



A Canterbury tale of woe for Epsom's Rugby team

30 November 2025



Canterbury II 30 Sutton & Epsom RFC 26. Saturday 29th November.

The Pilgrims had belatedly progressed to Level 6 when their glass ceiling was removed by the RFU. After an inauspicious start to their campaign they had shown improved form whilst, in contrast, the emphatic Sutton start to the season has somewhat stuttered. The outcome of the fixture was never going to be a foregone conclusion that a casual glance at the league table might have implied. By the final whistle the Black & Whites had suffered their third loss on the spin whilst the hosts had returned to winning ways, overturning a 21-point deficit to triumph 30-26.

An accident on the M25 threatened to hamper the visitors' preparations but they negotiated the scenic rural route to arrive at a rain-lashed Merton Lane. Fortunately the weather relented by the time the game kicked off under the floodlights. Canterbury welcomed back Harry Sloan, Alfie Orris and Jesse De Vries after lengthy absences, while for Sutton the vastly experienced Steve Munford replaced the injured Laurence Wise at 9 and Tom Boaden moved from the bench to start in the front row. The Kent club kicked off with an effort lacking in altitude that set the tone for a laboured start. If anything, the hosts looked like the team who had endured the more tortuous journey, though traffic in Canterbury at this time of year is far from ideal. It was a red-letter day for Sutton's wing Kyren Ghumra who was playing his 150th league match. The winger celebrated in perfect style with a try in the third minute. Tom Lennard made the significant break and Ghumra ran a scything line to score under the posts. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 7-0 lead.

Before ten minutes had been played the Black & Whites had doubled their lead and Ghumra's dream day continued with his second try. The forwards provided clean quick ball and Adam Bibby appreciated the overlap, sending the speedster on his way. Bunting bisected the uprights for 14-0. On the quarter hour Sutton turned over the ball in the 22 and advanced through the pack towards the line. After calmness and control came calamity as they fumbled close to glory. After a first quarter monopolised by an S&E side exploiting the sloping terrain, Canterbury awoke from their slumber and journeyed into the visitors' 22



seeking a response. On the half hour Steve Munford's long clearance had the hosts retreating once more to their 22. Things worsened for the home side when hooker Jake Dengate received a yellow card. Sutton immediately exploited the numerical advantage, executing a set play from their lineout and allowing the prolific hooker Sam Lennie to collect try number 13 in his ninth outing of the campaign. Bunting added his third conversion for a 21-point advantage.

For the visiting supporters it was a delightful reminder of early-season pomp but a knowledgeable local sage informed the Sutton scribe that even a four-try cushion was unsafe with this slope. The first period entered its last few minutes and Canterbury finally got on the scoreboard. A simple penalty from Owain Collins made it 3-21, visibly injecting hope and confidence into the Pilgrims. The turning point came on the stroke of half time. A powerful catch and drive put the Black & Whites on their heels and replacement Nathan Morris forced his way over. The conversion erred and the referee concluded the half. Canterbury sought the sanctuary of the dressing room whilst Sutton stayed on the pitch to hear the second-half tactics. The hosts trailed 8-21, hoping the 13-point deficit would not prove insurmountable.

The second period began with great home purpose and an early penalty that, fortunately for Sutton, struck the upright. For the next Canterbury attack Sutton were indebted to Gareth O'Brien whose try-saving tackle and perfect jackal were of the highest defensive order. Five minutes later the hosts were not to be denied as Owain Collins, the talented young ten, surged to within five metres and then brushed aside a mountainous defender to score. He added the conversion for 15-21.

A minute later the Canterbury comeback was complete as fullback Owen Hewett ran in from distance despite a desperate tackle attempt, his momentum carrying him over under the posts. Collins converted for a narrow home lead with 25 minutes remaining, and soon extended it with a penalty after a strike against the head, making it 25 unanswered points. Sutton's early purple patch had faded and it was now one-way traffic for the Kent club whose forwards, led by Divine, dominated collisions and forced penalties. The slope, gentle at the start of the half, now felt extreme.

Sutton's inspiration came from Adam Bibby who chased a kick and made a thunderous tackle, forcing a penalty. Another infringement followed, placing Sutton deep in the Canterbury 22. The forwards controlled the drive and replacement Jack Howes touched down out wide. The missed conversion left Sutton ahead 26-25 with a bonus point secured. Canterbury had ten minutes to respond. Initially they fluffed their lines with an overthrown 5-metre lineout and then conceded a penalty. But third time proved lucky. A catch and drive moved them into the 22 before the backs swept into action. Collins improvised with a basketball chest pass that opened the field and Hewett raced clear to score in the corner. The conversion failed but the hosts led again, 30-26.

Could Sutton launch one last assault? Tension rose as infringements disrupted play. Canterbury, suddenly unable to control the ball, struggled to run down the clock, but their rapid, abrasive defence contained the visitors to halfway. The game concluded when Bunting's penalty to touch failed to reach the 22 and Canterbury kicked the ball out to seal a 30-26 victory.

After a glorious start it had looked an ideal occasion for Kyren Ghumra to celebrate his 150th league appearance. But in recent rounds Sutton have been unable to maintain their early intensity long enough to subdue opponents. Canterbury rose from their early slumber, combining a robust forward effort with pace in the backs. The longer the game went on the better Collins played. The hosts never panicked despite



trailing by three goals and dominated the second half. For the Black & Whites Rob Hegarty and Ben Tame refused to take a backward step but the forwards could not replicate the fluency of the early exchanges. There was, for the second Saturday in a row, the consolation of two bonus points.

Perhaps the Pilgrims' progress was predictable. They struggled through the Slough of Despond, stood atop the Hill of Destiny before entering the Valley of the Shadow of Death, overcame the Giant Despair and were welcomed to the Celestial City of victory. Though Sutton & Epsom supporters were disappointed they could not fault the hospitality of the hosts whose welcoming bar and ideally placed viewing area provided perfect shelter from the elements. There was neither hobgoblin nor foul fiend in sight.

Next Saturday 6th December Sutton & Epsom host league leaders Brighton. The Sussex men have had an exceptional start as they bid to return to Level Five. They have one loss at home to Beckenham and a 100% record on their travels. Despite three losses on the trot Sutton & Epsom remain third in the table. Rugby Lane supporters will hope the visit of the early pacesetters inspires a return to early-season form. Kick-off is at 2pm and all are welcome.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Fitzgerald, Bibby, Bunting (c), Ghumra, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, McTaggart, Duey, Rea, Tame, Hegarty. Reps: Howes, Finney, Scott.

Canterbury II

Hewett, Masaka, Fielder, Sloan, Orris, Collins, Valladares, Oliver, Dengate, MacMillan, De Vries, Hunt (c), Divine, Evans. Reps: Bull, Morris, Parker.

John Croysdill