

TT No.80: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 15th March 2014; **Tooting & Mitcham Utd v Folkestone Invicta**; Isthmian League Div. 1 S; Result: 0-0; Attendance: 248; Admission: £10; Programme: £2 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: *.

THE HOP: All downhill, unfortunately, once the football kicked off. An East Coast first class rail freebie saw us arrive in London shortly after 9am. This allowed a good four hours to explore the capital in what proved to be delightful spring sunshine. We took the Tube from King's Cross to Holborn then walked past my wife's London office close to Kingsway, through the theatre district, Covent Garden and into Trafalgar Square. We continued down Whitehall, crossed Westminster Bridge and enjoyed the classical view of the Houses of Parliament before joining a throng of foreign tourists strolling north past the London Eye and east along the south bank of the Thames, which was throbbing with river traffic. Lunch was a delicious curry from a street market near the Southbank Centre. We continued past the Millennium Bridge to London Bridge. From there, we shared a Tube ride to Elephant & Castle then went our separate ways: I continued to Morden; my wife headed for the shops of Regent Street and Piccadilly. I've been to London many times. Generally, though, it's been for sport rather than sightseeing, so I enjoyed our little tour. The train tickets had been booked weeks previously, making it very much pot luck with sporting fixtures. After some deliberation, I opted (foolishly, it turned out) for Tooting & Mitcham United's home game with Folkestone Invicta: eighth versus fourth in Isthmian League Division One South. Getting to King's Cross station in time for the train back to civilisation (sorry, capital dwellers, I loathe London) is always a key consideration. A game at T&MUFC made this possible.

THE PLACE: Tooting & Mitcham United play in neither Tooting nor Mitcham. Their ground, Imperial Fields (or the KNK Stadium), is in Morden and a 20-minute walk from the eponymous station at the terminus of the Northern Line. Apart from the obvious visitor spectacles, I find it hard to differentiate one bit of London's depressing urban sprawl from another. My wife, who lived and worked in the capital for 15 years, was alarmed to hear me mention Tooting (haunt of potential muggers, apparently), and reacted with relief to news that comparatively safe Morden was my actual destination. Morden, to my eyes fairly characteristic of south-west London, proved to be reasonably leafy, with a busy high street. One thing I like about the Tube (OK, just about the only thing I like about the Tube) is its Art Deco architecture. Morden station is a fine example of the genre. The not unpleasant walk to the ground took me past a National Trust garden (Morden Hall Park) and along quiet roads lined with 1930s semis, most of which had two cars (BMW des-rigueur) shoehorned into tarmacked parking spaces where front gardens used to be. Washing said cars appeared to be residents' primary weekend leisure activity. Couldn't they find something more interesting to do on a Saturday afternoon? For goodness' sake!

THE CLUB: Product of the 1932 merger of Tooting (founded 1887) and Mitcham Wanderers (established 1912). It was felt the area could not sustain two clubs. The Terrors started in the Athenian League, which they topped in 1950 and 1955. On to the Isthmian League, whose championship they secured in 1958 and 1960. Their most famous former player is Mitcham-born Alex Stepney, the ex-Manchester United goalkeeper. Tooting & Mitcham occasionally do well in the FA Cup. They reached the third round in 1959 - the Fifties seems to be the club's best era - and took First Division Nottingham Forest to a replay, losing 3-0 in front of 42,362 at the City Ground. The Terrors went one better in 1976, getting to round four, where they lost 3-1 at Fourth Division Bradford City. Their third-round victims, in a replay, were Third Division Swindon Town. Last year, disaffected United fans, reportedly unhappy with how the club was being run, set up a new club, Tooting & Mitcham Wanderers, to compete in the Surrey South Eastern Combination. They play at St Catherine's playing field, Raynes Park.

THE WEATHER: Early spring is my favourite time of the year in Britain: warm sunshine leavened by the lingering crispness of winter and a wonderfully mellow, clear light. If our weather could be like this every day, I'd be content.

THE PEOPLE: Fine. Had a good chat before kick-off with an old-timer who followed Folkestone Invicta one week and Hythe Town the next. He was at this away game purely because his brother, who lives in Epsom, was having a 75th birthday party that evening. The guy in the club shop was friendly, too.

THE GROUND: Pretty new, opened in 2002. Unfortunately, I never made it to Sandy Lane, Tooting & Mitcham United's former home, acknowledged as one of the finest non-league grounds in the country but, at the end of its life, a decrepit wooden inferno-in-the-making. The KNK Stadium (courtesy of a naming rights deal with a property repair and drainage services firm), though better than many new-builds, will never attract similar affection from the ground's enthusiast. Part of a large community sports complex, it is fringed north and south by 3G artificial pitches. When I arrived, a game of lacrosse was taking place on the pitch nearest the Bishopsford Road entrance. Hosts Hillcroft were in the process of losing 15-6 to Woodmansterne-based South Premier Division high-flyers Walcountian Blues. Nobody, save WAGS and chums, was watching - and I could see why; on this evidence, it is not the easiest game to follow. Keeping track of the ball was tricky. Lacrosse, I was told, is enjoying a renaissance in the south of England. And there was I thinking the sport was restricted to the posh bits of Cheshire and Sheffield.

Unusually, the KNK Stadium's main stand, a cantilever seating 600, is positioned on the east touchline, close to the River Wandle. As a result, its occupants are obliged to squint into the setting sun. TMFC is spelt out using white seats amid black. The ends are identical: steeply raked terraces topped in the centre with simple covers. The west side is merely a narrow hardstanding strip. The main stand houses all the usual facilities, along with a gym, for community use. The KNK Stadium's 3,500 capacity has been tested only once - for an FA Cup tie against Stockport County during the 2009-10 season. For today's game, it was thirteen-fourteenths empty. Or, if you're the positive type, one-fourteenth full.

THE GAME: Truly awful. From the early stages, it was obvious we weren't going to witness a goal. Folkestone went closest to breaking the deadlock. They had a Matt Newman shot cleared off the line and struck the crossbar through Paul Booth. Tooting & Mitcham almost won it at the death but Tim Roberts saved well from Max Noble. Neither side did enough to merit three points. Having spent much of the season watching rugby union, I was struck forcibly by the amount of dissent shown towards the officials, from the dug-outs, the players and the fans. To be honest, I found the bad language tiresome in the extreme.

THE PROGRAMME: Bog standard issue whose contents fell away badly after its centre spread of match statistics. Decent cover with an eye-catching photo. I like historical stuff but this programme had far too much of it. Overpriced by at least 50p. Available in the main stand's ground floor bar and at the turnstiles.

THE VERDICT: Enjoyable - if long and tiring - day out, spoiled only by a terrible football match.

04/20