



Epic comeback against Sutton & Epsom RFC a fitting end

Medway 32 Sutton & Epsom RFC 31. Saturday 1st February.

It was an emotional Saturday at Priestfields as the hosts had suffered the tragic passing of their cherished groundsman Mel Collins. The archetypal club stalwart, former player, club sponsor and Vice President passed away whilst marking out the pitch for a midweek Army fixture. Grassroots rugby is far more than promotion and relegation; it is about tradition, camaraderie and lifelong friendships, and it seemed entirely appropriate that Medway won this thrilling and highly entertaining encounter 32-31.

Sutton and Epsom were much changed following their Sidcup success as they endured that modern scourge of club rugby - the overseas stag weekend. Resources were stretched but Jack Butt on the bench was the only new face to the campaign. Following a minute's silence, Medway kicked off, but it was the Black & Whites who had the perfect start, scoring from the opening scrum. Number 10 Tom Lennard's intelligent switch to the blindside created an instant overlap, and winger Matt Symonds finished with ease. The conversion from the flank drifted harmlessly by as Sutton led 5-0.

The Kent team pressed hard for an immediate response, but the S&E defence stood firm through multiple phases. However, this effort came at a cost as prop Callum Gibson's thunderous tackle left him prostrate with a shoulder injury that saw Richard Madadangoma enter the fray rather earlier than he had wished. This setback did not upset the visitors' equilibrium. The Sutton defence again withstood a further assault until the referee awarded the hosts a penalty. The three points were surprisingly squandered. Moments later, Medway had a second chance and this time opted for the kick to the corner and the attacking lineout. Plan B was stymied by conceding a penalty.

Tom Lennard turned defence into attack with a massive clearance that left the Priestfield men deep in their 22. The Black & Whites again opted to give it swiftly to their backs. Adam Bibby made the break, and his sublime pass to his centre partner Josh Rea saw him score near the uprights. Tom Lennard added the extras for 12-0 at the end of the first quarter.

From the restart, Tom Lennard again illustrated his prowess with the boot as he sent the home defence scurrying back to their 22. From a scrum, Sutton faked the blindside attack and went open but were thwarted in the corner, needing an excellent tackle from Adam Bibby to stop a promising counter.

On the half-hour mark, it was Medway who again looked to be in the ascendancy as their pack relentlessly carried and their excellent backs kept the ball alive as they probed for weaknesses in the Rugby Lane men's defence. The situation was transformed by a superb turnover from Jac Davies. Steve Munford's awareness led to a kick over the top, and the chase was on. The bounce initially favoured Medway as the ball went backwards and evaded the first attacker, but it nestled obligingly in Tom Lennard's hands. The fly-half set off on a magical jinking run that took him to within a yard. The quality of his pass was diabolical in comparison to his footwork, as the supporting 6-foot-7-inch Ewan McTaggart was offered the ball six inches off the turf. Credit to the lock who gathered the ball and scored. Tom Lennard converted, and Sutton led 19-0.

The crowd hardly had time to digest the score before the Black & Whites added a fourth bonus point try. From the restart, another telling territorial kick put the visitors on the front foot. Flanker Dan Jones made a surging break, and Sutton attacked the left-hand corner. An inspired Tom Lennard summoned his inner Antoine Dupont and lofted an inch-perfect cross-field kick that just cleared the defender and landed in the hands of a grateful Finlay Scott, who touched down. The Sutton 10, who was enjoying his finest display of the season, added the touchline conversion.

The 26-0 score was hardly a fair reflection on the balance of play in the first half, but Sutton had been brilliant in attack. With the clock running down, Medway went in search of a morale-boosting score before the break. On this occasion, S&E failed to cope with the restart, and the Priestfields crowd were rewarded with the first try from their men. Once again, the home forwards carried with passion and precision against the stubborn defence, but this time the hosts would not be denied. Hooker Jack Nickalls was on hand to score out wide. Jamie Ford's kick from the flank unluckily came back off the upright, and the hosts trailed 5-26.

Inspired by opening their account, they stormed back into the Sutton 22 looking to reduce the deficit further, but they were thwarted by another superb Jac Davies turnover. A wonderful first half ended with Sutton & Epsom 26-5 ahead.

From the outset of the second period, Medway ratcheted up the pressure by several notches. Within five minutes, Anthony Clement's blistering break looked certain to create a try, but he was trumped by a Steve Munford cover tackle in the corner. But the hosts were not to be denied, and John Sipawa forced his way over. Jamie Ford did the necessary, and the home team trailed by 12-26.



Soon the fullback was adding three more points to his tally, and the Sutton lead was 26-15. The sizeable Priestfields crowd sensed the game had turned in their favour and urged their team ever onwards. They were rewarded when scrum-half Noah Hyde ended a most profitable third quarter with his side's third try after John Sipawa was hauled down just short of glory. With the extras banked, the deficit was down to four points at 22-26.

With 22 unanswered points, the last thing the visitors needed was another injury, and to make matters worse, it was prop Dan Johnson who departed with a deep cut on his forehead. There was no easing up from the hosts, and their back play got better with every passing moment as players coming from deep with pace were put into gaps with precisely timed passes.

