

TT REPORTS 2020-21

updated on 22/09/20

TT No.16: *Brian Buck* - Saturday 19th September 2020; **Cropredy** v Yarnton; Oxfordshire Senior League Premier Division; Result: 2-0; Attendance: 30 approx.

Today was supposed to be one of those rare days when Mrs Buck and myself went to a game together, with our destination intended to be Aldeburgh Town in the Suffolk & Ipswich League, but after travelling no further than 200 yards my good lady decided that she didn't want to go after all. So, I turned round, dropped her off and headed roughly the same distance westward instead and after a slow drive I arrived in Cropredy about two hours later. This is a clean and pleasant village a few miles north of Banbury and not too far from 'Midsummer Murders' land. No dead bodies here though. Nonetheless Cropredy is famous as it's where Fairport Convention live. They are apparently a rock band and as such they play one concert a year (but not this year) at the sports complex, which houses two cricket pitches and a football pitch. It seems that they all do rather well out of their hire fee. There are two pavilions, one is for one of the cricket pitches and is built on stilts and the other is part cricket and part football, but not open today until the football had finished. They also have two stands, of sorts, both three seaters, or double that if you are prepared to sit on the narrow foot rest. They are really the former dugouts. So, I plonked myself in one of these and true to form my view was soon blocked by three men who although they could have stood anywhere, decided to stand in front of where I was sitting. This was a warm sunny day and the 'crowd' socially distanced around the pitch, railed off on two sides and wooden fenced off on the other two sides. The hosts looked to be a useful, but aging side and they went a goal down on 9 minutes. But they then equalised immediately. Yarnton regained the lead on 24 minutes before the hosts scored what would be the final goal on 60 minutes, to eventually bring to a close a friction free relaxing afternoon, both on and off the pitch.

contributed on 22/09/20

TT No.15: *Steve Hardy* - Saturday 19th September 2020; **Eversley & California** v Long Crendon; FA Vase 1st Qualifying Round; Result: 1-3; Admission: £3 OAP; Programme: No; Attendance: 57 h/c

The glamour of the FA Vase was too big a draw to resist today, so it was off to poshest Berkshire for Combined Counties league Eversley and Hellenic league Long Crendon.

For some reason I was really grumpy all day today, and my mood wasn't improved when I eventually found the ground to be met at the gate with the dreaded 'no programme today' from the lad on turnstile duty. The programme was online he told me, but it turned out to be read only, and not available for download. Luckily, he then went on to say they had printed 5 copies of the programme for their sponsors, and should there be any left at kick off I could have one of those. There

was one left at 2.59pm, so I gleefully snatched it out of his hands as the whistle blew for the start of the game!

The game itself was really one-sided, with Crendon coasting to a 3-0 half time lead. Eversley were dreadful and arguing with each other from start to finish didn't help their cause. The half time chat from the Manager was 'intense' as he changed his formation and brought on a couple of subs straight away. They never looked like getting back in to the game in the second half, although they did try a bit harder and deserved their consolation goal on 75 minutes.

Crendon brought a good, few supporters with them and there was generally a good atmosphere throughout. Social distancing worked well and their Covid19 regulations were well organised and practical. There is a super tea hut to the right as you come in to the ground, and both that and the admission charge were card only payment today.

I was still grumpy when I got home too, having ignored all Satnav Sarah's suggested directions, but at least the soar-away Royals result cheered me up.

contributed on 22/09/20

TT No.14: Keith Aslan - Saturday 20th September 2020; **EPPING TOWN** v Harold Wood Reserves; Essex Olympian Division 2; Kick Off: 14.29; Result: 7-3; Admission & programme: Free; Attendance: 54 (49 home, 3 away & 2 neutral)

Latest stop on my world tour of the south of England is the farthest reaches of the Central Line where a bus from outside the underground station will take you on a ten-minute ride to within three minutes Epping's ground. Don't leave it too late as the times on the internet don't match the timetable on the bus stop and the bus didn't correlate with either of them. Coming back everything went pear shaped, more of which anon.

Epping have been unceremoniously evicted from their Stonnards Lane ground and are now playing at Upper Clapton Rugby Club in the village of Thornwood Common, a few miles to the north of the town. A good move for both sports, the ground would otherwise be lying fallow as the playing of Rugby is still a no-no and the way things are going, is likely to remain so for some time to come. The rugby club moved there in 1933 when their east end ground kept on being flooded by the River Lea and they have retained their name ever since. Like most rugby clubs the bar facilities are top notch with hot drinks available, but no food. No lunchtime football either as they only put the TV on to show rugby games. Epping have made a good job of the ground, completely surrounded by a luminous green rope with matching posts. Very effective. On a glorious autumnal afternoon, the matchday experience was also enhanced by numerous planes flying overhead from the nearby North Weald Aerodrome. Only one dug out, they haven't got the money for the away one at present! Epping apologise to all their opponents in advance who are so far quite happy about it. Might not be so happy if it's pouring with rain? For their opening game a fortnight ago, they attracted a crowd of 126, less than half that here today. Track and trace seemed to be operating on a voluntary basis, nobody

asked me for my details. The bar had a clearly signed one way exit and entrance system which appeared to be far too complicated for many of the locals. And the football team fund raising cards aren't going to be a big seller at a fiver a pop. On my last visit to Epping's old ground they had a bloke called Stan Bowles playing for them who looked rather good.

