, Crawley, Wealdstone, Hillingdon Borough and Chelmsford City in particular.

In my view, the Pilot Field is a great venue and has always been the one on which I have judged other non-league grounds. It is very spacious you can see how it has held crowds in excess of 12,000 in the past with the spectator facilities set back behind the remains of an old cinder speedway track. On the south side there is a substantial grandstand filling the full length of the side. Opposite is a steep grass bank, a popular vantage point, back in my youth but now sadly out-of-bounds and overgrown. The Elphinstone Road end has a modern clubhouse with viewing balcony, standing next to a large covered terrace of twenty steps, which dates from 1956. I still know this as the 'Cow Shed', although that name seems to have fallen into disuse. A second large covered terrace used to stand next to this but has now been demolished. On Saturday a new cover was officially opened at the Wood End; the first new spectator development in my thirty years of visiting the ground. The rail has been brought forward at this end, across the track and up to the touchline. A two-step covered terrace now fills the middle third and was well used. Next door is the 'Top Field', the now-derelict ground most recently used by Stamco. A planning application note posted on the fence suggested that this will soon be converted to floodlit ballcourts.

Although the crowd was nearly 100 more than the next biggest in this division, it is still sad to see so few in the ground. In sleeping giant terms, Hastings must be one of the doziest of them all. But there is still great enthusiasm amongst those present and it would not take much success to bring back the missing hundreds. There was much murmuring around the touchline to suggest that manager Neville Southall MBE might not be using his talented squad to best advantage although nobody would be so brave as to say this out loud within earshot of the big man. It is striking to see that he has used 39 first team players already this season and, whilst I am the first to accept that I have only a rudimentary grasp of football tactics, even I thought there was something odd about Hastings' approach to this

game. The first half was played with just one-man up front against a blanket Dulwich defence, which got Hastings nowhere. Eventually in the second half, a second forward, Sam Adams (the best player on the pitch in my view), was brought on, but two defenders were also substituted at around the same time. This had the effect of making Hastings a more attacking side, but wide open at the back. In the end it was poor discipline which was Hastings' undoing with a series of defensive fouls leading to goals from set pieces. And thus, did the better side not just lose, but receive a thrashing. A standard Hastings match programme was issued. Always a good read, this has plenty of information on the wider Sussex football scene.

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