S&E defended valiantly, with Adam Bibby tackling himself to a standstill in midfield. Medway were awarded a kickable penalty but opted for the scrummage. Under severe pressure, the Sutton set-piece was creaking, and the home team had a free ball. Jamie Ford timed his entry into the line to perfection and glided in for the try. Though the 15 hooked his conversion attempt, the comeback was complete as Medway led 27-26.

A few minutes later, a now rampant Medway had their fifth try, and it was the forwards' turn to demonstrate their handling skills as flanker Dan Jackson triumphantly crossed the whitewash. With under ten minutes to go, the hosts led 32-26 and looked to be favourites to stretch their lead.

The Kent team had monopolised possession in the second half to such an extent that many Sutton players might have forgotten what the ball looked like, let alone felt like. The travelling supporters were probably looking at damage limitation and holding on to the losing bonus point. Then the game offered another twist as Gareth O'Brien set off on one of his familiar sidestepping runs. Winger Finlay Scott, who had been starved of possession, devoured the ball and squeezed home in the corner for his second try. The challenging conversion was missed, and Sutton trailed 31-32.

Medway were not to be denied their epic comeback on this most special afternoon. The hosts returned to the offensive, and following another penalty, they were once more on the S&E line. Courageous defence denied the hosts, who were held up over the line. Sutton and Epsom had the drop-out behind their line and had the length of the pitch to cover if they wanted the win. On this occasion, there was to be no last-play drama, and Medway held on for a 32-31 win.

Sutton & Epsom Team:

O'Brien, Symonds, Rea, Bibby, Scott, Lennard, Munford ©, Johnson, Lennie, Gibson, Tame, McTaggart, Jones, Davies & Hegarty. Replacements: Hilton, Gibson & Howes.

Medway Team:

Ford, Chalmers, Bullock, Revell, Sipawa, Clement, Hyde N, Oyesola, Nickalls, Campbell, Cole, Stubbington, Jackson, Hyde J & Ajuzie. Replacements: Perry, Mason & Price.

Sutton and Epsom rugby away win

SIDCUP 24 SUTTON & EPSOM RFC 34. Saturday 25th January. Crescent Farm has produced a bounteous harvest this season with a maximum crop yield of 35 points from a magnificent seven wins. In addition, last season's visit by Sutton and Epsom was seen by many levelheaded observers as the nadir of that campaign. Originally planned for January 18th, before the intervention of Jack Frost, this fixture came with the usual proviso of a rescheduled match: Who is available? In a quality encounter, Sutton and Epsom, playing their best rugby of the season, inflicted the first home defeat of the season on Sidcup by 34-24.

The Black & Whites welcomed back Messrs Johnson & Lennie to the front row union but were bereft of the veteran Munford and Number 8 Rob Hegarty who had scored a hat trick against Old Tiffinians the previous Saturday. Job 1:21 springs to mind. The hosts kicked off in glorious sunshine on a windless afternoon. S&E were swiftly into their stride opening their account after a few minutes. Freddy Bunting kicked a penalty to the 22 where Ewan McTaggart obliged with clean lineout ball. A dominant carry by Josh Glanville set up the backs and slick passing resulted in a Gareth O'Brien dummy and a try. Captain Bunting converted from the flank for 7-0. Sutton now demonstrated vastly improved kicking from hand with the highlight being a sublime 50-22 from Tom Lennard. Sidcup have conceded the least points by any club in the league this season so excellent defence was expected. A second try was denied but they came back for a penalty that Freddy Bunting nonchalantly converted for 10-0.

The home team hit back with multiple phases and great intent. Deep in the Sutton 22 they had a free ball and looked to cross the whitewash. It was the turn of the Surrey men to defend valiantly and the Kent team to have the consolation of a penalty. Josh Twyford obliged to trail by 3-10. It had been a thrilling start but the best was still to come. On the quarter hour Sutton produced their try of the season. The forwards carried with pace and conviction with Sam Lennie and Josh Glanville making gains. The ball



was then passed along the backs with pace and precision to exploit an overlap, and winger Finlay Scott ran in untouched from near halfway. Freddy Bunting's conversion extended the advantage to 17-3 at the end of an inspired first quarter.

Sidcup fought hard to get back into the game but not only was S&E tackling first rate but also the coverage of the host's kicking game was most efficient. Another penalty gave Freddy Bunting the chance to put the Crescent Farm team into the corner. The lineout was secured but all momentum appeared to have dissipated, and the drive was halted. Sutton lost yards and were recycling the ball on the 22 when Number 9 Laurence Wise dummied at the ruck and made a clean break. Ben Tame's fine support run was rewarded with his try under the posts. A simple conversion added to the burgeoning Bunting account for the season for 24-3 on the half hour.

There was no easing off from the visitors. Playing with a high tempo combining powerful carrying from the pack and astute kicking from the backs, the hosts were forced to defend in their 22. With normal time nearly complete, winger Matt Symonds picked up a loose ball near touch as Sidcup tried to break out. The ball arrived at the Brobdingnagian lock Ewan McTaggart who strode towards glory only to be denied by courageous cover. Despite two 5-metre penalties under the posts, and Sidcup being reduced to 14 when Ben Ibrahim saw yellow for an additional 10-minute siesta, the visitors failed to extend their lead. S&E had replaced their front row in its entirety as Gibson, Hilton and Howes came off the bench, but despite these fresh legs the first period ended with no further addition to the scoreboard that read 24-3 to Sutton and Epsom.

