

TT No.52: *Paul Roth* - Sat 10th October 2009; Surrey Elite Intermediate League; **Oxted & District** vs. Wandgas Athletic; Res: 1-1; Att: 70(?); Prog: 8pp - free, as was entry; Weather: Sunny/mild; Altitude: Master Park is 103m above sea level.

Whenever Saturday comes around, I always look forward to the day out at my chosen football match and all the fun that goes with it; whether the game be good, bad or indifferent, I always seem to come home having thoroughly enjoyed myself. Unless I've been travelling on public transport, that is!

Every so often a surprising, crackerjack of a venue presents itself and my recent visit to Master Park, the home of Oxted & District FC, was just such an occasion. At 103 meters, 337.926 feet, above sea level, the ground is the most elevated yet that I have reported upon this season.

My day's 'fun' began outside the Malt Shovel public house, in Eynsford, waiting over an hour for its doors to open!

Every year there are always one or two Kentish entries in the latest edition of the Good Beer Guide that I'm not 100% sure if I've supped in before, and having drunk in every annotated pub in my adopted county since that noble publication's inception, in 1974, I feel compelled to keep up my sad record. Two more hostelries were tried and tested en-route to Oxted and I can commend the characterful White Bear at Frickleshole, in Surrey, to you all. Alas, the Diamond, a misnomer I should point out, at Hurst Green, which incidentally dangles the carrot of discounted Real Ale to card carrying CAMRA members, doesn't come with the same recommendation.

Club secretary, Peter King, had answered all my e-mail enquiries regarding programmes, kick-off time, state of play etcetera, etcetera with a spontaneity I very infrequently encountered from such officials, perfectly illustrating how efficiently this lovely little football club is run.

The small Surrey town of Oxted lies at the foot of the North Downs and is bisected by the busy A25. On its southerly side is the 'Old Town', where two ex-GBG pubs, the Crown and the George, sit cheek-by-jowl on its narrow High Street.

Across the way, and half a mile along, lies the 'newer' Oxted, where numerous black and white, timber-framed buildings and a selection of eclectic shops line the attractive thoroughfare, all the way up to the railway station and beyond. The town is of course world famous for its annual pram race. To cap it all, there's even a bloody Wetherspoons!

But for us football aficionados, the big 'Green' on the corner of Church Lane is what is of most interest. If driving to the club, their car park is easily missed as you pass the cricket ground on your left; I didn't spot it! Before footballing ephemera is put in place it would be difficult imagining this space, which is virtually part of the High Street and has the chalky, Down-land and a quintessentially English church

spire as a theatrical backdrop, as anything more than just an idyllic green lung dotted here and there with oak trees (Oxted, or 'Acstede', literally means 'Where oaks grew').

Once roped-off and with smart red and black netting affixed to the goal furniture, the venue is transformed into a nonpareil setting of footballing grandeur. It is a beautiful setting and on such a glorious day, veritably resonated with Autumnal splendour. The recent heavy rains have brought a refreshed vivacity to the playing surface with the game never in any doubt; Peter had actually told me earlier "We hardly ever have a postponement." I didn't espy teatime comestibles for sale, but it's nearer and easier to stroll onto the High Street to purchase these anyway, than trek back the arduous 168 yards to the pavilion!

The club are issuing a smart, 8-page programme this term, an inducement for a sojourn for a lot of 'hoppers I'm sure, and is even given away free of charge. On the back cover is an advert for 'Turnstiles' barber shop, a soccer-themed gents' hairdresser located on the main drag, who are the club's main sponsor. No gate monies were collected, but it's nigh-on impossible to do so anyway, as that would surely be tantamount to begging on the public highway!

Both Oxted & District FC and Wandgas Athletic FC have come up from the Surrey South Eastern Intermediate Division 1 this season, the former as champions, but are struggling at present to come to terms with life in their new surroundings. On the evidence of this match however, it won't be long before both teams are moving in the right direction, away from the lower echelons of the SEL league table.

A goal for each team (Oxted's opener being a speculative long-range screeching shot, from Michael Bamforth's right boot, that seemed to dip extraordinarily at the last moment, was cancelled out by a neat strike from the purple-clad visitors a few minutes later) in the opening forty five minutes of play meant that honours finished even on the day; the larger-than-I-might-have-expected crowd of 70 or so went home slightly disappointed, as O&D maybe could have pinched it the dying moments.

The footballer Ian Pearce, a Premiership medal winner with Blackburn Rovers FC in 1995, started his career at the club and returned briefly in 2008, before moving on to play for Kingstonian FC, is fondly remembered and rightly held in high esteem at the club. Currently, he is assistant player-manager at League 2 outfit Lincoln City. An interview, that was broadcasted on 'SKY SPORTS' featuring Ian, plus quite a chunk about the club itself, can be found on the club's remarkable and unbelievably sophisticated website; a true labour of love if ever I have seen one and perhaps the best football club site I have ever come across.

Master Park and Oxted & District FC is a real find, and the day, venue and match was thoroughly enjoyed by all present, including myself, underlining my opening sentence. Amongst the assembled were a smattering of 'old' faces who always seem to appear from out of the woodwork when word gets out around about such wondrous locations. So sorry gentlemen, I meant 'familiar faces'...didn't I?

FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

06/20