

TT No.74: Paul Roth - Sat 25th October 2008; **OLD BEXLEIANS** vs. Sutton Athletic; West Kent Challenge Shield; Res: 2-7; Att: 25 (?); Programme & Entry: N/A; Weather: Breezy, mild and sunny.

Needing to be home in time to ready myself for the 8pm start of the Birchington and St. Nicholas-at-Wade annual 'Hoedown For the Homeless' charitable extravaganza, this WKCS tie at the Seven Acre Sports Club on Church Manorway, Abbey Wood and the 2.15pm kick-off suited me down to the ground. The Hoedown has become a bolt-on event in our social calendar and something neither my beloved or I want to miss. The event allows my wife the chance to dress-up in her beloved gingham and for me to dust off my Stetson, don a waistcoat and strap on my Chaps!

En-route to Abbey Wood a rare thing happens...I pop into a Wetherspoons pub, the Furze Wren in Bexleyheath, and come away with a good impression. That doesn't happen too often at such establishments, in my experience anyway!

Talking of good impressions, what a true delight the Seven Acre Sports Club is. Older 'hoppers may have visited this venue when RASRA 8 (Royal Arsenal & Recreation Association FC) were the team in residence. Mike Floate's excellent book, "*Football Grounds of South East London*" contains superb photographs of the ground back in 1994 along with a brief description.

Located within earshot and spitting distance of Belmarsh Prison and with ghastly new-build industrial units as a backdrop, plus the scruffy area of Abbey Wood itself, initial impressions of the environs make one thankful for the invention of the 'locking wheel nut'. The well protected football club, however, is almost a well-kept secret and you could easily drive or walk past it without knowing of its existence.

Arriving an hour and a half before kick-off, Richard Masher, the sports club's friendly manager, gave me a guided tour. The 1st X1 pitch is railed with attractive wooden fencing on the car park side and bordered by allotments on its furthest extremity: it is supplemented by dugouts that are conjoined by a small seated and covered spectator area. The magnificent clubhouse, which has two bar areas, a catering facility offering hot food and the changing rooms lay behind the roadside goal. A balcony leads onto the ground, and offers covered protection in inclement weather. Even the smaller 2nd X1 pitch has the same attention to detail and has that same wooden fencing along its far side!

If you do visit, try not to miss the eclectic array of trophies in Richard's office or the extraordinary old map that hangs upon the clubhouse wall, showing the location of old local munitions and industrial works in the area. It must date back at least 100 years or more! Today, the club and land are all family owned and has a membership of just 90. The friendly lady serving behind the bar explains to me

the club's strict election rules and how they have to have known a prospective member for at least five years before they will even consider candidacy.

I'm joined for the game by fellow 'Traveller' Bob Powell and we are fortunate enough to witness a goal fest that is completely dominated by the lads playing in green and white, Sutton Athletic, from Sutton-at-Hone, near Dartford. Two nil up at half time, somehow, they allow OB's to score twice into their net but add a further five themselves and the truth of the matter is that if the linesmen hadn't been quite so on-the-ball, it could have been a lot, lot more. Still, nine goals on the day isn't a bad return? After seeing Metrogas hit seven a couple of weeks ago at Blackheath Utd., in the same competition, it's now official...I love the West Kent Challenge Shield!

This is a real gem of a football ground, found in the most unlikely of surroundings, and the very fact that it is still here is testament to the love and devotion held for it by the few that work so tirelessly to maintain it. I adored it!

FGIF Rating: 5*.

06/20