Winning at home has not only become a habit but it is the norm for Sidcup this term. Sutton may have excelled in the first half with a comfortable lead at the break but all those present were expecting the hosts to raise their game. Still with the numerical advantage, the second half began where the first had left off with the Black & Whites besieging the home line after the Bunting restart was dropped on the 22 gifting S&E a scrum. Sweeping attacks, superb defence and the usual penalty kicked to the corner. However, there was variety as Sutton erred with an accidental offside followed by a Sidcup infringement on their put-in and culminating with S&E giving away a penalty at the ruck when in prime position. Would the visitors rue their failure to secure the fourth try either side of the break?

In the third quarter, Sutton and Epsom were forced into demonstrating their defensive qualities. They were assisted by a lack of discipline by the hosts. After a 5-metre lineout had been neutered, Sidcup had the consolation of a scrum under the posts. Not only did they concede a penalty but in addition a quizzical comment saw them retreat ten metres more a second time. The cacodoxy in rugby is to argue with the referee. The second 10-metre forced march for Sidcup hinted at an outbreak of logorrhoea from a certain quarter and Mr Pedro Diogo would not tolerate the dissentient voices. Finally, the hosts made their possession, territory, and pressure count. The popular combination of a penalty, kick to the corner and the catch & drive try. Replacement Harry Large was the beneficiary of the fine forward effort. The reliable boot of Josh Twyford added the extras and optimism swept through Crescent Farm as their team trailed 10-24.

Sutton reintroduced Lennie and Johnson for Howes and Hilton. The gains from the Sidcup goal were quickly negated by another penalty which gave Freddy Bunting the opportunity to extend the lead to 27-10. From the restart the Rugby Lane men tried to run it out of their 22 but knocked on. From the scrum the hosts took full advantage as the forwards carried deep into the 22 before centre Sam Leek's astute line of running saw him touchdown by the uprights. Josh Twyford made it 27-17 and the comeback was on. Ewan McTaggart then received a yellow card at the restart and suddenly the game took on an entirely new complexion. An emboldened Sidcup threw everything at the visitors and looked favourites to add another quick score. However, credit to the character of this current S&E vintage. They rallied, scrapped for every ball and were defensively dogged.

The decisive blow came with ten minutes to go and the Black & Whites still with 14. A loose ball was picked up by prop Dan Johnson. There is no more popular sight in rugby than a prop forward on the charge. This was a classic with an impressively high knee-lift he set off like a Highland warrior eager to decapitate an Englishman and bearing an expression of deranged ferocity as he covered the 40 metres to score unchallenged under the posts for a memorable first try for Sutton. Freddy Bunting chipped over the easiest of conversions for a 34-17 lead and a bonus point.

Returning to their full complement, the Black & Whites doubled down defensively and looked to control territory. A penalty was kicked to the 22 was followed by a fine grubber by Tom Lennard and the hosts were stuck deep in their own half. The game entered time added on and the deficit was too great but credit to Sidcup as they kept pressing. The Crescent Farm crowd were rewarded when their team scored their third try of the afternoon. A penalty was kicked into the corner and from the ideal platform of the 5-metre lineout they crossed the whitewash. Josh Twyford being presented with the close-range try after the hard yards from the forwards. He added the conversion for 24-34. There was just time for one more play but there was to be no further addition to the scoreboard and Sutton recorded a notable scalp winning away 34-24.

Without doubt, this was the performance of the season that has included fine wins over the table toppers at Rugby Lane on three separate occasions. It was a wonderful team effort from 1 to 18 with the forwards providing quality ball and the backs playing with a fluency not previously seen. Laurence Wise at 9 had an exceptional game for a man with only a handful of caps. The kicking



game was unrecognisable from recent times, the defence was back to its high standards but it was the tempo and continuity that really caught the eye. It needed a performance of this nature to defeat a Sidcup XV that has made Crescent Farm a fortress this season.

Next week, the Sutton charabanc heads to Medway who will be looking to redress the balance. They arrived at Rugby Lane in October in pole position and returned with a 28-24 defeat.

Sutton and Epsom: O'Brien, Symonds, Bibby, Bunting ©, Scott, Lennard, Wise, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Rea, Jones & Tame. Replacements: Hilton, Gibson & Howes.

Sidcup: Ellison, Sheridan, Leek, McMahon, Keeley, Twyford, Ibrahim, Conlon, Fordham, Carmen, Epps, Evans, Williams, Healey & West. Replacements: Gibbons, Large & Masters.

Sutton & Epsom RFC just fail to mount comeback

SUTTON & EPSOM RFC 42 OLD TIFFINIANS 46. Saturday 18th January. *Sutton and Epsom* started this campaign with a rollicking runaway win over Old Colfeians.

