

TT No. 191: Paul Roth - Sat March 20th 2010; Kent County League Div. 1 East; **AFC Sheppey** vs. Sheerness East FC; Res: 0-0; Att: 90; Entry and programme: N/A; Weather: Windy, overcast with heavy drizzle at times; Altitude: The Co-operative Sports & Social Club ground is 3m (9.842 ft) above sea level.

I've been much busying myself this week, sorting out the garden after the rigours of Winter, tidying and sweeping out our shed and most importantly of all, seasoning our crepe pans. A much-used ditty at this juncture fully explains the importance of this time-consuming culinary exercise:

*"Crepe pans in Spring, saucepans in Fall,
season them well and there'll be food for us all"*

My not inconsiderable exertions had left me not wanting to travel too far today and what better footballing opportunity should present itself to me than one of the great, rumbustious Kentish football derbies. Over the years I've witnessed them all: Margate-Ramsgate, Dover-Folkestone, Gravesend-Dartford, Maidstone-Tonbridge, Sittingbourne-Sheppey United, Metrogas-Samuel Montague Boys' Club; that list can now be augmented by AFC Sheppey-Sheerness East.

This particular KCL Division 1 East fixture holds added intrigue as AFCS are playing at yet another venue (they moved from Holm Place in Halfway earlier this year), namely the Co-operative Sports and Social Club ground in St. Georges Avenue. One of the happier aspects of this relocation is that the club has moved back nearer its former home of Botany Road.

The chime of a quarter to one from our hallway clock signalled my departure and meant I'd been able to partake of Tiffin with the good lady; she does love these local tarriances, as of course I'm home in time for high tea and postprandial cocktails.

Once described by a friend, who admittedly had drunk one too many Tequila Sunrises, as..."That bejewelled outcrop set in the glistening silver tiara that is the Thames Estuary', the Isle of Sheppey isn't quite so poetically bewitching as his eulogy might suggest. That said, is there anywhere in the northern hemisphere more elegant and sophisticated to while away a Summer's evening, luxuriate in an Alabama Slammer and watch the sun set, than the shimmering resort of Leysdown-On-Sea at the Riviera's north-eastern-most tip?

Landscapes, terrains and environments are constantly mutating, a sentiment borne out by my drive across the relatively-new Swale Bridge. This magnificent, four-lane structure, opened in July 2006 at a cost of £102.446 million, instantly transformed the logistical infrastructure of the island and has speeded the flow of traffic, to

and from, along the A249. The old Kingsferry Crossing still remains, conveying rail passengers from and back to mainland Britain, its roadway utilised if high winds ever necessitate the closure of the new edifice. When viewed side by side, the two constructions make for an historical and pictorial study in design engineering. Sheerness-on-Sea town centre has little to commend it but venture into Blue Town's antiquarian High Street, a few hundred yards north of the railway terminus, and you're now in the atmospheric former dock area. The Red Lion is, as ever was, an oasis for the cotton-mouthed traveller.

When I first dipped my toe into Kent League football, Sheppey United FC always featured strongly for honours and since their formation nearly 120 years ago, they've played in various competitions, including the Southern League, which they last graced during the 1989/90 season, when they unfortunately finished bottom of the southern section.

Since losing Botany Road to the developers, their fortunes have waned considerably, despite the highlight of winning the KL championship in 1995 when ground-sharing with Faversham Town FC, and hit rock-bottom when they ceased to exist altogether in 2006. Just after the turn of the century Sheppey withdrew from the then Bass Brewers Kent League and a non-playing period of three years ensued. AFC Sheppey took the former club's place in the KCL.

Now playing football at a fourth venue, on the island, there is real hope that, with the backing of a consortium of wealthy businessmen, Sheppey United FC might be reborn as early as next season. The Co-op ground has potential for being turned into something better than it is and after the turbulence of the past twenty years, hope abounds. My fingers are crossed!

The facilities at the ground are rather good and the hoarding on the pavement, advertising the match, outside the club's narrow entrance augurs well for what lies within. An enormous club building, not unlike Sheerness East's own clubhouse, is the focal point (not somewhere I would personally choose to linger) and is supplemented on the field of play with an unexpected section of metallic railing. 'Mobile' goal frames were wheeled into position before kick-off and with a larger-than-anticipated crowd assembled, expectancies were running high.

It's a shame all that anticipation was, for the most part, carried off by the vicious winds that screeched and swirled across and around the arena throughout what was always an absorbing contest. The famous red and white striped jerseys had most of the play but neither side truly mustered a telling shot at their opponents' goal, so resolute and secure were both defences. The game's five bookings in no way portray the 'Esprit de Corps' in which this encounter was contested, understandably, as most of the combatants are on first name terms!

The excess of yellow cards shouldn't be seen to demean referee Valentine Anekwe's excellent performance either; his officiation was first rate, with each booking totally justified. East almost secured the three points in the final minute, when a flashing header from their No. 9 grazed a post, but a draw ultimately was about right.

My first Isle of Sheppey derby had been thoroughly entertaining, going to prove once again that I don't have too far to travel to enjoy my football fix. Now, who's for 'Crepe Suzette'?

FGIF Star Rating: 4*.

06/20