

**TT No. 180: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 3rd March 2012; **Leatherhead** v Harrow Borough; Isthmian Premier; Res: 2-0; Att: 275; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

Lack of Isthmian League 'ticks' does not keep me awake at night. I doubt I've done 15 grounds in what (rightly or wrongly) I regard as an 'Inside the M25' competition. London is among my least favourite destinations, and the thought of slogging down to the capital from North Yorkshire on the M1 or A1 to watch a game of Isthmian League standard before trekking all the way back again on the same day holds little appeal; even less in our age of austerity, with its crazy petrol prices. However, a long weekend in Surrey, accommodation provided by the de facto in-laws, was too good an opportunity to let slip. Those generous travel managers at East Coast again rewarded my girlfriend's unstinting loyalty to their York-King's Cross service by handing over two free first-class rail tickets, and her father gallantly agreed to let me borrow his car. With a pledge to drive carefully, the Isthmian League world was my oyster!

I've always had a fancy for Leatherhead. I'm old enough to remember the 1974-75 FA Cup season of 'The Leatherhead Lip'. Maverick striker Chris Kelly, an upholsterer as well as an upstart, was apt to give it large with his gob to national TV audiences as the Tanners battled past Bishop's Stortford, Colchester United and Brighton & Hove Albion to earn a fourth-round tie with Leicester City, then in the First Division. With Motty, the Match of the Day cameras and more than 32,000 fans looking on, Peter McGillicuddy, a plumber, and England Amateur international Kelly scored early in a match which had been switched to Filbert Street. Just before half-time, Kelly waltzed round Foxes keeper Mark Wallington, but saw Steve Earle clear his shot off the line. City, doubtless rollicked during the interval, ensured their superior fitness and talent paid off in the second half and emerged relieved 3-2 winners. Such was the impact made by Kelly, on and off the pitch, he earned a professional contract with Millwall, only to fade from the nation's consciousness with the same rapidity he had impinged upon it. This time of year, I like a match with something riding on it for both teams. Harrow Borough's visit to Leatherhead was a classic six-pointer. The hosts were fourth-bottom in a league in which four go down, and Harrow immediately above them, albeit four points better off. Leatherhead's last five outings had garnered a single point: the epitome, then, of a 'must win' fixture.

Fetcham Grove is a smashing ground. It boasts a semi-rural parkland setting close to the River Mole and shares a valley-floor site with a leisure centre and facilities for cricket, tennis and (here's another throwback to the Seventies) skateboarding. I can't be the only forty-something who was bored rigid on the bus ride to school by mates banging on about gullwing trucks and other skate dullard techno babble. In Kelly's day, Leatherhead - a post-Second World War merger of Leatherhead Rose

and Leatherhead United - attracted crowds of 1,500, therefore it's an impressive set-up.

A tree-lined drive leads to a grand turnstile block, beyond which, on this particular afternoon, Fetcham Grove shimmered invitingly in bright sunshine the weather forecasters had omitted to mention. Sometimes, though rarely, it's great when they get it wrong. Past a sizeable car park, a rickety collection of stands runs along the near (west) touchline. Much of the cover is divided into small bays, each with five rows of black plastic tip-up seats. The section at the near end is terracing. The whole lot suffers from a bewildering number of roof columns. Fabulous to look at maybe, but obstruction-free viewing is impossible. The tea shack amidships did a roaring trade on its first day under new management - a chef from a gastro pub in Bookham, no less. Tacked onto the rear of the stands is an equally muddled huddle of low structures which contains the bar (surprisingly bright and modern), the dressing rooms, a tiny boardroom (I snuck in for a peek) and what appears to be a children's nursery. A bijou club shop is squeezed into a triangular corner between the bar and the stand. A modern cantilever stand, flanked by terracing, dominates the north end. It is dedicated to the late Bernard Edwards, a former vice-chairman. The enthusiasm and industry of his family guaranteed the Tanners' survival during tough times over several decades. The east side, where rather neat LFC-labelled plastic dugouts are positioned, has hardstanding at the foot of a grassy bank, whilst the south end is extremely narrow, with barely room for a couple of steps of terracing. Netting suspended from poles keeps the ball within bounds. A paved snicket affords access to the car park from this end. Behind is a park football pitch and floodlit tennis courts. A spotless wooden fence encloses this wonderfully tidy enclosure, which is fringed delightfully by tall trees on all but the main stand side. The River Mole (shockingly shallow; no wonder there's a drought in the South East) flows beyond the east side of the ground. I was happy to see the floodlights are of the traditional non-league variety - the spindly sort one used to encounter everywhere, but which are now an endangered species.

The Leatherhead fans were a friendly, cheerful bunch. The woman on the turnstile told me she used to work in the local branch of WH Smith and served Michael Caine's wife regularly. Hollywood heavyweight Caine ("a lovely fella") lives in a big house (natch) on the edge of town. Having skimmed (with dismay) its Wikipedia entry, I found Leatherhead to be much nicer than I was expecting, but can't help feeling it's an odd place for someone as wealthy as Caine to lay such an expensive hat. The chap who kindly let me in long before the other punters to take a few crowd-free ground snapshots enjoyed reminiscing about the Chris Kelly era, but admitted: "We're really struggling."

Prior to this game, the Tanners had won just seven times in the league, and gallows humour was much in evidence. But in spite of the moans and groans, their supporters really cared and celebrated this crucial victory with enormous gusto. Not, during the early stages, that a home win looked remotely possible. Harrow were the better team for much of the first half, but fell behind in the 29th minute to a superb headed goal from Vernon Francis. Moments later, Francis rattled the

crossbar with a volley from the edge of the penalty area. Leatherhead, sensing Harrow posed little threat, grew in confidence as the game wore on, and clinched the three points in the 70th minute. Tommy Hutchings displayed fast feet in a tight spot close to the dead ball line and his low cross was toe-poked into the far corner from 10 yards by the unmarked Charlie Holness, who had come on as substitute to make his Tanners debut. There were a couple of scares at the other end, but a third Leatherhead goal always looked the likelier scenario. “A disgrace - every last one of you,” was the verdict of one disgruntled Harrow fan as the men in red trudged off at the final whistle.

Nice (at last) to get Fetcham Grove done. It wasn't anything like I imagined it would be. My mind's eye indicated a scruffy ground shoehorned between industrial premises. How wrong can you be? Perhaps I need to rethink my assessment of 'That London'.

07/20