Since then the Rugby Lane crowd has enjoyed an overwhelming diet of tense, low scoring affairs with defensive defiance the common theme. The avalanche of points in the 48-43 loss to Old Reigatian being very much the statistical outlier. However, a glance at the reverse fixture, a 41-19 Tiffinians triumph, and the bonus point penchant of OTs perhaps gave a hint to another Old Boy try-fest. In a seesaw encounter of thirteen tries the visitors edged it 46-42.

Sutton and Epsom kicked off with prop **Alex Mount** celebrating his 100th league appearance and desperate to eviscerate the memory of that chastening October loss. The opening salvoes were fast and furious with both sides hinting that it would be an entertaining afternoon on a favourable surface with minimal elemental interference. After ten minutes an accidental offside from a lineout offered Freddy Bunting the chance to peg the Old Boys back into their 22. This initiated an all-out assault as the forwards looked to open the scoring against a resilient Tiffinian defence. Ironically on this red-letter day for the centurion it was the ultimate unsung hero, Josh Glanville, who took the best supporting Oscar with the opening try on his 50th appearance. The stalwart second row is worth many a verse of praise as he is always at the heart of the action doing the less glamorous hard work that is much admired by not only his teammates but also the supporters. Bunting added the extras for a reassuring 7-0 lead.

Five minutes later the hosts had doubled their advantage. Benefiting from two quick-fire penalties the Black & Whites were gifted a 5-metre lineout in the corner. With commendable precision and control the forwards ushered Rob Hegarty over the line. If Sutton and Epsom had started with the single-minded determination to redress the balance from the unpalatable defeat at Summer Avenue then their opponents demonstrated admirable sangfroid. As Bunting prepared to make it 14 zip there were no splenetic recriminations under the posts but just a calm assessment from Captain Hobbs that they were playing well. Little did we know that we had the heir to Nostradamus in our midst.

There followed a remarkable twenty minutes. To describe it as a reversal of fortunes would be a grotesque understatement. It was a tectonic shift of cataclysmic proportions that altered the landscape of Rugby Lane with 29 unanswered points from a rampant Old Tiffinians. It started with some familiar ineffective kick tennis followed by a couple of penalties conceded by the hosts. The visitors pressed hard and the livewire scrum half Matt Fowler collected the first of his trio of tries. The touchline conversion failed and 5-14. Sutton and Epsom seemed to shrug off this aberration with a promising attack from a tapped penalty but good work was undermined by poor handling. Tiffs next incursion in the home 22 saw winger Segun splendidly exploit a Sutton and Epsom error with a stylish finish. The touchline conversion struck the crossbar and went over for 12-14. The comfortable cushion had deflated to a miserly 2-point advantage.

An emboldened opposition were certainly not finished. More penalties ceded territory, more errors were punished and two more tries followed in the next five minutes. Matt Fowler was the major beneficiary as his excellent support play and eye for the tryline saw him complete a first period hat trick. Coach Blackburn must have been delighted at the response of his charges with the high tempo play, slick passing and a lethal awareness that led to four clinical finishes and a 26-14 lead. With the interval approaching Sutton and Epsom conceded another penalty in front of their posts but with the 4-try bonus point already securely banked Sharif Dougaramaji took the three points meaning that Sutton and Epsom required three scores as now they trailed 29-14.

In time added on in the first half the home crowd urged their team to respond. Captain Bunting perhaps motivated by an understandable despair at the horrific turn of events adopted the motto of the suffragettes: "Deeds not Words". He set off on a stunning break combining pace, power and changes of direction before being halted in the OT 22 and gaining a penalty. With the



lineout operating like a metronome the kick was declined in favour of the 5-metre lineout. With the throw safely secured Sutton and Epsom advanced to the line. Desperate defence could not stop the drive and Mr Maynard spotted skulduggery and trotted under the posts to award a penalty try. The whistle blew to conclude a breathless 50-point first half with Tiffinians 29-21 to the good.

Sutton and Epsom opened the second period on the front foot and despite missing an early opportunity to cross the whitewash they were given a second chance with a prior indiscretion. The supporters waited in anxious anticipation for the 5-metre lineout. Once again the forwards delivered and Rob Hegarty had his second score and Sutton and Epsom had the bonus point. The reliability of the lineout was rivalling the Bunting boot that made it 28-29. The penalty count mounted against the visitors. Five minutes later Sutton and Epsom faced the familiar question: Take the simple three points or go for the maximum? Their positive approach and the excellence of the lineout gave Rob Hegarty his hat trick. Freddy Bunting impressed once more with a touchline conversion and the Black & Whites had regained the lead 35-29 but there was still 30 minutes on the clock.

The restart should be a moment to refocus and heighten one's concentration. Sadly Sutton and Epsom reacted in statuesque fashion to the kick. To compound this error they conceded a completely unnecessary penalty for a high tackle on a man in the maul. For the umpteenth time the ball arrowed into the corner from a penalty. This time there was some variation on the theme as the ball was shipped wide to the backs. The Sutton and Epsom focus on the catch and drive left an overlap and Sharif Dougramaji bulldozed his way over the line. The centre converted his try and the pendulum swung back in Old Tiffinians favour as they led 36-35.

