

TT No.113: Brian Buck - Saturday 22nd February 2020; **AFC Stoneham** v Hamble Club; Sydenhams League (Wessex) Premier Division; Venue: played at Hampshire FA Stoneham Lane Football Complex; Result: 3-2; Attendance: 83.

With the weather still an issue, but not as bad as on previous weekends, my trusty chauffer decided to visit the Hampshire FA's Stoneham Lane Complex, where AFC Stoneham have taken up residence on one of the 3G pitches they have here. Our journey to the ground, by car, was OK apart from near the M25 where an exit lane to the M4 was closed for roadworks. We didn't go straight to the ground, as there was a pub which needed doing first. We could have had some food here, but as it looked too expensive for our needs, we decided to wait until we got inside the ground. This was to turn out to be a big mistake!

On arrival at the ground, which is in the same road as that of Eastleigh, but under and on the other side of the M27, we parked up without any problem. So, I'm not sure how easy it is to walk to this ground from the nearest station, Southampton Parkway. It may be that Swaythling is a better option. We did notice a bus passing the ground every half hour. Maybe it came from Eastleigh. Then came the small issue of getting into the £9 million complex. To do this you need to have a QR code. I was lucky in that my chauffer had already arranged this for me, but if you don't have a computer along the ability to cut and paste a mug shot of yourself on the application form, then you aren't going to get in here, unless you can persuade the staff to do it for you. In other words, if your face doesn't fit, then you can't get in! The other alternative is to watch the match through the metal grill from the car park. But once you are in then you are free to roam around, until you reach the part where you have to pay to get in.

First stop was the bar, where you could buy food & drink. But beware, it's a rip off. I was tempted by the pulled pork roll, priced £4, the pork element of which we were told had taken twelve hours to cook. When it came it was about the size of a burger and was demolished in seconds. A 300mls bottle of Magners cost £3.50! So why did we need to register? The Hampshire FA say that the *FA and Sport England* require the data generated from registrations and the reception turnstiles to analyse trends and participation. Furthermore, they say that registration is compulsory to meet their safeguarding requirements, saying that they need to know you have consent and or are fit and well to participate in activities within the club. Each registration is sent a unique QR code that will give them access via the turnstile. Maybe so, but when we went to the Middlesex FA's version at Rectory Park on the previous Saturday there was none of this except that their food may have been just as expensive, but we didn't try it. Non-League football is supposed to be about everything that league football isn't, not trying to imitate it.

Stoneham may well be playing in facilities which will see them gain access into Step 4 football, which they look like doing because they top this league, but having to go through this process every time you want to watch a game will surely drive

the fans away, especially visiting fans. Furthermore, as they hire this place either short or long term, they can't progress financially because from what I see they can't make any money for themselves. Having said that, the set up was better than the one-sided Middlesex FA ground. You could walk around all four sides here and furthermore they had a decent sized stand.

Today the hosts struggled to beat their spirited visitors. They went into a 2-0 lead by the break, but Hamble pulled that back to 2-2 by the 53rd minute. But Stoneham scored the winner five minutes later from a deflected shot. By the end some light rain had started to fall, which we only noticed when we left the stand. Also, we had been sheltered from the din of the nearby M27 traffic, because the wind was in the right direction. Overall, this was an enjoyable but unmemorable day and I can't wait to get back to visiting a club with their own ground and clubhouse, when it stops raining, of course!

04/20