

**TT No.242: Paul Roth** - Sunday May 6th 2012; **Sporting Club Abbevillois** v Association Sportive du Pays; Picardie Region Division Honneur; Res: 1-1; Att: 200; Entry: €5; Prog: 12-pages, €1; Stade Paul Delique is at latitude 50 degrees, 6.0 mins N; 1 degree, 50.7 mins E (position derived from centre circle); Weather: Overcast; My CFL: 13.7.

My natural disaster-fixated friend won't mind me referring to him as a bit of a 'statto'. A perennial compiler of lists, there's one he's working his way through that's now considerably shrunk in size: namely his inventory of every football ground upon Terra Firma Francais where his once-beloved Dover FC has played. Wanting to visit all of these cross-Channel stadia, most of which are contained within a 30-mile radius of Calais' port, two such clubs, before today, remained outstanding to complete the brief: these being SC Abbeville, and USL Dunkerque - rumour has it the Lilywhites also played a Paris-based side during the 1950s, but apparently no record of who they are/were exists.

Having been the gateway to continental Europe for so long, it's unsurprising to learn the Crabblites have played many friendlies, and competed in numerous competitions, against French club sides. I'm reasonably safe in thinking though that it's been a while since any such encounters have taken place.

Happy to accompany my learned friend on his idiosyncratic mission (actually I'm the driver), especially as he's promised to buy me a slap-up meal at a restaurant of my choosing at journey's conclusion, we've already enjoyed many trips across La Manche together in pursuit of Gallic Nirvana. Somehow though I've a sneaky suspicion when the time comes to call collect, that elusive Paris team may rear its ugly head, ultimately stymieing my epicurean expectations. Methinks my quick-thinking 'Ami', will deem the assignment eternally 'incompletable'; a packet of crisps and a bottle of something Shepherd Neame-ish, aboard one of P&O's homeward-bound ferries, may instead be the extent of my culinary reward.

Our trip to the Picardie region this Sunday, via the auspices of the renowned ferry company, is by far and away the furthest the present-day Blue Square Bet South side ever travelled within the Republic (109 km/68 miles), apart of course from that one phantom sojourn to the capital 90-years ago.

Extensively bombed during World War II due to its close proximity to the English Channel, River Somme-adjacent Abbeville is today a re-built, modernistic city. Only a few buildings survived the German Blitzkrieg, that give an inkling to the town's former picturesque complexion, most noteworthy of which is possibly the 15th century Gothic church of St. Vulfran. Twinned with the East Sussex town of Bexhill-on-Sea, the close post-war links forged between the two settlements continue right up to the present day.

Aujourd'hui, fortune favoured the Seismologist's on-going French odyssey. That's because Sporting Club Abbevillois predominantly play their home matches on

Saturday evenings: in fact, this is only the second time all season they've played a home fixture on the sabbath. Given the distance back to Calais and the resultant late arrival home, travelling by ferry on the week's sixth day, for an evening kick-off, as far as we were concerned, was always going to be a non-starter. With the time constraints imposed by a day return I'm not even sure it's possible.

Founded in 1902, the club has enjoyed an illustrious history, winning many regional and domestic league and cup competitions. Most meritoriously, the red and blues have reached the Coupe de France's round of the last 32 on no fewer than four occasions, the last time being in season 1982/83, when they were beaten 2-1, over two-legs, by First Division giants Paris St. Germain. The return match in Picardie attracting the club's record attendance of 9,500.

Located to the south of the city, on Chemin des Postes, SCA's Stade Paul Delique is named after a former player and founding President, and is but a five-minute drive from the expeditious A16 (part Peage). The arena, as is customary in France, forms part of a multi-sports complex that comprises four football fields, an Athletics track and a 3G hockey pitch. Indoor sporting activities catered for include tennis, basketball and even snooker. In close proximity there are numerous other grounds, all of which are associated with the club.

On-arrival a magnificent portico, emblazoned with the club's name, that has Art Deco-style circular paned windows painted in the team colours on its flanking walls, welcomes you. Once inside, this vibrant colour scheme is in continuance. Two grandstands reside juxtaposed one another, each able to accommodate seated spectators on bum-numbing bench-style seating. A couple of areas of covered terracing either side of the decorous main stand grace the stadium's Tribune d'Honneur side, and behind each goal further concrete steps augment capacity, which is officially given as 5,048. A garishly façade on the building at the Chemin de Poste end acts as a low-key buvet, whose interior is anything but gaudy. Ancient walnut wood panelled walls, coupled with a dust-covered and sparsely-filled trophy cabinet, instantly transport the visitor back to times of yore. Old team photographs adorn its walls; these interestingly depict different squads frozen in time, wearing every conceivable variation of Abbeville's eye-catching uniform. The elegantly dressed lady custodian too had a decidedly yesteryear look about her. Four towering floodlight pylons, each housing 16 lamps apiece, stand guard over this most atmospheric of grounds.

We payed €5 each to ingress, and a further Euro for an unexpected, but nonetheless welcome, all-colour 12-page programme. SCA's promotion aspirations took a nosedive in midweek when they lost 1-2 at Breteuil, but the team still harbour an outside chance of elevation to CFA2, if they could only glean all four points from today's clash with Nesle (you're automatically awarded 1 point just for turning up!).

That they fell behind as early as the 2nd minute, courtesy of a header from the shortest player on the field, didn't augur well. However, from then on, they had nearly all the play, creating numerous openings during a frustrating first-half that

saw them force ASPN's yellow and black-striped attired netminder into only one serious save. The second-half started in similar vein, but after their talented Didier Drogba-esque centre-forward was mysteriously substituted, matters became more pedestrian. Passes started to be misplaced, and the game's cohesion evanesced. That was until the 73rd minute, when No. 8 da Rocha unleashed a net-stretching thunderbolt garnering the blues a deserved equaliser. It was then end-to-end stuff, as both sides strove for a winner. That it never materialised mattered not, as our overall impression at match's conclusion was of an exciting, evenly fought encounter. Let's be honest, if at the end of any French football match you come away feeling so uplifted, then you've been fortuitous indeed.

So, one more down; one more to go! Having myself 'ticked' USL Dunkerque 20 years previously, and not favourably predisposed to re-visits, is there any inducement Mr. Quake could offer me to convey him Flanders-wards? Well.... maybe to wash down those packets of 'Can't be Faulted', I'm not averse to the occasional bottle or three of Krug now and again.

FGIF Star Rating: 5\*.

07/20