Ineffectual kicking and penalties now haunted Sutton and Epsom as the Old Boys were in the ascendancy. They declined a simple penalty in front of the posts in search of another try. There was a return to the popular catch and drive theme as Number 8 Jaewon Jang completed the score. The missed conversion left Sutton and Epsom trailing by 35-41 knowing a goal would inch them ahead. Moments later and it was roles reversed. Sutton and Epsom had the penalty and another lineout opportunity. Once more the excellent throwing in by Alex Mount found its mark. The home pack bullied their way to the line and prop Callum Gibson scored from a couple of centimetres out. The highly lubricated crowd roared their approval as the Bunting conversion sailed over and his side led 42-41 with ten to go.

It was the traditional tense ending for the assembled crowd as has become the norm at Rugby Lane but that certainly did not ease the tension. Errors and infringements far outnumbered moments of quality as all involved knew that the next score might be the decider. As the hosts ran the ball from just outside their 22 disaster struck as a pass was intercepted. Sharif Dougramaji kept his composure and scored lucky try number 13 in the match. However, once again he failed with the conversion and with the OTs leading 46-42 Sutton and Epsom required a try to lead. In the in-goal area a disconsolate and exhausted Alex Mount left the field having given his all. He may not have scored a try but his excellent lineout service had provided a remarkable six tries for his pack.

There was to be no last gasp glory and Old Tiffinians held on to complete the double over Sutton and Epsom. The hosts' errors had been costly but great credit to the visitors who pounced on every opportunity and did not squander a chance all game. Hat trick hero Matt Fowler exemplified their ruthless streak and the first half purple patch was the foundation of their success. Rob Hegarty joins the illustrious trio of Will East (Luton), Kyren Ghumra (Shelford) and Ollie Baptiste-Wilson (Royal Wootton Bassett) who have scored a hat trick in the league for Sutton and Epsom in a losing cause. The match was a curious affair because there was much to applaud in the Sutton and Epsom performance but their demise was the result of self-inflicted wounds that were deep and proved to be fatal. Next Saturday sees the visit to Sidcup to play the fixture that was recently frozen off. There can be no doubt about not only the severity of the task but also that the hosts will be equally unforgiving if the Black & Whites repeat such an error-strewn performance.

Sutton and Epsom:

O'Brien, Scott, Bibby, Bunting ©, Rea, Lennard, Munford, Mount, Boaden, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.
Replacements: Hilton, Davies & Wise.

Old Tiffinians:

Day, Segun, Dougramaji, Sabania, Marshall, Taylor, Fowler, Hobbs ©, Blackman, Turner, O'Connell, Noeh, Dore, Graham & Jang.
Replacements: Oram, Turnbull & Burgess.



New Year Cheer For Sutton and Epsom Rugby

Sutton & Epsom RFC 21 Battersea Ironsides 20. Saturday 4th January.

The September fixtures had concluded with a rousing encounter at Garratt Green when these two fine sides could not be separated and fought to a standstill for an engrossing 19-19 draw. It was the first indication in this campaign that Sutton had transformed their rather porous defence of recent times into a far more formidable outfit. The Ironsides still remain the benchmark for this league and another fiercely competitive contest was expected. Rugby Lane had witnessed five home victories on the bounce but every one of them by a miserly margin. This match maintained that sequence as Sutton edged out Battersea by a solitary point to win 21-20.

With winter arriving in the week there were concerns the pitch might be under threat from the elements. Rugby Lane was spared and a small but knowledgeable crowd gathered in gelid amiability. Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings as Sutton attacked the clubhouse end. The hosts were in top gear at once with multiple phases and commendable continuity they advanced steadily into the visiting 22 but concluded by conceding a penalty. The defences held sway as they thwarted the best endeavours of both teams. However, S&E put themselves under unnecessary pressure with errant kicking from hand that has been an unwelcome feature in recent weeks. The first instance came on ten minutes when a simple touch kick failed to cross the whitewash. It was returned with interest, led to a penalty and suddenly the Black & Whites were defending a lineout near their line. The pack were held short of glory before the ball was transferred to Charles Jacobs on the wing who could empathise with Buridan's ass as he pondered whether to go outside or cut back and the brief hesitation enabled Adam Bibby to hold him up over the line.

Shortly afterwards from the first scrum Sutton failed to find touch and Charles Stuart executed a perfect 50/22 to put the hosts under the cosh once more. The 2024-5 Sutton vintage is far more robust than recent predecessors and the defence forced a handling error. From the scrum Rob Hegarty made his first penetrative carry from Number 8 on an afternoon that was to garner impressive yardage for a man celebrating his 50th cap. At the third time of asking S&E cleared with the boot. Back in the opposition half the fluent movement looked to have broken down disastrously. Charles Stuart intercepted and was sauntering off for a certain score when the referee, Matt Blackett, brought play back for a penalty for the home team. Bunting stepped up to the oche and slotted over a 45-yard penalty for the 3-0 lead.