Mr. Referee, Alan Moore, deserves a name check. Spent many minutes pre. match talking to both teams, another long tete-a-tete with the club linesmen, checked both nets and still got the game going on time. See boys it can be done. And a 2.30 kick off that finished at 11 minutes past four, oh happiness and joy, a proper football match. The first half will live long in the memory with a goal every five minutes. 0-1, 1-1, 1-2, 2-2, 2-3. At this point I confidently predicted Epping wouldn't come back a third time with Harold Wood looking the better side. Within 20 minutes 2-3 had become 6-3 proving even someone as wonderful as me can occasionally get it wrong. Only one goal in the second half, but still much to enjoy.

Got back to the bus stop but from the outset it was apparent all was not well. A very busy road with a constant stream of traffic in the other direction, hardly any cars at all going towards Epping. When I noticed a van go by then come back a couple of minutes later, I knew Mr. Bus wouldn't be making an appearance this afternoon. Found out later an accident two miles north had closed the road. With much trepidation I began the three-mile trek back to the station. Not something I was looking forward to in my delicate state of health. At the next stop, 15 minutes down the road, a passenger had ordered a taxi which was turning up as I arrived and we shared it back to the station so all was well in the end and no delay to the arrival time back at my country dacha. And good news for all you Stratford fans, they now let you go from one station to the other without sending you on a detour around the Olympic Village. Lots of arrows in Westfield Shopping Centre telling people where to walk. Lots of people ignoring them too.

contributed on 20/09/20

TT No.13: Brian Buck - Saturday 12th September 2020; **Fleckney Athletic** v Sileby Town; Everards Brewery Leicestershire Senior League Premier Division; Result: 0-2; Attendance: 65 approx.

Today we had an easier than it looked journey to our chosen game. Fleckney can be found a few miles west of the A6, roughly halfway between Market Harborough and Leicester. On our arrival at the ground, just under an hour before kick-off, it looked as though we might have a problem. As we drove into the car park the pitch, where we thought that the game was going to take place, next to the dressing rooms, was marked out, but without any other football furniture being in place. Then we were directed, past a cricket match in progress through a gap in a hedge, to find the landscaped pitch down below us. It was on a partial plateau, with banking on two sides, with the other two sides dropping away. Then, certain that the game was on, we headed to the nearest watering hole where we were served by a lovely smiling barmaid who looked just as good wearing her see-through plastic face shield.

We were back well in time for the start of the game. I think that this might have been the first time I've ever seen a Leicestershire Senior League Premier Division game not played out on a railed off pitch, but being a Step 7 division, they don't need to rail it off and so instead it was roped off on one side with the occasional barriers on the dugout side. Viewing was supposed to be on the roped off side only and generally this was adhered to, although a few people strayed from this from time to time. Nonetheless this was a scenic ground and being in a dip behind some trees on a pleasant afternoon there was a good rural feel to the place. Newly promoted Fleckney weren't quite at the races in this match and going two goals down, both scored in the last 15 minutes of the first half was about right. The hosts made at least two subs at the break and I doubt if one of them saw either of the goals scored as he only turned up for the game just before half time. The second half saw Fleckney play better, but Sibley easily held on to take home all the points. This was a decent enough afternoon's football and it was good to see some friends here whom I only seem to see occasionally.

contributed on 15/09/20

TT No.12: Brian Buck - Saturday 5th September 2020; **Epping Town** v Hullbridge Sports 'A'; ProKit Essex Olympian League Senior League Cup 1st Round; Venue: played at Epping Upper Clapton Rugby Club, Upland Road, Thornwood Common; Result: 2-0; Attendance: 160 approx.

Today we undertook a scenic route to this game, avoiding Harlow and Epping to get to Thornwood Common by going via St Margaretsbury's ground and also that of Roydon, where our back up match was taking place. This season Epping Town have been forced to move here because they have encountered problems with the Town Council over the use of their ground at Stonards Hill in Epping itself. From what I can tell, the club want to restore it, to as it was in their 'glory' days, which came to a halt when the original Epping Town resigned from the Isthmian League mid-season and appeared to fold.

In fact, between December 1974 and March 1984 I saw twelve games here. Many of my visits to games here were made by public transport in the days when I lived in Cheshunt. I can't tell you what fun I had changing buses in the middle of Epping Forest by the Wakes Arms for evening games, where street lights were almost non-existent! But on 21 April 1986 I also saw a game on a recreation ground, behind Epping Town's ground and here I saw Coopersale beat Upminster 5-1 in an Essex Olympian League Senior Division 2 match (att: 9). In 1992 they became Eppingsale and Epping in 1999 before becoming the reincarnated Epping Town in 2018. These days with the fencing taken down and the two grounds seemingly looking as one, you can see why the Council want both grounds to form one recreation ground in the middle of Epping. However, if Epping Town's old ground was sold for housing then I'm sure that the sparks would fly.

