

TT No.237: Paul Roth - Saturday April 28th 2012; **Thetford Rovers** v Mundford; Anglian Combination League Division 2; Res: 2-2; Att: 50; Entry: Donation with 12-page programme; Altitude and global location: Euston Park, Euston Hall, Thetford is 25m (82.020 ft) above sea level: at latitude 52 degrees, 22.8 mins N; long 0 degrees, 47.7 mins E (position derived from centre circle); SAT NAV: IP24 2QW; Venue's Atcost status: Atcost-free; Weather: Horrid rain, horrid wind and horrid cold: in summation, horrid!!; Club shop: No; Local MP: Matthew Hancock (Cons); My day's CFL: 13.6.

At the time of my visit to Bungay Town last month the Anglian Combination's Second Division title race was building to a climactic finish, with numerous clubs vying for the two promotion places. The competition's continued in a similar vein, with now any permutation from Aylsham, Harleston Town or Thetford Rovers still able to secure those coveted ennoblements.

In reality, before kick-off, it looked odds-on that strong-finishing Harleston would win the league, leaving Rovers needing to win both their remaining games in hand on long-time league-leaders Aylsham, to pip them on goal difference, for second spot.

Set in the grounds of Euston Hall, the ancestral home of the Dukes of Grafton, two-and-a-quarter miles, to the south and east of Thetford, Euston Park's a venue I've never considered visiting; that is until recently.

For one, I was unaware the club plays in the shadow of a stately home, and secondly, that they'd started issuing matchday programmes.

Geoffas (his latest post-New Labour sorbriquet) had told me about the latter a few weeks back, and also of the venue's considerable charm, having himself previously visited the ground with our mutual friend Steve 'Telemachus' Hurley (the two capricious rapsallions once thought it a wheeze to watch football at its lowest level, when Rovers were entombed in the Combination's basement vault).

Meeting up for one last end-of-season thrash (our bacchanalian pre-match jaunt included a stop at the White Horse at Exning, the home of our esteemed web host - the village that is, not the pub, more's the pity!), it was rare indeed to see my urbane friend not garishly attired.

In fact, the hand-stitched woollen jacket, bespoke salmon-coloured Boston Button Down striped shirt, spats and Burberry raincoat ensemble, cleverly enhanced by the subtle application of a soupcon of wishy-washy fard-scumble glazed onto his prominent cheekbones, afforded my chum that quintessential look of sartorial elegance. His man-about-town demeanour always a cut above; his adorned frame the epitome of a 21st century Beau Brummell; his bon vivant personage a veritable shop window of Savile Row splendiferousness. Alas, my own fashion sense's shop

window has long since been boarded up, and concede is nowadays more Collier Row in appearance.

Whatever it is we clothe ourselves in makes not one iota of difference to the hilarity that always accompanies our infrequent assemblages. With conversation ranging in eclecticism from which football team Zimbabwe's despotic President Robert Mughastly would support if he were a Devon-based groundhopper, to how many green - for some reason it must be green - glaze cherries it's possible to insert into a fully-grown human being's rectum (shamefacedly, I have an inkling as to the answer - and it's not as many as you might think!) there's never a dull moment: well, except maybe when the football starts.

In such a mise en scene as Euston Park you'd expect a football ground to look incongruous, but somehow here it isn't. Unfortunately, the manorial pile is out of view, hidden behind dense woodland, further along the A1088 (I should point out Euston Hall is closed to the public for refurbishment during 2012. A shame, because inside its walls is housed an extensive collection of historically important artwork by Van Dyck, Canaletto, Lely and Kneller - in truth I've become a bit of an art buff since last year's opening on our harbourfront's Corniche of the thought-provoking Anthea Turner Contemporary Centre). Instead, the parish church of St Genevieve and the manicured surroundings of the estate frame a splendid backdrop.

Harking back to Bungay just for a moment, do you recall me saying that that club's ground is actually situated in Norfolk, despite the town itself being in Suffolk. Well, in a twist of 'hopping irony it's vice versa here; whilst Thetford is in Norfolk, Rovers' Euston Park HQ is over the border, in Suffolk...what jolly japes!!!

The club returned to play matches at Euston Park as recently as 2005, after a 5-year spell at East Harling, and what a sweetie of an arena it is. Sweeping through a grandiose gateway, an unmetalled driveway guides the visitor to an area of grassed pitch-side parking. A donation - we gave £2 apiece - proffers your entrance, plus that vital aforementioned programme (the promise of latter-day papyrus had enticed a substantive gathering of our brethren from their erstwhile Priest Holes).

Furnished with a metal barrier along the majority of its nearside, the park is adorned in places with an occasional advertising hoarding and a diddy wooden grandstand touchingly named after Rovers' diminutive and ebullient long-standing secretary, Ted Zipfel. Green-painted brick dugouts, a tea hut and a decrepit-looking changing cube are also located on this flank. Modern goal frames embellished with red and white netting, plus a verdurous and steeply sloping - whenever attacking upfield, in the direction of Mount Everest the deployment of belays is advisable - playing surface (the groundsmen have thrice been voted the league's best) complete the pleasing prospect, the whole as gratifying a scene as anything I've come across all term.

Luckily also for Thetford Rovers, the present-day duke is no dullard, being very much a sports-minded fellow who has aided the club no end, especially in the

drawing up of plans for a much-needed new pavilion. After an absence of many decades, there's even talk of reinstating the legendary cricket ground.

Having been thumped 8-2 by champions-elect Harleston last week, any thought that Mundford would roll over to allow their hosts an easy passage soon evaporated, as the blue-uniformed visitors stole into a two-goal lead by teatime, thanks to a well-taken long-range effort and a penalty-kick. Yes, the considerable incline and strong tailwind abetted their cause, but they were full value for their half-time advantage. As expected, the homesters launched a second-half onslaught down the hill, but for twenty-five minutes were unable to make headway.

Having pulled one back though, a second soon followed; this an effort that hit the underside of the crossbar and bounced in! A grandstand finish didn't quite ensue, the reds ultimately running out of time not only in this particular match, but in the season too. The draw, with Harleston once again triumphant, means they'll have to start all over again next year.

Euston Park is a groundhopping classic, and you'll be afforded a terrific welcome by Ted and his merry crew. All self-respecting travellers should try to make it their duty to drop by. If you do, just make sure you pick a nicer day weather-wise.

FGIF Star rating: 5*.

07/20