

TT No.107: *Dean McClean* - Wed 27th December 2006. Kent League Premier Division: **Herne Bay** v Whitstable Town; Res: 0-1; Att: 536; Admission: £6; 36pp-programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 2*.

Visiting family in East Kent enabled me to take in the eagerly anticipated “derby” match between these bitter local rivals.

Although the town is well known for being the place where the first series of the BBC comedy Little Britain was filmed, it also has a small football ground of some note. Winch’s Field, home of Herne Bay, is one of very few grounds at Level 5 to be four-sided. Not only does it have this distinction, it has cover on all four sides. Not bad.

Having said this though, it is a ground that should be a lot better than it is. One stand behind the goal has a large roof panel missing, while the rest of the ground is rather scruffy looking, with weeds protruding from the paving stones at numerous points. The pitch too rather lets the side down as it is undulating and bare in places.

It is not usual to see a queue at the turnstile for a Kent League match a full half-hour before kick-off! I was rather worried at one point as the gateman engaged in unnecessary conversation with the punters. Once inside the ground my programme was cheerily sold to me for £1. An unspectacular read but most of the stats and facts needed to keep one informed of Kent League matters.

Whitstable Town are a team on form. Only two defeats in 26 competitive matches this season and undefeated in the league, the Oystermen are dreaming of their first ever Kent League title and promotion to the Southern League. With a smart, tidy ground, a young energetic team, healthy crowds and potential to attract larger ones, things are certainly looking up for the Natives.

Ten seasons ago it was Herne Bay who were dreaming of pushing up through the pyramid system. The 1990s saw them win the Kent League on four occasions, with the 96/97 season surely one that will never be repeated as Bay won the Kent Senior Trophy, Kent League Cup and Kent League Championship in a matter of weeks to record an historic treble. Somehow though this period of domination, in what was then a very strong competition, failed to yield promotion and the glory days have since disappeared. As Chatham, Folkestone, Ramsgate, Sittingbourne and Maidstone have all progressed to a higher level, Herne Bay have been left behind.

A bumper Christmas crowd of over 500 (compared to 45 v Lordswood on 19/12) saw an even, if somewhat timid local derby which fell woefully short of expectations. A typical derby one might say. Struggling in mid-table, Herne Bay raised their game but could not break down a resolute Whitstable defence superbly marshalled by their young centre-half Josh Maine. It was perhaps cruel on Bay that they were

punished with a late goal by the experienced Steve Marshall, who blasted home expertly after an awful mix up at the back.

If Whitstable do go on to claim their maiden KL Championship they will surely look back on this game as a defining moment of the season.

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