Today we arrived at the ground some 45 minutes before kick-off and then made use of the excellent bar the balcony of which offers a good, but distant view of the pitch, which was one pitch width away, that one being for use, but not today, by

the rugby club. We also picked up a team sheet. Ours were in colour. There was information printed on both sides but there were no line ups. On a breezy, sunny but not too cold day, this was a fairly even game to watch. Neither side looked like world beaters but the hosts won it with goals on 27 and 80 minutes. In a match of limited scoring opportunities at no stage could I see Hullbridge winning, even though they tried hard. This is early days for Epping here. If they work hard at it, both on and off the pitch and develop a strong relationship with their landlords then this move could end up being the best thing they've ever done!

contributed on 15/09/20

TT No.11: Keith Aslan - Saturday 12th September 2020; **HANBOROUGH** v Cropredy; Oxfordshire Senior League Premier Division; Kick Off: 14.35, late start due to the home team reluctant to leave the changing room; Result: 1-5; Admission: Free; Programme: £2.50p; Attendance: 41 (34 home, - 0 away & 7 neutral).

The ground is a 20/25-minute walk from Hanborough station, the stop after Oxford. Coombe is somewhat closer, but with five trains a week and none on Saturday it's probably better to give that one a miss. The ground is in a rustic setting, brand new brick-built dugouts with a chain erected along a small part of the pitch before they lost interest and left the rest of it lying on the ground. The village hall contained the dressing rooms with a small bit of cover outside giving a reasonable view of the pitch if the weather turns dodgy. Round the back is the important bit, the clubhouse, serving tea and coffee at half time with a television which somehow managed to show the Brentford v Birmingham match in spite of not having Sky. Apparently, someone ran it off their mobile phone, the wonders of modern technology are a mystery to me. No food but the chip shop up the road provided adequate sustenance. A colour programme with more issues to follow if it's a success. Don't quite know how they would gauge 'success'. There were around ten left over, can't understand why Hanborough couldn't get someone to go round the ground flogging them. They remained in situ on the bar which most of the crowd didn't visit. The area is where *Midsummer Murders* is filmed but everybody managed to see out the match without falling victim to the myriad of serial killers floating around. Indeed, the locals all looked harmless, it's the groundhoppers you needed to worry about.

I know I say it every week, but really nice people running this club, and they donated their match fees to a fund set up for Cropredy player Aaron Field who suffered a massive stroke the previous weekend. Would be interested to know what Hanborough's 'match fees' actually are? As last Saturday, a pretty substantial win for the away side. When Cropredy were awarded a penalty in the second half the home goalkeeper lobbed a hail of abuse at the referee which as I heard from a considerable distance he certainly did. The correct decision would have been to send Mr. Potty-mouth off but the referee did nothing. I suppose you've got to expect an increase in abuse without the 'Respect' handshakes. ha! ha! When the dust settled the keeper did pull off a fine save. Cropredy would have won the

league last season and look like carrying on where they left off, while Hanborough weren't too bad at all with plenty of hope for the future.

TRAIN WATCH: Running at around 70 per cent capacity of pre Covid levels, not anything official just my observations, no catering on any of them and I've yet to come across an on-train ticket inspection making them a mecca for fare dodgers. At Paddington a note on the loos said 'toilets shut due to reduced customer numbers' You what? I'll draw a veil over the facemask fiasco (mythical fines now up to £3,200) but much kudos to the tourists who tried to put one on the statue of Paddington Bear. With West Ham at home I would under normal circumstances expect to be overwhelmed by belligerent cockneys at Stratford station so there is a definite plus side to not allowing any spectators.

While I was on my travels, on the home front Ramsgate sold out their cup tie with Chipstead on Friday morning. That's 400 tickets, where have all these people come from. And Sundays '*Non-League Paper*' had yet another photograph of the famous Margate Crosses. These are becoming the town's number one tourist attraction (there ain't much else to do in the place).

contributed on 13/09/20

TT No.10: Gary Spooner - Saturday 5th September 2020; Easington United v Billingham Synthonia; Northern League Division Two; Kick-Off: 3pm; Result: 2-1; Admission: xx; Programme: Yes; Attendance: 131.

It's good to be back! Yesterday saw my first competitive game on a Saturday since March 14th. I do love a trip to the seaside and yesterday saw me heading to Easington Colliery for their game against Billingham Synthonia.

Very friendly welcome and big credit to all the Easington staff whose tremendous hard work had ensured that a crowd of 131 could watch the football. Similar efforts up and down the country too so that local fans and hoppers alike can get their weekly footie fix. Most definitely appreciated!

Onto the game and Easington took the lead in the 21st minute only to see Billingham equalise in the 22nd minute. 4 minutes later Easington were back in front from a 40-yard free kick. Superb precision or wind assisted luck - I'm sure there were different opinions! No more goals but a very competitive game with high drama in injury time. A goal-bound Synthonia header was saved on the line by an Easington player. Handball! Red card! Penalty! The Easington keeper then pulled off a tremendous save to deny Synthonia a share of the points.

