

TT No.199: Ian Hill - Sat 4th April 2009; Essex Senior League; **Clapton vs. Stansted**; Res: 2-4; Att: 10; Entry: £5.00; Prog: 16-pp, £1.00.

With a free day in London I had plenty of choice for grounds to visit but I revisited an old favourite, The Old Spotted Dog Ground, home of Clapton FC. It's a bit like "marmite" this ground you either love it or hate it!

I really don't know how this club keeps on going because it always appears to be on its last legs. Thanks to the dedication of the small band of club officials it is still here and hopefully it will carry on for many years to come. The old ground itself is a bit of a dump. There are all types of rubbish strewn inside its interior - a pool table, rubble, litter, furniture, old fridges, tree trunks etc but in a way this adds to the charm. Located in the East End of London, the easiest way to get to the ground is to catch a train to Forest Gate and then a 15-minute walk to the ground. The area is very diverse with most of the shops and businesses reflecting on the various nationalities in the area. The ground itself is very hemmed in and must be a prime site for housing. Gardens back onto three sides of the ground with the clubhouse end backing onto a small factory. The clubhouse is a bit run down and the bar inside has now closed down. The gent's toilets were also a bit dodgy with a big plastic box underneath the urinals to catch the leaks. A small hatch from the clubhouse dispenses refreshments but I didn't see any food available. It was interesting that a notice was posted outside the changing rooms which advised the players to consider the people in the neighbouring houses. It was also repeated on a sign which I think was in Portuguese.

Grass is starting to take over a lot of the ground. It is breaking through the concrete around the pitch and there is a grass bank with three steps of concrete terracing behind one goal. A small steel grandstand is the largest spectator structure on the site with a very rough covered terrace opposite. The dugouts are on this side of the ground with the home one featuring a big hole where the Perspex side has been broken.

Any Clapton game I have watched has always been entertaining. The side is a very multinational one featuring African and Eastern European surnames. With so many different cultures their football is a bit all over the place. It was quite funny to see the Stansted goalkeeper change ends before the kick off. I don't know whether he was injured but he had to hobble to the opposite goal with a very pronounced limp. It appeared that all Clapton had to do was get a shot on target and it would go in. This proved to be the case as they raced to an early 2-0 lead before Stansted hit back to level the scores before half time.

Clapton raced about the pitch with their panic-stricken style of football. One of their defenders hoofed a ball over the large mesh fence that surrounds the ground which resulted in their goalkeeper having a major whinge at him for doing so. It

meant that one of their coaches had to try and find a hole in the fence to recover the ball from a garden.

Stansted took control in the second half two score two further goals to win 4-2.

To their credit Clapton issue a colour 16-page programme. I did feel sorry for them as some of their crowds listed in the programme have been very low this season - 15 (twice), 14, 13 and 10. Today's crowd was also 10 but that was beaten though by the previous week's attendance of 5 at a Mauritius Sports game.

I didn't begrudge paying my £5.00 to get in today. The football may not be brilliant but you do feel that it is helping a club to survive in a small way. It maintains that football is continued to be played at this old venue that was first used in 1897 and hopefully more people will pay a visit to help the struggle for survival.

06/20