

TT No.172: Paul Roth - Sat February 27th 2010; Surrey Elite League; **Old Rutlishians FC** vs. Battersea Ironsides FC; Res: 2-5; Att: 30; Programme & Entry: N/A; Weather: Mild and Sunny; Altitude: The Old Rutlishians Poplar Road Sports Ground is 16m (52.493 ft) above sea level.

"We've not had a game called off here for more than 20 years and the match versus Battersea Ironsides will definitely be on tomorrow".

Of the 81 e-mails I sent to various clubs during the course of Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, it was only Old Rutlishians team manager Graham Clayton's response, annotated above, that appeared in the least bit optimistic as to the chances of play come Saturday afternoon.

Actually, I can't remember the last time I didn't have to contact a club representative to ascertain if my preferred match was going to go ahead or not, so bad has this Winter's weather been. On a different tack, it's interesting to note that only 50 replies to my correspondences were acknowledged. If I had more time wouldn't it be fun to compile a Pie Chart, or some such scholarly diagram, to more graphically illustrate such amazing statistics?

As luck would have it, my choice of game today turned out to be inspired, but before I get on to outlining the club itself, a few words about my pre-match, fluidic preamble. SW London isn't my favourite haunt when it comes to seeking out new pubs, a truism borne out by my brief stopover in the Queens Head, Mitcham. Found on Cricket Green, it sounds idyllic but isn't! On the other hand, Woodies, an atmospherically converted cricket pavilion at the end of Thetford Road in New Malden, is!

Old Rutlishians FC are members of the Surrey Elite League, a competition I've dipped my big toe into previously and thoroughly enjoyed. Their tidy sports ground is located in Poplar Road, Merton, south London and accommodates both rugby union and football. The rugby club play their matches on the pitch nearest the pavilion whilst the football team's ground is found 53 yards further south. The whole is surrounded by residential housing, which gives the venue an enclosed feel; it's one of those places that you have to know it's there is to know it's there! I'll be honest, I wasn't expecting that much but I'm pleased to admit my faux pas.

The facilities are excellent with the vibrant, seventy-year-old clubhouse, which incidentally sells real ale, being the hub of activities on matchdays. The well-equipped football field has permanent dugouts situated on its furthest flank, is fully roped off as-per league criteria, has high netting effecting a well-needed barrier between the playing area and neighbouring housing encompassing the necessary three sides and a glorious wooden, covered lean-to cum stand in one corner. Striped yellow and blue netting, the club's colours, adorns the white goal frames.

Old Rutlishians Association Football Club was founded in 1907, by ex-pupils of the nearby Rutlish School but folded in 1932 when rugby became the chosen Winter sport of the Old Rutlishians. Reformed in 1990, the club has made steady progress through the Surrey leagues and is currently holding its own in the recently formed SEL. Graham and club president Gavin Lennard had warmly welcomed me upon my arrival, the latter generously furnished me with a magnificent, fascinating brochure that beautifully tells and depicts the Association's one hundred year history.

The SEL table currently shows Battersea Ironsides FC comfortably top. This statistic notwithstanding, I was hopeful of a close-fought encounter. Those hopes were dashed as early as the second minute, when the men in green from Earlsfield grabbed the lead. Two more strikes ensued before OR's secretary, Paul Hull, reduced arrears with the game's best goal. A slick, interchanging passing movement culminated with a powerful, unstoppable shot past the visitors' stopper. So, 1-3 at teatime. Possession of the football had been pretty equal throughout that initial period and Old Ruts must have harboured realistic ambitions about getting back into the match, if they could only score quickly again themselves after the restart. That wasn't to be either, the 'Irons' adding a nail-in-the-coffin, victory-clinching penalty on fifty minutes. A fifth followed, before that man Hull rounded off the afternoon's scoring with the game's second-best goal, a controlled chest-down followed by a pin-point, left-footed drive. Another day could well have seen a different result; without a shadow of a doubt the 2-5 score-line flattered the away side.

After another abysmal, rain-sodden week, I'm eternally grateful to have found such a wonderful club to visit and such an entertaining game to watch. There was more than a soupcon of worry festering in my mind on Friday morning that I might have had to endure yet another Saturday, tuned into the cartoon network!

FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

06/20