

TT No.37: Stephen Harris - Saturday 30 September 2006; FA Cup 2Q; **Haverhill Rovers** 1-0 Eastbourne Borough. Attendance: 504. Admission £6.00; Programme issued; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

Not wishing to see Leyton Orient further humiliated at Blackpool on Saturday, I scanned the FA Cup fixtures for a good South East tie on a ground that I had not previously visited. Haverhill Rovers against Eastbourne Borough stuck out a mile as an attractive game and for offering a genuine chance of an upset. And Hamlet Croft was a ground I had wanted to visit ever since seeing photographs of it on this very website.

I guess the only reason I had not been before is that Haverhill is a slightly awkward place to get to from London, the obvious bus link from Audley End station being too infrequent to be of any use, forcing travellers the long way around via Sudbury or Cambridge. On my eventual arrival I was a little surprised to see it was a very down-market sort of place, not at all the twee little Suffolk market town I had expected. Worse, there was an alarming number of people walking around in claret and blue football shirts. This is a colour combination to which I have a very serious allergy and I honestly wouldn't have come here if I thought the homesters had that particular problem with their kit. Fortunately, these turned out to be the sort of football 'supporters' whose idea of following the game is to sit in a pub all Saturday afternoon waiting for the Premiership scores to flash up on the TV - their sort was absent from the stadium, where Rovers played in a much more socially-acceptable red and white.

The ground is tree-lined and picturesque and was already busy when I arrived 45 minutes before kick-off. There is a concrete walkway and a rail all the way around, set quite a long way back from the pitch. On the west side, a steep grass bank has been formed when the pitch was levelled and the rail follows the top of this to provide the best view for spectators. In the centre of this side is an elderly stand with rows of black bench seats - the letters HRFC being picked out in white. This side also has the dressing rooms, tea bar and a rather uninviting social club, in three separate brick buildings. Just for today there was also a barbeque tent. With the big crowd mostly gathered on this side and a good following from Eastbourne behind the goal they were attacking, there was a good cup atmosphere. For next season, the club is planning to move to a new sports complex in the town where they hope to be able to play on a 'new generation' plastic pitch.

Eastbourne immediately looked a strong side and forced two quick saves from the home 'keeper. But Rovers then dominated the first half, had a good penalty call turned down and played some impressive football. Borough presumably felt the wrath of their manager at half time and again came out looking strong. More good home goalkeeping kept Rovers in the game before they grabbed a dramatic winner right at the very end. Great stuff. A four-level difference in status between the sides was not obvious and I would expect Rovers to be challenging for promotion

this season. Eastbourne probably paid the price for under-estimating their opponents.

A decent match programme, with plenty of statistics, was issued for one pound. Very commendably this programme, along with many back issues, can already be downloaded for free from the club's website. This is something I occasionally encounter abroad but is a very rare service in England.

06/20