Both teams were showing admirable attacking intent that was neutered by well-organised defences with ferocious tackling. The Ironsides were also hindered by ambisinistrous handling with the mitigation being the cold weather. On the half hour another Sutton attack floundered in the Battersea 22 but Mr Blackett brought play back for an infringement near halfway. Once again Freddy Bunting impressively bisected the uprights for 6-0. From the restart the Greens soon won a penalty of their own and kicked to the 22. The lineout drive shifted the play laterally before the attack drove towards the corner. The ball was recycled and spun to the opposite side and a mismatch in the centres was expertly exploited and Charles Jacobs ran in untouched for the try. Charles Stuart put Battersea 7-6 ahead with a perfectly struck conversion.

The hosts were soon offered the chance to restore their lead but on this occasion the penalty was just beyond the range of the Bunting boot. This was the start of a period of intense pressure from Sutton as they sought the lead before the break. A penalty was kicked into the corner and from the attacking lineout the ball was sent towards the wing only to be intercepted. Again Sir brought play back for a penalty. From the tapped penalty Rob Hegarty went close before hooker Sam Lennie forced his way over for his first Sutton try. Freddy Bunting converted and the whistle blew for the interval with S&E leading 13-7.

It was the type of afternoon where the piquid offerings of a burger van are enjoyed more for the warmth given to the hands than their culinary delights. One local resident was seen to take pity on two elderly spectators on a bench. Having popped home he returned with cups of tea and added brandy much to the appreciation of the lucky supporters. The game was living up to expectations and the score reflected an even contest that was in the balance. No one doubted that the second half would be more of the same with no quarter being given by two excellent defences.

From the restart Battersea Ironsides set out to dominate the rest of the proceedings playing at a higher tempo and with great intensity they subjected Sutton to intense pressure. The hosts were up for the challenge and weathered the early storm. Aided by a knock on by Cameron Baker, resplendent in white tights, the hosts gained a foothold in Battersea territory. Soon the familiar and reassuring sight of Freddy Bunting lining up a penalty was followed by cheers as the captain extended the lead to 16-7. Minutes later Charles Stewart replied in kind to reduce the deficit to a single score as Battersea Ironsides trailed 10-16.

The game entered the final quarter with the visitors' best efforts being undone by handling errors in the face of the relentless pressure from the home defence. Sutton's counters were promising rather than significant as the balance of play was in Battersea's favour with their glabrous Number 9 Ed Carr urging his team ever onwards. Finally, the pressure paid dividends as the Ironsides forwards were denied near the line the ball was spun wide. It was the turn of the men in green to benefit from Mr



Blackett bringing the play back for a penalty. Charles Stuart accepted the easy 3-point option as the scoreboard eventually registered Sutton 16 Battersea 13 with ten minutes of regular time left on the clock.

For regulars at Rugby Lane this season this was familiar territory. Following the opening day thrashing of Old Colfeians every home game since has gone down to the wire.

Sutton & Epsom:

O'Brien, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Gibson, Mount & Rea.

Battersea Ironsides:

Baker, Diamond, Magee, Banton, Jacobs, Stuart, Carr, Martin, Lewis, Chetwynd, Trickett, Wharton, Macpherson, Chitan & Dollard.

Replacements: Borup, Plater & Hirons.

Image courtesy Robin Kennedy

After 12 wins in a run Sutton & Epsom fall at the thirteenth

Old Reigatian 21 Sutton & Epsom RFC 15. Saturday 21st December.

Midweek illnesses, at one stage, threatened to derail Sutton selection for the last league game in 2024. Ultimately the usual array of injuries, concussion protocols and Saturnian celebrations led to only four changes from the squad that tamed Beckenham. In September the two sides thrilled Rugby Lane with Old Reigatian holding on to win 48-43. Since that day OR have only enjoyed two more wins and even more remarkably S&E have not indulged in the frippery of a solitary further bonus point. Entering Round 13 after six wins on the spin would it be 'Seventh Heaven' or 'A Game Too Far' for the Black & Whites? In another enthralling and entertaining encounter the hosts triumphed 21-15 completing the season double over Sutton.

Despite the recent meteorological travails the pitch was in pristine condition and full credit to all those people who work tirelessly to make Geoffrey Knight Fields such an excellent venue. Though pleasantly moist under foot, rather than muddy, there was a strong diagonal wind and the ominous prospect of impending rain. Almost at once the wind, favouring the hosts, demonstrated its venomous teeth by sweeping a Reigatian kick comfortably beyond the playing parameters and play resumed with a Sutton scrum in the hosts' half. Sutton opened their account after five minutes. A powerful scrum on halfway was followed by a Bibby break and a Rea run. Fleet-footed fly-half Freddy Bunting looped around and received the ball to dash into the corner. The captain, making light of the elements, added the conversion to his try for a 7-0 advantage.

From the restart the visitors were on the attack again with Ben Tame carrying out of the 22 to link with Josh Rea who fed Dan Jones who kicked ahead. Sutton stole the line out and were awarded a penalty. Freddy Bunting opted for the three points and extended the lead to 10-0. Perhaps Old Reigatian feeling the pressure of having the wind started to run from everywhere rather than exploiting the conditions with the boot. Errors mounted and Sutton were in the ascendancy and pressing for another try. Gareth O'Brien's angled run was met by a fabulous try-saving tackle on the quarter hour. At the end of the first quarter the fluent play from the Rugby Lane team was rewarded. The referee played advantage and the ball was flung out to the right touchline. Angus Findlay did well to take the high pass and then excelled himself with a perfect inside pass to Rob Hegarty who dived into the corner. Their followed a moment or three of confusion. Freddy Bunting's effort from the extremities split the jury if not the uprights. One flag was raised, the other remained disinterested and the scoreboard indicated 15-0. Then it became 17-0 before finally resting with 15 points to Sutton & Epsom.

