

**TT No.177: Justin Holmes** - Sat 12th February 2011; **Norton Sports** v Herne Bay; Kent League Prem Division Cup Q-F 2 Leg; Venue: Woodstock Park, Sittingbourne; Score: 2-3 (2-5 on aggregate); Admission: £4.00; Programme: £1.00; Attendance: 106; Match Rating: 4.

For today's fare, I headed to the Medway towns in north Kent to visit the newest venue in the Kent League to watch an intriguingly poised Premier Division Cup tie between two clubs who were landlords and tenants prior to this season, Herne Bay visiting Norton Sports in the Quarter Final second leg of the competition.

Norton Sports' new home, Woodstock Park, is about a half hour walk south from Sittingbourne rail station, just into the countryside beyond the extremities of the town and is a very neat and tidy complex, with plentiful parking outside and one walks past the fairly impressive clubhouse on entering the ground.

This is the first season that the ground has hosted senior football, Norton Sports having lodged at Winch's Field, the home of today's visitors Herne Bay for the last two seasons since their promotion from the Kent County League. So it's not surprising that facilities are still somewhat basic here at the moment, with only the length of the pitch by the clubhouse and behind one of the goals open to spectators, although all with tiled hard standing, and a slight bank outside the clubhouse makes for a reasonable vantage point to watch the action. There are two uncovered stands, a small one close to the entrance and clubhouse, and a larger one behind one of the goals. In this day and age, a surprising feature is the lack of floodlights, which caused the early 1.30 kick off today. Presumably Norton Sports have made a firm commitment to install lights as soon as practicably possible, although there is no sign of their installation currently. The basic facilities in no way detract from a pleasant rural, neat and peaceful feel to the ground.

Note should be made of a very reasonable £4.00 admission fee, which is one of the cheapest charges I have encountered at this level and compares particularly well with other Kent League clubs, a league in which one encounters some of the highest charges at County League top division level. The 24-page programme was a pretty reasonable effort with a minimum of advertising and plenty of facts to digest, although short of reading material if I were to be super critical. Strangely, there was a match report of a game four games ago, but not of the last three.

Herne Bay brought a 2-0 lead from the first leg, and away goals would only count if scores were level at the end of extra time. Herne Bay are always one of the strongest teams in the Kent League and this season is no different, as they are in second place in the league, just two points behind leaders Erith Town but with a game in hand. Norton Sports are having a reasonable season as well, in seventh place in the 16-team league but have lost their last three games.

The home side needed to claw a goal back early in the match to give themselves a realistic chance of turning the tie around, and that's exactly what they did, when an Ashley Baverstock drive was diverted into his own net by Toby Ashmore on four minutes. They should have extended their lead, having had a surprising share of attacking and chances against a good side who were sloppy for most of the first half. However, a hammer blow for Norton Sports came five minutes before half time, when a fierce shot by Byron Walker could only be parried upwards by Nick Shaw and into the net. Ryan Rook gave Norton Sports renewed hope on 73 minutes, with a low shot after a previous shot had deflected into his path seven yards out. But with ten minutes remaining, the home side seemingly threw away any chance they might have had forcing extra time when a free kick deep in their own half was passed straight to Herne Bay's Rhys Lawson, who strode forward to set up substitute Darren Marsden for a simple finish, and the visitors ensured a win on the day as well as in the tie overall when Marsden struck again in the final minute with a delightful measured finish from the edge of the area into the top corner. So, in the end, a spirited display by Norton Sports to try to retrieve the tie, but ultimately the two-goal defeat in the first leg proved fatal, and it was Herne Bay who progressed to a semi-final showdown with Corinthian.

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