

TT No.227: Paul Roth - Sat April 14th 2012; **Gas Recreation** v Harwich & Parkeston; Essex & Suffolk Border League Prem; Res: 2-1; Att: 35; Entry and Programme: N/A; Altitude and global location: Colchester Sports and Social Club, Bromley Road is 33m (108.267ft) above sea level: at latitude 51 degrees, 53.8 min N; 0 degrees, 56.4 mins E (position derived from centre circle); SAT NAV: CO4 3JE; Weather: Sunny and mild; Club shop: N/A; Local MP: Bob Russell (Lib Dem); My day's carbon footprint legacy: 13.6.

April the 11th 1953, ten to three in the afternoon. Eric Tyrell leads his Harwich and Parkeston side into a sunbathed Empire Stadium to contest the 49th FA Amateur Cup Final. Their opponents are the Oxford and Cambridge combined University side Pegasus. The two teams are welcomed onto Wembley's emerald surface to rapturous applause by an expectant crowd of 100,000.

What a difference 21,554 days make! 35 is the summation of this afternoon's salmagundi of onlookers. Present-day Shrimpers' captain, Michael McLachlan, escorted his charges not only onto Gas Recreation FC's tidy Bromley Road arena, but into a world footballing-wise, and in nearly every other respect, unrecognisable to that of yesteryear.

The former Eastern Counties League giants nowadays ply their trade in the humbler surroundings of the Essex and Suffolk Border League, Premier Division. Their fall from grace is well documented, but at least they're still in existence, and in the process of rebuilding. Ongoing financial problems however prohibit a return to the Eastern Counties League anytime soon.

That's more than can be said for the fabled winged-horse, the offspring of Centaur and Falcon that captivated many a football audience during the early 1950s, but which ultimately flew too near to the sun, and disbanded a decade later, in 1963. In reality Pegasus' fate had been sealed at the time of inception, in '48. The constant differences of opinion between the two seats of erudition proving to be an insurmountable stumbling block.

Gas Recreation have themselves enjoyed an auspicious existence. Founded in 1937 as the Colchester Light and Coke Company, the club reformed as Eastern Gas FC fifteen years later, winning many honours, most notably in season 1971/2 when they carried off the E&SBL Premier Division title, and finished runners-up in the Essex Intermediate Cup to.....Pegasus (the Essex version!). During the 1990s, under the passionate management of Mick Potter, they captured four successive league titles. Champions once more in season 2009/10, last season the club had to settle for second spot behind Brightlingsea Regent.

Their compact ground, located behind Tesco Express on the historic garrison town's easterly fringe, is at once likable.

A weathered pavilion sits on the halfway line, the interior walls of which are festooned with atmospheric photographs of past XIs, and has 'THE GAS' picked out in white on its tiled and lichen-encrusted roof. The playing area is partitioned on its nearside by a metal railing-cum-barrier. Surrounded by deciduous woodland, the whole has a timeworn charm.

In Ken Shearwood's book (the centre-half played in both Pegs' Amateur Cup successes, and in later life had the unenviable task of trying to teach yours truly the finer points of Tudor and Stuart history) 'Pegasus, The Famous Oxford and Cambridge Soccer Side Of The Nineteen Fifties' The Times' then football correspondent, Geoffrey Green, masterfully recounts the ease in which the university side overcame Harwich to record their second Wembley triumph in three seasons - this second occasion by a never-to-be-bettered post-war record margin of 6 goals to nil:

"Theirs was a mature exhibition of pure football that cut poor Harwich and Parkston to ribbons, reducing them to the status of a selling plater that has strayed by mischance into classic company. After the first quarter of an hour it was never really a match. Two well taken goals within that opening span, rather against the run of early play, left the rest of the proceedings with a mere academic interest. Yet it was an interest that offered much aesthetic satisfaction, no matter where one's sympathies really lay. For now, Pegasus proceeded to unfold themselves majestically, calling up the heights of their creative instinct as they brought a variety of designs to the attacking picture".

Had the renowned journalist still been alive - he died in May 1990, aged 79 - he'd today be extolling the virtues of a feisty, gritty table-topping confrontation (despite Harwich having a 20-point advantage over Gas before kick-off, the Colchester-based side had five games in hand) that didn't possess quite such disparity. The first half-hour belonged to the men in black and white, who deservedly drew first blood on 30 minutes by virtue of a powerfully-struck Tom Brannon 25-yard free-kick. After that they mysteriously faded, and didn't create another clear-cut chance. From then on, the homesters bossed proceedings, drew level with a toe-poked effort courtesy of B. Bethell with 20 minutes remaining, and threw the title race wide open when J. Chatters scored a winner late on.

'Immensely enjoyable' succinctly elucidates the day that had me glancing over my shoulder at a time past, and that for a subliminal moment had, in this unlikely setting, filtering through soughing branches of breeze-filled trees, the ghosts of a bygone epoch arising from their Elysian Fields to re-tell their story, lest we forget. Mine is not a predilection for any team mentioned here, but for that Corinthian age so richly deserving the epithet....."Those Halcyon Days". FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

07/20