Sutton's play in the first quarter bore all the hallmarks of a side buoyed by their winning streak and confident in their method. The visitors then gave the hosts a foothold in the match. S&E overthrew their lineout ball 10 metres from their line. Jude McRobbie accepted the festive offering and had the awareness to exploit the situation and strode home for the try. Tom Baldwin navigated the wind with aplomb to see the home XV trail 7-15. This was followed by a frenetic period of play. The reinvigorated Reigatian team launched an ominous attack only to be undone by an Adam Bibby interception. The centre was hauled down 35 metres out and the ball was run back with an impressive counter until it was turned over and returned with interest. It was breathless stuff for players and spectators alike. Despite the best endeavours of all concerned the half ended with no further



additions, or reductions, to the scoreboard. Sutton, who had dominated the early exchanges, led 15-7 but Reigatian were right back in the contest as the sides retired to the warmth of the dressing rooms to contemplate their strategy for the second period.

Old Reigatian began the second half in splendid fashion creating two chances in as many minutes. The first was thwarted by an errant pass and the second by an interception. Sutton threatened to score with a wonderful 60-metre burst by Adam Bibby but he failed to connect with the lone support of Matt Symonds. OR stepped up the pressure and were aided by a flurry of S&E indiscretions that did not go unmissed by Mr Stewart. Following considerable pressure and multiple advantages Old Reigatian deservedly scored. With the addition of the Baldwin conversion the Black & Whites lead had shrunk to a single point as they held a 15-14 advantage. In addition to his exemplary place-kicking Tom Baldwin was becoming increasingly influential with ball in hand as he exploited the extra time and space he was finding with numerous jinking breaks that had Sutton scrambling in retreat.

Driving drizzle descended for the last half hour as conditions for players and spectators deteriorated rapidly. Scrum-half Ali Webb made a fine break as the hosts started to dominate proceedings. As the game entered the final quarter Sutton & Epsom received an additional burden when Mr Stewart correctly issued a yellow card to Dan Jones to reduce the visitors to 14 men when the flanker failed to avoid the airborne catcher. At once slick handling and ruthless efficiency saw winger Jonny Bridges cross the whitewash for his side's third try. Baldwin maintained his 100% record and the Geoffrey Knight Fields' fans rose as one to celebrate the 21-15 lead. The fifteen-point deficit was now a distant memory.

However, this was familiar territory for the Black & Whites who have become remarkably proficient in coming out on top in close encounters of the rugby kind. They looked poised to score through their pack as they advanced to the line only to concede a penalty. In the blink of an eye the visitors were back in their 22 and grateful that skipper Reilly Franklin-Talbot dropped the ball so denying his side the chance to increase their lead. Sutton's scrambling defence was being tested to the limits. As usual Steve Munford was to the fore but perhaps the best tackle came from Angus Findlay swooping off his wing to thwart another opportunity. With five minutes left the visiting forwards looked like they were going to add a third try. Once more they were denied by the whistle. This time the Rugby Lane team could not edge out their opponent at the death. Old Reigatian held on for a 21-15 victory. It was a well-deserved success as Old Reigatian had created more opportunities and played the more eye-catching rugby in the second half.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Symonds, Rea, Bibby, Findlay, Bunting ©, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Mount, Davies & Hilton.

Old Reigatian:

Woodford, Briggs, Allen, Baldwin, Parker, Holder, Webb, Marshall, Nestor, Lee, Grant, Franklin-Talbot ©, McRobbie, Goodwin & Travers.

Replacements: Garrec, Cox & Overtom.

Photo credit Robin Kennedy

Sutton & Epsom topple league leaders

Sutton & Epsom RFC 20 Beckenham 19. Saturday 14th December.

For the final league match at Rugby Lane in 2024 the crowd were treated to the visit of the league leaders Beckenham. Twice previously this campaign have proud pole position players descended upon Cheam. Firstly, Sidcup were dispatched and then Medway had their colours lowered by the Black & Whites. Could Rugby Lane prove again to be a graveyard for the aspirations of the high-flying? This is the first of the reverse fixtures this season and the visitors' hopes were bolstered by their September success at Balmoral Avenue by 29-14. However, it was Sutton who triumphed 20-19 to collect, arguably, their most valuable scalp of the season.

After one week away Jordan Huie and Jac Davies returned for Sutton. The Black & Whites may have the Kiwi trio of Bibby, Lennie and Rea but Beckenham included Jamaican internationals Lamar Sinclair & Rimani Richards, Barbadian Sevens caps with the Caddy brothers in the centres as well as Messrs Aoke-Tiamu, Badger, Boyce & Kakoulidis from Australia added to the mix. Freddy Bunting set the game in motion on a dismally gray afternoon, thankfully free from rain, with a crosswind in his face. It was high tempo rugby from the outset as probing attacks were battered back by formidable defences. Rob Hegarty, who is enjoying an impressive season for S&E, made the first significant break to the 22 but his side failed to capitalise. Sadly, Beckenham lost their



influential 15 Bradley Bateup to an horrific dislocated knee in the opening ten minutes.