Sweeping views out to sea from most of the ground, superb pie, chips and peas from the food hut and a decent game as well made for an excellent day out. Long may they continue.

contributed on 06/09/20

TT No.9: Keith Aslan - Saturday 5th September 2020; **CLARENDON** v Denmead; Hampshire League Division 1; Kick Off: 14.59; Result: 1-7; Admission: Free; Programme: £2; Attendance: 48 (29 home, 4 away & 15 neutral).

Standing in a field in the middle of the warm Wiltshire countryside, stuffing my face with sausage baps, clutching some paper and chatting to like-minded souls about the evils of e-programmes, it's afternoons like this that make me almost glad to be alive. This one is virtually impossible to do for the carless, it can just about be done for an early kick-off if you get a bus from the Russian tourist hotspot of Salisbury, but you have to return via Andover. So, this afternoon I was grateful to a well-known northern hopper who chauffeured me to the game from Grately station. Having driven down from Stockport he picked me up spot on the time we agreed. I can only marvel at his accuracy in working out exactly how long the 150 odd mile drive would take. The 20-minute car journey took us through the delightfully named village of Over Wallop to the ground in the equally bewitchingly monikered Middle Winterslow. Two miles south was the village of East Grimstead; I wonder how much of their mail ends up in Sussex? The ground is a beauty, dressing rooms and a tea bar, two pitches at the back with Clarendon debuting on the newly acquired front pitch. It used to belong to the cricket club and when it dispersed in 2018 the football team put the land to much better use.

Clarendon have got it all sussed off the field. Track and trace on entry, hot and cold drinks and scrummy bacon and sausage rolls served by a couple of sensual ladies and an all colour glossy programme from the JMA stable. Tea bar was out of bounds and serving was through a hatch. No problems on a day like today but I do wonder how all this alfresco caper is going to pan out in the winter months. The chairman welcomed us on arrival, a really nice set up with their home debut in the Hampshire League being an absolute pleasure to attend. And to answer the question on everybody's lips, they're called Clarendon because they play adjacent to the Clarendon Way, an old Roman road (aren't all Roman roads old?)

While everything is hunky dory off the pitch the football team is still a work in progress with the higher grade proving a bit of a struggle. 1-0 down in two minutes, 3-0 down in 15, and 5-0 down at half time the outcome was never in doubt. Had to admire the optimism of home goal scorer, Sam Cook (not that one), who pulled a goal back in the second half, then picked the ball up and rushed to the centre circle to get the game restarted quickly to give more time to continue the comeback which needless to say never came. I really would like to see Clarendon settle down in the Hampshire league, a lovely club run by wonderful people. They deserve success.

The paper accoutrement attracted some top of the range groundhoppers one of which had been to an Arthur Dunn Cup semi-final in the morning. This had finished level and now is to be replayed. Must be the only competition in the country that has extra time and replays, at the moment. Good to see the AFA going their own way. Also present this afternoon was an overlord from the Hampshire FA who must have been the only spectator who was surprised to find there was a programme. I did suggest programmes should be made compulsory in the Hampshire League, but I don't think he took it on board. If anybody wants to know why I do what I do an afternoon at Clarendon would explain everything.

contributed on 06/09/20

TT No.8: Brian Buck - Tuesday 25th August 2020; **Slip End United** v Lancot Park; Friendly Match; Result: 2-0; Attendance: 15 approx.

Having done my homework, I knew where this ground was located, but others might struggle as the entrance to the playing field is not signed. However, it is on the way to Airparks, where people leave their cars (at a cost) before flying out from Luton Airport and it is next to St Andrews Church, which is signed. Slip End play in the Leighton & District Sunday League and the visitors tonight were Lancot Park of the Beds County League and they put in a decent warm up session before the match started promptly at 6.30pm. Meanwhile the hosts appeared in drifts and drabs and did a token warm up just before kick-off.

As this ground is right next to the M1, I was expecting to be deafened by the noise of the traffic, but with a combination of a high wooden fence and the wind blowing in the 'right' direction you couldn't hear it at all. The match kicked off roughly on time and it saw the hosts attacking the end which had a 'Danger Archery in progress' sign behind the goal, which was irrelevant on such a windy night as this. On 35 minutes we had a brief rain shower and then three minutes later Slip End scored. It was a curious goal. A long ball was played forward towards the centre forward. He had his back to it but knew it was coming and indeed it did, as it went over his head. He then waited to see where it bounced before deciding whether to chase it or not. But as it was 'within range' he decided to and he soon collected the ball, ran on and slotted home easily. In this half Lancot Park had started well, but the spoils went mainly Slip End's way. The second half was slightly more even, but for me the hosts still shaded it. Both sides were now making subs but as they had very few to bring on it was more of giving players a rest before they returned. At the end I went to the 'bench' get the goal scorer's name, only to be told that he got both goals! But I'd only seen one. Despite this he had scored twice, as he told me as he helped take the nets down. Perhaps I was watching the planes passing overhead from nearby Luton Airport when he got his other goal!

contributed on 04/09/20

TT No.7: Keith Aslan - Saturday 29th August 2020; **CORINTHIAN CASUALS SCHOOLS XI** v Lancing Old Boys; Friendly; Kick Off: 11.06; Result 1-1; Admission: Free; Programme: £2; Attendance: 66 (60 home, 2 away & 4 neutral).

