

**TT No.10: *Stephen Harris*** - Tuesday 15 August 2006; Essex Senior League; Clapton 2-1 Romford. Attendance: 74; Admission £5; Programme issued; FGIF Match Rating 3\*.

Clapton are probably the second nearest senior non-league side to where I live (after Leyton FC) and very easy to get to, the No. 58 bus route connecting us almost door to door, and I have always had a soft spot for them. Yet in recent seasons I have rarely been more than a one or two game a season man. I guess this is because they have not exactly been high-flyers lately and have suffered from more than their fair share of match postponements. Indeed, it always seems something of an achievement to actually see a game there. Anyway, I felt that I could not miss their first home game in the Essex Senior League, a much more interesting league than the deadwood of the Isthmian Division 2 where they have been stuck for the last few years.

The first obstacle was actually getting in to the ground. The uncommunicative gateman seemed unable or unwilling to tell me the entry price. I eventually gave him a fiver, received no change and was waved in. Speaking to others later, I discovered that £5 did seem to be the going rate, but watching the gate for a while I noticed that almost every arrival had some reason or other why they should not pay to get in. Some were successful, some reluctantly paid up and others walked away in disgust, refusing to pay to watch their mates play for Clapton.

The club has an interesting history (as do opposition Romford) - founder members of the Southern League in 1894, then founder members of the Isthmian League in 1905. They once shifted a league fixture against Barking to nearby Upton Park and drew a crowd of over 5,000. I shall be watching for the attendance figure for the corresponding fixture on 25 November this year to see if it hits one-hundredth of that total. They have played at the Old Spotted Dog Ground since 1887 (it is nowhere near Clapton incidentally) but, like the historic pub of the same name next door, the ground is looking very unloved these days. Everything is in poor condition and the surrounds are completely overgrown with long, dry, grass. There are piles of rubbish at several points around the ground, some of which has been half-burned. With a careful step and a sense of adventure it proved possible to get to the small area of covered standing on the far side - but nobody was intrepid enough to attempt to reach the overgrown terracing at the far end. Most made do with the hard standing in front on the clubhouse and the small stand on the south side. The one area which does not currently benefit from a luxurious growth of vegetation is the pitch itself, which is threadbare and bumpy.

Clapton fielded an almost entirely new team from last season's and have hopes of springing a few surprises this season. They did not surprise me though and it was one-way traffic throughout the first half. The only real surprise was that Romford were only one nil up at half time. A penalty a couple of minutes into the second half made it 2-0 before the 'Tons staged something of a comeback. They managed

one goal before, predictably, tempers boiled over at the end and a home player was sent off, leaving the score at 1-2.

Part of the reason that many of the spectators did not stray far from the entrance was that the mythical Clapton match programme was said to be “on the way”. Regulars expressed surprise when copies did actually turn up, just before half time. All fifteen of them. By a fluke I was just passing at the time on the way to the bar and managed to get my mitts on a copy. I’m not sure who were the more disappointed - those who had forked out a pound for what was essentially no more than a listing of the home squad, or those who had been unable to get a copy at all. Oh, and please don’t let any of the above put you off going there - Clapton are a great little club and I’ll certainly be back for more later this season.

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