

**TT No.112: Paul Roth** - Tues 16th December 2008; **DOVER FC** vs. **TOOTING & MITCHAM UTD**; Ryman League Premier Division; Res: 3-0; Att: 2760; Entry: Free; Programme: 32 pages, £2; Weather: Mist and cold.

I first espied Dover's Crabble Ground when watching county cricket on the field below and without doubt it is the venue at which I have watched more football matches at than any other. For many years, before this groundhopping bug took hold, I was an ardent supporter, both home and away. Friendships were formed here and without Dover FC I would not have been lucky enough to have met my great friends Alan Beecham and Bob Honeyball. Great, unforgettable days have been spent in Dover before, during and after matches.

From that early sighting, all those years ago, the stadium is in exactly the same position but the ground and its fittings are totally different. Even the pitch has been levelled. The now not-so-new standing areas behind each goal still follow the slope of the old pitch, giving an optical illusion to the unknowing that there is a six-foot incline running from right to left.

This season has seen the opening of the new 'Centre Spot' clubhouse, which is much bigger than the old structure, but I have to say, equally as jejune. There is a new catering hatch which serves from both the inside and outside of this pavilion.

The seated grandstand opposite, that runs the whole length of the pitch, has the press box and Denis Hammond (I was saddened to hear that Denis had passed away quite recently) Directors Suite at its middle, and now boasts a new-this-season seated area above it for those privileged. Alan pointed out to me that actually it isn't that 'privileged, for when it rains the shallow roof doesn't offer much protection.

A new well stocked club shop-cum-boutique is situated on your right after entry, which replaced Chris Collings' programme hut that used to be tucked away in the far corner of the stadium. To the left of the turnstiles is a family seated stand, that in truth was built quite a few years ago. A flexible and extending covered tunnelway is used for the players entrance nowadays, replacing the extraordinary, and possibly unique bridge the gladiators used to pass over. Four floodlight pylons bring high lux lighting to the whole. The club also employ a full-time groundsman, who produces a playing surface that would be the envy of many a football league club, again in complete contrast to the quagmires Crabble used to become in Winter during my visits of yesteryear.

But why am I here this evening, you may well ask? Because it's FREE ENTRY, that's why! With the club having so many home games coming up just before Christmas and with the 'Credit Crunch' biting, the directors thought it would be a gesture of goodwill and thanks to their loyal supporters to allow them, and anybody else for that matter, in for gratis.

What a reward the 2760 fans, who braved a gloomy evening, were treated to, with the home side in sparkling form, playing some stunning, intricate passing football. As a contest, the match was over by half time as Dover led 3 nil. In fact, if it'd been a boxing match the ref would have stopped proceedings by the hour mark, so one-sided was the second period, although somehow Dover couldn't augment to their already winning lead. Wave upon wave of white and black shirted players poured into the Tooting half and only luck (on the visitor's part), poor refereeing, Dover profligacy and great goalkeeping kept the home goal tally down. Each team had a player dismissed during the latter forty-five minutes.

This win, the club's tenth in a row at home, and eighteenth in total so far this campaign, gives them a sixteen-point advantage at the top of the Ryman League. They are champions in waiting, without any shadow of a doubt.

The only thing I had to splash my cash on this evening was the 32-page, glossy colour programme, which retailed for £2.

The decision to allow free entry tonight was magnanimously rewarded by the enormous turn out, and there is only one thing I want to say to all the hierarchy at Dover FC whose idea tonight was - THANK YOU.

FGIF Rating: 5\*.

06/20