As soon as I saw a photograph of the front of the programme this was the match for me today. Probably the best cover in the world. It features one of those cheesy L.P. covers from the 70's, retro chic I think you'd call it, and best of all, it had nothing to do with football. Check it out on their website. This should be nominated for the Turner Prize. Had a long chat with Stuart Tree, the editor, who tried, and very much succeeded, to do something a bit different on the front. Sixteen glorious pages of glossy colour with everything you could possibly want to know about the two teams (but alas no information on who the six pollo-necked pullover clad chaps on the cover were). While Margate wouldn't give out team sheets last week for fear of the paper spreading Coronavirus, no such problems

with today's programme. Maybe it's printed on the same Covid resistant paper that Margate used on their raffle tickets which they were freely hawking around without any thought for public safety?

The Corinthian Casuals Schools XI definitely weren't schoolboys, far from it, while Lancing Old Boys were all quite young with a couple of them looking as though they should be back in school next week. It's all explained in the programme. In truth this wasn't the best game I've ever seen, spoilt by the strong wind and the fact that neither side were very good at playing football. The ground, a 12-minute walk from Tolworth station, has changed little from my last visit, the clubhouse is full of old photographs and the back of the stand has a large tableau of figures from Corinthians past. When you've got a history as rich as theirs it's worth flaunting. A wooden shed has the word 'Megastore' emblazoned above the door that I took to be ironic. There is a horsebox from which food will be available in happier times. The stand is festooned with flags including one from the 'Airdrie Casuals', a bit of a trek to home games I'd have thought. Only thing open was the bar which also sold hot drinks, but when I went to get my half time 'cuppa' they wouldn't let me in without a face mask which I didn't have. No problems, they gave me one. A free facemask, what more can you ask for, I will keep it as a souvenir of my visit. I suppose it will always come in handy if I decide to rob a bank.

COVID WATCH: Temperature taken on arrival, apparently I'm still alive, and I had to give my details for the 'World beating track and trace system' as Boris calls it, or 'shambolic mess' as it is more widely known. I've lost count of the number of times I've been to Cafes, restaurants, pubs and football grounds and given them my phone number but not one of them has ever called me up to ask how I'm doing. Casuals have a scaled down version of Margate's famous crosses on the terraces, these weren't painted but made from tape, the type the police put round your house when someone's been murdered. All very confusing because at Margate you were supposed to stand on them while here you had to avoid them. A man with a contraption on his back went running round the ground spraying wayward balls with antiseptic before they were allowed to be put back into play. While the supporters were well protected, the Lancing players didn't have enough shirts and kept swapping them around when substitutions were made. A big no, no.

First time I've been on a tube train since lockdown, the government's policy of scaring people off public transport is one of their success stories, putting the fares up again is a masterstroke. I don't get as much pleasure from travelling as I used to, this facemask caper is a big turn off, and I can't see me travelling any great distances in the foreseeable future. The highlight of my day was lunch in my favourite Euston eatery. No track and trace, face masks or social distancing here, it's just like the old days. And the delightful serving girl is still there. She said how nice it was to see me again, not words I'm accustomed to hearing.

contributed on 30/08/20

TT No.6: Keith Aslan - Saturday 22nd August 2020; **MARGATE** v Ramsgate; Isle of Thanet Cup; Kick Off: 14.58! Result: 3-2; Admission: £4 for old people;

Programme: Well I got something (see below); Attendance: Covid-19 capacity of 300 (228 home, 72 away & 0 neutral).

I spent more time trying to get a ticket for this one than I did watching the match. Computer owners only and my computer skills are basic with a capital 'S'. Just about managed to fill in all my details and order a ticket but I have no facilities to print it off and long phone calls to the exceedingly helpful chap at Margate meant that I was able to quote my ticket number on arrival and he would be on the gate to allow me entrance. He said I could also use my smart phone. What's that? My mobile makes and receives phone calls which is as smart as it gets. Why does the club need all of my details anyway? If it's discovered someone at the match has Coronavirus are the other 299 really going to be contacted and told to self-isolate. I think not. Ten out of ten for Covid compliance here, somebody must have spent hours painting socially distanced crosses all around the ground for people to stand on which nobody did. Don't understand why the council don't draw crosses in the sand on Broadstairs Beach, that's sure to end overcrowding. Two out of every three seats were marked as being out of bounds. Not if you're a family of four they aren't. The toilets were shut up at half-time because that's when everybody wants to use them! Bar shut but amazingly the burger van was open, surely this was the greatest danger to public health, not through Covid but salmonella. Now it just gets really silly. No programmes of course but someone went round the ground and Sellotaped a rather sexy looking team sheet to a couple of walls. It was part teams and part programme containing lots of bits about the game and containing vital information about toilet closures. I asked for a copy and was told that, due to Covid restrictions, they can't hand them out. If paper spreads the disease my newsagent is living on borrowed time and the mortuaries would be full of dead postmen. Come on boys, if you aren't going to do a programme just 'fess up, don't pretend they are plague carriers. As soon as the team sheets were put up, they were taken down, mostly by me, and I have a nice little addition to my collection.

