

TT No.226: Paul Roth - Sunday 10th May 2009; **Belmonte Thanet Sunday Football League Division 1 Cup Final**; Played at St. Luke's Football Ground, Dumpton, Thanet; CRAMPTONS (SUNDAY) FC vs. SAUNDERS FC; Res: 4-1; Att: 200; Entry: £1 with colourful 4 page programme; Weather: Sunny with a fresh breeze; French Onion Soup: Most probably.

I don't watch Sunday league football; If I did, on my return home I'd find a packed suitcase awaiting me on the doorstep!

But here's an exception, and what a glorious exception it is too. St. Luke's is the culmination, the veritable zenith, of my own personal Groundhopping season. Located just off the A255 Hereson Road, 200 yards to the south of Dumpton Park railway station and opposite the Wyevale Garden Centre, this beautifully manicured ground is completely hidden from view. You have to know it's there, to know it's there! Personally, I have actually known of its existence for some time now. Both Saturday & Sunday local league football is played on its pristine turfs, but before today, I'd not ventured forth to sample a competitive match there.

Just before we have a look around, a bit about of information regarding the area. New housing and the enormous garden centre replaced the famous Dumpton Park Greyhound Stadium many years ago now; there was talk at one time of the arena being adapted to accommodate a merged Margate & Ramsgate FC; with both clubs abhorring this idea, the scheme was always going to be a non-starter. For a time, the Dumpton Market attracted traders and shoppers alike from far and wide; this facility has now decamped into the centre of Ramsgate, about a mile distant, and is a regular feature every Friday morning. For a pre-match drink you could do worse than try the Racing Greyhound opposite; they bang-out a decent Sunday lunch by the look of it, and retail Sharp's Doom Bar! For more atmosphere, stroll the short distance into Dumpton itself and sample the eclecticism of the unaltered and Good Beer Guide accredited Brown Jug. I fear time is ticking for this establishment, especially when the long-standing landlady finally retires.

But now on to St. Luke's: entry is gleaned by taking the unmetalled road to the side of the 'Dumpton Dental Practice'; soon you are at the small gate and only entry point. A specially positioned table and friendly welcome greets all-comers; the £1 entry fee was accompanied by a colourful and informative four-page programme (cup finals only).

Once inside, the arena opens up to reveal a sumptuous facility that is steeped in history. The pavilion and dressing room side boasts a railed-off area; the current structure replaced a dilapidated and long-since burnt down edifice that once stood in the near corner, where the aforementioned dental surgery is presently located.

My photograph of the poster, housed inside the clubhouse, commemorates the reopening of the ground in 1975 after the construction of the new building.

A hanging sign pinpoints the 'Tea Room'. In here you will find.....well, tea! There are also coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, sweets, crisps, a plethora of differing freshly made and wrapped sandwiches, a stack of history, probably French Onion soup and George Milton! George, who proudly told me that he is a descendant of that quintessentially English poet, John Milton, was keen to tell me he has documentary proof to substantiate this ancestral fact, is a walking encyclopaedia regarding the club, which is, incidentally, over one hundred years old. He told me that the ground was donated to the Kent FA by the former mayor of Ramsgate, Eddy Butcher, who was a long-standing trustee. The present Ramsgate FC website recalls 'Ramsgate Press Wanderers' playing in the Kent League Division 2, at Dumpton. As you might expect, especially at this period of time, the 1930's, huge crowds of up to 2000 people were not uncommon.

Today, St Luke's is leased from the KFA for a peppercorn rent. Lately, it's been a real battle to save it, the land being much sought after by developers for housing, which has increasingly encroached hereabouts, swallowing large swathes that once belonged to the club. The 'Tea Room' is festooned with old photos, posters and press cuttings; in all but name, it's a museum!

Carry on around the perimeter and two huge wire-mesh gantries tower above and behind each goalmouth; these, in the main, but not always, capture errant footballs, and draw the visitors' eye. On the cemetery side, two of the sweetest 'technical areas' you'll ever encounter, aback the myriad of graves: headstones and memorials poke their heads inquisitively above the redoubtable stone wall.

The excellent, flat playing surface is worthy of mention too; George told me that this second cup final of the day was in fact the 103rd fixture to be played on it this season!! St. Luke's is the current 'home', this term at least, of Dormans, Active, Brenlan Flooring and Princess of Wales football clubs'.

Research showed me that the final Division 1 league table, the second tier of the BTSFL, had both Cramptons FC and Saunders FC finishing level on 33 points apiece, with an identical 'won, drawn and lost' count. The former prevailing on a superior GD. With that in mind, an even and tight contest was anticipated by your correspondent.

The reality, however, was the exact opposite, as a better-on-the-day Cramptons FC, playing in their colourful strip of yellow and green, dominated from start to finish. One up at tea time, Cramptons (sponsored by the Broadstairs hostelry of the same name) had tripled their advantage by the seventieth minute before Saunders FC (sorry, but I'm none too sure of their provenance) stole a consolation. A late header, following a corner kick, sealed an emphatic victory. The standard of football was on the whole most impressive, played in a good spirit and refereed with sense and the good of the game in mind. The modest trophy was presented to the jubilant winners by Mr. Tim Amans, the league referees' secretary, and was alarmingly and instantaneously snapped in half when one of the over-exuberant victors toppled forward onto it. Blue tack, solder or Super-glue should facilitate its repair; maybe an amalgam of all three!

The great news for us 'hoppers is that there are four more cup finals to be played at this captivating venue, before season's end. Two each, on the 17th and 24th of May respectively, culminating in the leagues' 'Blue Riband' event, the Challenge Cup Final, this year to be contested by Dolphins FC and the Fayreess Hotel FC.

All these matches are "Entry by programme" affairs; I'm sure this will be music to many a 'Traveller's' ear.

The above may all sound overly complimentary, but my inadequate description of what exactly awaits our brethren hardly portrays the true splendour of this magnificent ground. In fact, ignore my utterances entirely and come and be judge and jury for yourselves. You WILL all be spellbound.

For info, match dates, statistics and kick-off times consult the BTSFL website.

FGIF Star Rating: an unequivocal and serendipitous 5*.

06/20