

TT No.8: *Justin Holmes* - Sun 25th July 2010; **George Piper Courier Cup Tournament**; Venue: Culverden Stadium, Tunbridge Wells; Admission: £5.00; Programme: £1.00; Attendance: 250; Match Rating: 3.

A rare Sunday afternoon's football entertainment was provided by the second day of the revamped George Piper Courier Cup. In previous years, the cup has been contested as a one-off match between Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge Angels, who have traditionally sent their reserve team (which has usually been sufficient to win the Cup), and this year was no different. However, this year, Crowborough Athletic and Rusthall were also invited, with the format being two semi-finals on the Saturday with the final and third place play-off taking place on the Sunday. In the semi-finals, Tunbridge Wells beat Crowborough 3-0, with Rusthall beating Tonbridge on penalties after a 1-1 draw. There is no doubt that this competition added a welcome competitive edge to what would otherwise be meaningless pre-season friendly matches, with the four teams coming from a 7 mile radius of Tunbridge Wells, with therefore many connections between the clubs, yet coming from four different leagues - Tunbridge Wells from the Kent League, Rusthall from the Kent County League, Crowborough from the Sussex League, and Tonbridge Angels from the Ryman League - or perhaps more accurately considering the team they fielded, the Suburban League.

Culverden Stadium, which is located about a 20 minute walk from Tunbridge Wells train station, will always be one of my favourite grounds at County League level, with a pleasant enclosed feel to it surrounded as it is by trees and set in a completely peaceful location down a short track well away from roads and housing. An ageing stand runs along one length of the pitch, half of which provides seating, the other half terracing. Steps of terracing behind one of the goals provides an excellent vantage point, with hard standing around the rest of the pitch. Anyone who has been to the Culverden won't be surprised to hear that the pitch was in a dreadful state - rock hard, dusty, bobbly and with long dry grass making the bounce and roll of the ball unpredictable. Of course, the prolonged hot and dry weather has done the groundsman no favours. A colour programme was produced for the tournament providing good basic information on all four teams competing.

Crowborough Athletic 2 v 3 Tonbridge Angels - Third Place Play-Off.

The first game of the day was the third place play off, between Crowborough Athletic and the reserve team of Tonbridge Angels. With Crowborough fielding mostly a first team, they would have been expected to have been the stronger side, and indeed Crowborough for the most part dominated the first half and creating the better chances, although somehow Tonbridge went into the interval with a two-goal lead. They soon made that three within minutes of the restart, and the game looked dead and buried, particularly with Crowborough players seeming to lose interest on a hot, muggy afternoon. However, they pulled a goal

back with a fluke goal when a cross from out wide sailed over the keeper and into the net, and a close finish was ensured with 7 minutes remaining when Crowborough scored a second. Despite a couple of good chances to equalise, Tonbridge held on for the win and the rather hollow prize of claiming third place in the competition.

Tunbridge Wells 1 v 2 Rusthall - Final

After an hour's break came the final of the competition between the two senior clubs of Tunbridge Wells. With so many connections between the clubs, this was always likely to be a keenly fought affair, one for which Tunbridge Wells would have had to have been favourites, with the game being played at their home ground and being from a higher league - indeed, Rusthall play at intermediate level, but there was plenty of incentive for Rusthall to create an upset with several of their players having played for Tunbridge Wells, and their manager, John Ronaldson, played for Tunbridge Wells with distinction. During the first half, the superiority of Tunbridge Wells certainly showed as they spent most of the half in possession and had most of the chances, and it was something of a surprise that they only went into the break one goal to the good. The second half carried on in the same vein - whereas Rusthall played reasonably well, there seemed to be very little threat of getting back on level on terms until the 73rd minute with a slightly controversial goal, when just at the moment the Tunbridge Wells keeper caught the ball, the Rusthall forward headed the ball out of his hands into the net. For me it was a good goal as the ball wasn't under the keeper's control, and it was refreshing to see, for once, the goalkeeper not get the benefit of the doubt. At this point the game completely transformed as Rusthall pushed for the winner, which they got ten minutes from time when a cross was emphatically headed home. Tunbridge Wells threatened to score intermittently throughout the second half but Rusthall held on to huge cheers at the final whistle to claim the trophy and the local bragging rights.

This was an entertaining day's football, and a great way of adding a little competitiveness and interest to pre-season games, and the warm weather certainly helped make the occasion even more enjoyable. Perhaps games with 30 minute halves might be a better system and fairer on the players considering the small squad sizes of the competing teams, and presuming the competition is repeated in future years, although Tonbridge Angels are potentially a big draw considering their Ryman League status, all the time they send reserve teams for the Cup, it would seem more worthwhile to invite another local team in their place, such as Sevenoaks or East Grinstead.

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