The Non-League Paper issued a 'Margate Special' on Sunday to celebrate the biggest game in the country. That might at first sight seem a ridiculous thing to say, but you try and think of a bigger one. Three of the six photographs on the front page were of Thanet's finest, I found particularly enchanting the snap of a section of the crowd all dutifully standing apart on the crosses. I wonder how long it took to choreograph that one. Page four has a large photograph of the legendary crosses. Who on earth would look at that picture and think 'That's social distancing all sorted out'. And Charlotte Richardson obviously enjoyed the game. In her match report she gave it five stars. It was good, but not that good.

The Isle of Thanet Cup has been going for as long as I can remember (not a great distance these days), a pre-season match between the Islands big two (only?) clubs. Always a joyous occasion the attendance would have been well over double today's in normal times. It's also the friendliest derby you'll ever attend off the pitch, with both sets of fans happily frolicking together, but not on their allotted crosses. Before the game there was a minute's applause for an ex-Margate player who had recently died. I never join in with these, I find clapping somebody who

has recently died to be extremely disrespectful, If you can't have a minutes silence, don't bother with anything. An entertaining match you needed to get there early with Ramsgate's opening goal coming before the advertised kick off. Five minutes in it was one all which was how it stayed until the second half. Margate went two goals in front before the Rams pulled one back five minutes from time resulting in a pulsating climax. It was good to be part of an actual crowd watching football, a small step in the right direction.

The match kicked off two minutes early, comprised of two 45-minute halves and didn't have any water breaks. If only this was the 'new normal'.

contributed on 23/08/20

TT No.5: Keith Aslan - Saturday 15th August 2020; **ROCHESTER CITY** v **POTTERS**; Pre-Season Friendly; Kick Off: 14.20; Result 1-2; Admission: Free; Programme: I can just about remember what they used to look like; Attendance: 15 (12 home, 0 away & 3 neutral)

Latest stop on my 'why am I watching this' tour is the Victory Sports Academy in Chatham. Like all Medway towns Chatham is a festering pit of hopelessness and despair where there is nothing much to do other than ponder on the futility of life. The only recollection I have of my trip to Chatham Town many years ago was climbing the brutal hill to the ground, and to reach today's destination the same ascent was required. Back then I was young, fit, and handsome while today I am old, decrepit but still good looking. Let's just say I wasn't too perky by the time I reached the ground. It took 45 minutes of toil and struggle to arrive at the Academy but less than half an hour to roll back to the station. As well as the 3g my game was played on (Guess what colour the surrounding fence was?) there are three other grass pitches with another game taking place on one of them. There are spectator facilities along one side where the vast crowd somehow managed to socially distance themselves. Next door to the Academy is Fort Luton which is now a museum of the Second World War mainly featuring the Dunkirk evacuation. I would have liked to have seen it, but it was closed due to a bug that's apparently floating around, at the moment. Good job the rescue didn't have to take place these days. By the time a risk assessment was carried out and everybody was checked to make sure they were wearing facemasks before boarding a boat we'd have lost the war. And coming over from France don't forget the two weeks quarantine.

Rochester City hail from the Kent County while Potters play in the Sevenoaks & District League. I have done Potters, (impressed huh?) for a final of the 'Craske & Wells Trophy' They still do a proggy. for the final of this competition and back in the day it used to be played at the home of one of the competing teams but is now played at the grandiose surroundings of Sevenoaks Town. The difference in status between the two teams was not apparent with Potters scoring the first goal thanks to a goalkeeping boo-boo then quickly adding a second before Rochester reduced the deficit before half time with one of the best taken penalties you're ever likely to see. There were no goals in part two. A fashionably late start the referee

atoned by just playing 45 minutes in the first half and a truncated 43 in the second due to the teams who booked the pitch for 4 o'clock champing at the bit to get on. He forgot the first half drinks break but surprisingly none of the players appeared to be suffering any effects of dehydration due to the omission. He made up for it with an extra, long break in the second that was one fifth drinkies and four fifths team talk. I got my first soaking of the season but didn't care, it's just nice to be watching football again.

