

TT No.144: Paul Roth - Sat January 14th 2012; Kent Air Ambulance Intermediate Challenge Shield Quarter-Final; **HILDENBOROUGH ATHLETIC FC** vs. SHEPPEY UNITED FC; Res: 1-1 at 90 mins and aet; 3-4 on pens Att: 20; Programme: 16-pps £1 incl. admission; Altitude and global location: The Racecourse Sports Ground, The Slade, Tonbridge is 34m (111.549 ft) above sea level: at latitude 51 degrees, 11 mins N; 0 degrees, 15 mins E (location derived from centre circle); SATNAV: TN9 1DS.; Weather: Seasonably cold and gloriously sunny; Club Shop: N/A; Local MP: John Stanley (Cons); My day's carbon footprint legacy: 13.7.

My trip today to The Racecourse Sports Ground, the current home of Kent County League side Hildenborough Athletic, is unbelievably the 7th different venue at which I've watched sport in the River Medway -adjacent town of Tonbridge (the village of Hildenborough itself lies two miles to the north, on the B245). The statistic even surprises myself.

My favourite arena of the heptad is actually the only one where I've not watched football: Tonbridge School's 1st XI cricket ground - The Head - is as quintessentially English as it comes, and there can few places more glorious to watch mine, and my wife's, favourite pastime. Tonbridge Angels FC's former Angel Ground does however come a close second.

When I was 12-years-old I did actually play cricket at the independent school (back then such institutions were known as 'Public Schools'), when representing Lancing College's 3rd XI, but the mismatched rubber was over so quickly there was even time for a re-match, which again the Tonbridgians won with consummate alacrity. Why I should recall so vividly being dismissed in both innings for a 'Golden Duck' (on the first occasion I was 'Yorked', by the quickest delivery I've ever faced; second time around I got a top edge and was caught at short leg trying to pull a long-hop into Knole Park) all these years later is slightly perplexing, especially given that I have absolutely no recollection of what the good lady and I ate for our luncheon only a fortnight ago last Wednesday! Thinking about it, do you suppose I can count that nondescript school playing field as venue No. 8?

Sporting arenas notwithstanding, Tonbridge is a lovely place to visit, at any time of the year. With its historically important 11th century castle; famous school that's endowed with such outstanding sporting amenities to which I alluded earlier; its multitudinous pubs and quality eateries; excellent shopping opportunities and riverside location, the township is a worthy stand-alone tourist destination. That said, isn't it strange that I still perceive the place as a poor relation to nearby Tunbridge Wells.

After the purchase of a Kango, then imbibing refreshing 'tinctures' in the town's finest alehouse accompanied by my somellier friend, and fellow Traveller, Keith, 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', Aslan, it was time for my 168-hour football fix. The extensive Racecourse Ground, with its myriad of pitches, is a five-minute

walk from the High Street. It's never going to win awards for its aesthetic beauty, but the setting 200 yds from the castle, resplendent with its grandiose Motte-and-Bailey gatehouse, and the vista of distant Bidborough Ridge, does at least go some way to compensate for the club's lack of on-field facilities. The meagre installations hereabouts do harbour a surprise though; the changing room block - from where the 16-page programme was available for purchase - houses a cafe that sold hot food and drinks, along with all manner of confectionery. Look out too for the incredible recent photos of the Racecourse Ground under floodwater. Apart from the lined-off playing area and goal furniture, there are no other amenities.

This Kent Air Ambulance Intermediate Challenge Shield quarter-final tie between the sides presently occupying 2nd and 3rd place in KCL Division 1 appealed to me, especially with the scheduled kick-off time being 1.30 (meaning I'd be home in plenty of time to watch 'Winter Wipeout'). The fact that the homesters are currently scoring goals for fun - they notched up their third 11-0 home win of the campaign just last weekend - also went a long way to pointing me in a south-westerly direction.

Hildenborough Athletic and Sheppey United are, on today's showing at least, two evenly matched outfits, reflected in the 1-1 stalemate, aet, of this hugely entertaining encounter. The islanders had gone in at teatime a goal to the good, but 'Boro cancelled out this slender advantage with 15 minutes remaining, following a spell of sustained pressure.

Not one given to lachrymosity, my eyes did well up when no further scores meant a period of 30 minutes extra-time. The match petered out as a spectacle from this point in, as both teams ran out of puff.

Kicks from the penalty mark inevitably ensued, which saw the visitors progress to the semi-finals when the yellow and blue's No. 7 blasted the game's very last kick, and his club's fifth spot-kick, high and not so handsomely over the crossbar.

Thus, the ex-Southern League side take a further step towards some silverware, and that coveted prize: their very own Air Ambulance!

FGIF Star Rating 5*.

07/20