

TT No.229: Stephen Harris - Tuesday 25 April 2006; Essex Olympian League; Harold Wood Athletic 2-1 Debden Sports. Attendance: c.58. Admission free; No programme issued; FGIF Match Rating 3*.

The first task on arriving at the Harold Wood Recreation Ground was to try and work out just where exactly a football match might be taking place. The whole of this unremarkable sports ground on the very edge of London had been given over to cricket, but the pavilion was a burnt-out and deserted shell with no information there. There were no football posts to be seen. I spotted another potential spectator who advised waiting - "They'll probably not decide where to play until they get here".

Anyway, he pointed me towards a battered changing room block in the furthest corner where a few players were lounging around in tracksuits. This turned out to be the home team, there being no sign of the visitors. As I walked across, some lads started marking out a football pitch on a sloping patch of turf on the south side of the park. Rather shorter than average for a football pitch I thought, although this was compensated for by being rather wider than average. The expected kick-off time came and went, posts and nets were erected by willing hands amongst the onlookers, followed by corner flags. A rope was put up along both sides and one end and suddenly we had some semblance of a venue. Away players were trickling in and last of all came Debden's green kit, leading to a kick-off at the rather unconventional time of 6.58. Forty minutes each way with a quick turn-around could just be squeezed in before darkness fell.

Perhaps more by coincidence than design, there were some spectator facilities available. On one side, the pitch came up against a tarred pathway which provided hard standing, and this side also had four fixed, metal park benches which had been fully occupied since well before kick-off. Some way into the first half I counted 58 people more-or-less watching the game. A roughly three way split between friends and family, groundhoppers and idle local children out for a sly cigarette.

Harold Wood were top of the league and champions-elect, whilst Debden Sports are bottom and already relegated. With Harold Wood kicking off down the slope and scoring in the second minute, we anticipated something of a goal avalanche. It never came, with attack after attack being thwarted by some good away goalkeeping and wayward home shooting, notably in the latter case by Martin St Hillaire - ex of Barking and East Ham. Indeed, it was Debden who equalised against the run, early in the second half. Athletic quickly regained the lead but that was the lot so far as goals were concerned. Overall, an unexpectedly competitive, though clean, game.

Given the circumstances of the venue, it will come as no surprise to hear that there were no refreshment facilities available. Nor was any kind of programme or team sheet issued.

04/20