These shortened trips, Chatham is just an hour from Broadstairs, make for an early return to my country dacha giving me the opportunity to watch Total Wipeout, a classic edition with Freddie and Paddy. Almost makes me pine for Mrs. Browns Boys!

contributed on 15/08/20

TT No.4: Keith Aslan - Saturday 8th August 2020; **STURRY** v The Fountain; Kick Off: 14.05; Pre-Season Friendly; Result: 1-0; Admission: Free; Programme: Don't be silly; Attendance: 16 (15 home incl. 5 W.A.G.S., 0 away & 1 neutral)

No surprises that the station for this one is Sturry, next stop after Canterbury and a mere 6-minute walk from the ground by following the footpath along the south side of the tracks. I've been through here literally millions of times but this was the first occasion I've actually got off the train. The ground is on the cusp of Fordwich, an olde worlde Disneyesque town that on a boiling hot day like today was rammed with tourists. I've been to numerous places that boast they are the 'biggest village in Britain' but Fordwich has no rivals for the 'smallest town' accolade. Population 381 its town status is due to having a town council and a town hall. Another claim to fame is that it's the smallest Town Hall in the country. Originally erected in Norman times it was rebuilt as recently as 1555. (how did I ever manage to live my life before Wikipedia?) Two pubs in Fordwich, the first one you come to is the George and Dragon. Someone was standing at the door with a clipboard wearing a facemask so I gave that a wide berth. No facemasks at the Fordwich Arms but I was forced outside to consume my very expensive pint. (What are they going to do in winter?). The beer garden was on the banks of the Stour offering a perfect view of some rather comely young girls jumping off a boat into the river. Didn't get much of the giant Sudoku done.

Nice ground partly enclosed, with hot and cold drinks plus nibbles for sale from the tea bar, although they had to be bought outside to you due to Covid restrictions. A miniature railway is next door, not running today and it backs onto the main line. I was kept entertained checking the timekeeping of passing trains (and to think some people call me sad). Sturry are fairly new arrivals in the Kent County League while The Fountain strut their stuff in the Ashford & District League. The Waterboys had the best of the first half before Sturry took over in the second, scoring the only goal of the match on 60 minutes. I thoroughly enjoyed the game, just happy to be watching live football. With both teams ready to go well before the allotted kick off time the referee emerged from his car at precisely 2 o'clock making for a late start. Would it really have been too difficult for him to have

rolled up 5 minutes earlier? Apparently so. No linesmen's flags so one was waving his shirt around while the home official chose a cone to attract the ref's attention. Mr. referee wasn't going to let the fact it was a friendly being played in 34 degrees heat stop him from adding oodles of time on to the 90 minutes. Towards the end players were going down with cramp but he made everyone aware he was going to add on the time they were being treated. Presuming he knew why the players were cramping up did he really think adding more time on to the match was a particularly good idea? The obligatory water break in the second half took longer than usual as The Fountain weren't ready to start up again so soon. How long does it take to have a drink of water? Only an eight minutes half time enabled me to catch my train after the match. The home goalie strolled onto the pitch smoking a cigarette, a proper non-league footballer. At half time a real live skinhead turned up. Known to the locals he wore a tee shirt, jeans, braces and bovver boots with the appropriate haircut. He made a bizarre sight given that he was older than me and even less well preserved. For most people being a skinhead was a teenage phase, for this bloke it was a lifestyle choice. Good luck to him.

Home by five, this was a nice short trip for me. It will be sometime before I consider making any long journeys to watch my football. Even though I wasn't actually supposed to be watching the game due an F.A. directive, I just about managed to social distance among the 16 'crowd'. So, when the 'second spike' hits us it won't be because I went to a football match.

contributed on 09/08/20

TT No.3: Brian Buck - Saturday 1st August 2020; **Oracle Components** v Hatfield Town U23; Friendly Match; Kick-Off: 3pm Venue: played at Richard Hale School, Hertford; Result: 2-2; Attendance: 20 approx.

After the previous match had finished there was just enough time to nip home for a cup of tea and a sandwich before setting out again. I arrived at this 3G pitch about twenty minutes before kick where I bumped into a couple of other Groundhoppers and we spent the afternoon in each other's company, socially distancing of course! They have a big pitch here and more importantly to us Groundhoppers, a spectator viewing area, accessed today by walking onto the 3G surface and going through a side gate. The game seemed to start a few minutes early and was quite a competitive one without any serious friction, although the ref did get a bit of an ear bashing from Hatfield until they realised that despite his attire, he was actually quite a decent one and they eventually left him alone. The score was 1-1 at the break and then with the visitors replacing just about the whole of their side it seemed that they might dominate the second half and they took the lead on 72 minutes, but Oracle, making fewer changes, dug in and equalised with a cleverly won spot kick six minutes later. Although this was a school ground it was one of the better set ups and with it being partially tree lined this wasn't an unpleasant place to watch football at this time of the year.

contributed on 05/08/20

TT No.2: Brian Buck - Saturday 1st August 2020; **Renhold United** v Amptill Town; Friendly Match; Kick-Off: 11am; Result: 0-10; Attendance: 10 approx.

With my last game being on 14th March at East Ruston, that was it for four and a half months when all live football was stopped. But things got worse for me as in June I was sent to Bedford Hospital for tests, after I reported severe pains in my back and chest. Furthermore, my GP noted that I had an irregular heartbeat. I was expecting to be there for a few hours but in the end, I was there for three days. During this time my heart returned to something like normal but it was discovered that I have gallstones. Now I am waiting for an operation to remove my gallbladder, where most, if not all, of the gallstones are hiding but because of a back log it seems that I will have to wait months for this to happen!

By now I was on a low-fat diet and most of my pains had gone, although I was still feeling a bit lethargic, but it was the first day when friendly matches could start again. Since our last visit here the remains of the bulldozed Three Horseshoes pub have been removed and has been replaced by three nearly finished detached houses, making spotting the entrance to the ground behind them a tad more difficult to find. I watched the match from the comfort of my trusty garden chair. It was a decent day for football, warm when the sun was out, but a bit nippy when replaced by the rain threatening clouds. On the pitch you could work out what was going to happen before a ball was kicked. SSML Division 1 side Amptill had enough players to field a different side each half whereas the hosts, who will be playing in Beds County League Division 2 this season, just had an enlarged squad, with the emphasis on 'enlarged' and some of them will need to shift a few pounds before competitive football starts. As is often the case in these games the inferior side started well and for a while the spoils were even. But on 18 minutes Amptill took the lead and they were leading 3-0 by the break. At this point Mrs 'Renhold' or Mrs 'Renhold - Wixams' these days, because she and hubby have moved house, came to see us, primarily to get our contact details, not because we will get a Christmas card from her, but it had more to do with the 'track and trace' regarding the virus. In the second half Amptill racked up the goals. Eventually it was just a case of when they would get double figures. They had a chance to do this on 90(+3) minutes from the spot, but the shot was impressively saved. But the tenth goal did arrive two minutes later.

contributed on 05/08/20

TT No.1: Keith Aslan - Saturday 1st August 2020; **HAROLD WOOD ATHLETIC** v LAINDON ORIENT; Pre-Season Friendly; Kick Off: Noon; Result: 1-2; Admission: Free; Programme: In my dreams; Attendance: 44 (36 home, 4 away & 4 neutral)

Dateline March 14th, AFC Stoneham, seems like a lifetime away. My last live football, no social distancing, no facemasks, chatting with fellow hoppers over a cup of tea and cake. Who'd have thought life would have changed so much. Nobody could have foreseen four months on we would be playing football with no crowds, five substitutes, compulsory drink breaks and no 'Respect' handshakes. I was desperate to see a football match today. Didn't care if it was rubbish without any

paper, I just had to get some live action. First choice would have been up the road with Ramsgate taking on Folkestone, but obviously that had to be played behind closed doors. It would be impossible to socially distance around a hundred people crammed into a ground that can only hold four thousand! I chose Harold Wood as the early kick off meant I could get home in time to watch the Cup Final. With the F.A. Cup a shadow of its former self I don't even bother to watch the final these days unless Chelsea are in it. So that's virtually every year then. In view of the result I could have quite happily given this one a miss as well.

Harold Wood is so named as it was the old stomping ground of King Harold. You can see what attracted him to the place, a pleasant suburb on the eastern outskirts of London with the 'recreation park' just six minutes from the station. As well as the main pitch it contains a number of others of various sizes, tennis courts, and not one but two cricket pitch's both of which were in operation today. Double the boredom. Hot drinks and sweeties were available from a hatch in the middle of the park, next door was a bar which claimed to open up at twelve o' clock. I think they were just teasing. The arboreal surroundings made this an aesthetically pleasing venue to watch your football. Denizens of the Essex Olympian it complies with the leagues ground grading requirements by virtue being fully roped off but there are four seats dotted around the pitch for the hard of standing but you have to get there early if you want to bag one. In one corner of the ground is a large stone human sundial. You stand on the month and your shadow points to the time. It works.

Match not as bad as I was anticipating, both teams gave it a go and all of the players looked as though they wanted to be there, not always the case at some end of season games. Kicked off spot on time, well actually 25 seconds early if you want to be pedantic and was won by Laindon with two goals in the 46th and 48th minute of the first 45. Like their professional counterparts they had to stop every 20 minutes or so for 'water breaks'. Possibly if the two teams hadn't pointlessly run around in the hot sun for 40 minutes prior to kick off they wouldn't have got so thirsty.

Football all good but the journey to and from deeply unpleasant due to current restrictions. There are ten stations between Stratford and Harold Wood and at each one was a booming recorded message telling passengers/customers there is a £1,000 fine for not wearing a facemask. A thousand quid, it's only £100 everywhere else, or in reality nothing as the police quite rightly have more important things to occupy their time. As well as facemask vigilantes to contend with you can't just walk from one station to the other at Stratford, you have to take a circuitous route that takes twice as long. And 'Westfield Shopping City' provides a wonderful example of the illogicality of all this. No numerical restrictions or queues to enter, everybody just piles in, no social distancing whatsoever on the concourses and strangest of all, no compulsory facemasks either. But if you want to go into a shop you have to queue up (again no social distancing) and wait until the store is almost empty before you are allowed entry providing you first put on a facemask which now becomes compulsory. My groundhopping will be somewhat curtailed while this

nonsense carries on. If you spend up to 14 hours on a train, you have to enjoy travelling by train. That enjoyment has now gone.

Still hope is on the horizon with our flaxen haired leader telling us it will all be over by Christmas. Didn't one of his predecessors say the same thing about the First World War?

contributed on 03/08/20

End