The next S&E opportunity was snuffed out as the ball was stripped in contact. It was to be a feature of the first period that Sutton ball carriers became isolated and were consumed by Beckenham's predatory pack who were excellent at the breakdown. In addition, the league leaders, from the first whistle, showed a propensity to run the ball from defence. The abrasive and robust carrying of Liam Caddy was perfectly complemented by deft offloads of his brother Jake as they tried to utilise the power and pace of Jordan Gabriel and Zane Kakaloudis on the wings. The Black & White defence had to be on their mettle and they were equal to every challenge.

After a quarter of an hour the deadlock was finally broken. A Beckenham player strayed offside and Freddy Bunting calmly from 40 metres put his side 3-0 up. Having gathered the restart the hosts did not escape the perustration of Mr Spencer Pearce who reciprocated with a kickable penalty for the visitors. The Balmoral Avenue side were not content with levelling the score but went in search of the lead as they kicked into the corner. The league leaders illustrated their promotion credentials by scoring in the corner despite resolute defence. After several phases Tom Ward, like all good 7s, was on hand to cross the whitewash. The touchline conversion failed but the Kent team led 5-3 at the end of the first quarter.

Poor passing by the Sutton & Epsom side on halfway led to a lightning counter by Beckenham. A stunning score was nipped in the bud by a trademark covering tackle by the ageless Steve Munford. Sutton rallied with a superb scrummage winning the ball against the head that initiated their best passage of play. The game was developing into a highly entertaining spectacle as dangerous attacks were neutered by extremely efficient defences. Unfortunately, just after the half hour the away side suffered a second significant departure as loose-head prop David Aoake-Tiamu hobbled off the park.

Half time was rapidly approaching but with two significant breaks for injuries there would be a healthy amount of afters to consume. Beckenham were holding Sutton in check until a stunning break by Tom Lennard saw him advance deep into the 22 and as he was enveloped by the defensive cover flanker Dan Jones was on hand to take the well timed pass under the posts. Captain Bunting chipped over the conversion for a 10-5 lead. The Black & Whites went in search of further glory and moment later Freddy Bunting was lining up a pop at the posts. The expectant crowd, so accustomed to the excellence of their kicker, were surprised to see the ball drift wide as Bunting missed kicks are as rare as Ben Duckett leaving a ball in a test match. The final opportunity fell to the visitors but their 5-metre lineout was bundled into touch to conclude the first half with the scoreboard reading Sutton & Epsom 10 Beckenham 5.

The hosts made a rapid start to the second period. Learning from the first half the forwards advanced was ably supported and Steve Munford enjoyed a stream of fast ball on the front foot. A stunning break by Gareth O'Brien propelled him into open space in the 22 but he selflessly passed to Rob Hegarty who ran in under the posts. Freddy Bunting completed the formalities for 17-5. This was a healthy lead though when returning prop Alex Mount vociferously declared: "They cannot live with us" it was met with ribald laughter from players on both sides. Everyone at Rugby Lane knew this game was far from over. It soon came to pass, five minutes later, that Beckenham were alive but not kicking as they declined the three-point option. Then another penalty meant the hosts were defending a 5-metre line out. Geordie Boyce secured the ball and hooker Lamar Sinclair muscled his way over despite the efforts of his opposite number Sam Lennie. Lewis Bunton added a sweetly struck conversion to reduce the deficit to 12-17.

The visitors pressed hard but Sutton held on. In the dying minutes, after a relentless forty-phase attack, a blocked drop-goal attempt from Lewis Bunton secured Sutton's 20-19 victory.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Tame, McTaggart, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.
Replacements: Boaden, Davies & Hilton.

Beckenham

Bateup, Kakoulidis, Caddy J, Caddy L, Jordan, Bunton, Curtis, Aoake-Tiamu, Sinclair, Badger, Moran, Keefe ©, Boyce, Ward & Knowles.

Replacements: Richards, Latouche & Lovell.

Photo credit: Robin Kennedy

Rugby result reads well for Sutton & Epsom

Sutton & Epsom RFC 17 - Reeds Weybridge 11. Saturday 7th December 2024.



The arrival of Reeds Weybridge at Rugby Lane signalled the culmination of the first half of the season having played the other ten teams in the league in the previous rounds. The Whiteley Village outfit lay third in the table. It was an identical position to the same stage as last season but they enjoyed an improved record of eight wins and 40 points compared to seven wins and 32 points. In comparison, Sutton & Epsom are one win, two places and six points better off than the 2023-4 statistics. On the last occasion these teams met it was for the denouement of the season and S&E won by 12-10 with a late Rob Hegarty try. It was again a thrilling affair with Sutton triumphing 17-11 for their fifth win on the spin.

Storm Darragh had put paid to the game at Priestfields but that was the only postponement as Reeds kicked off with the clubhouse and a strong wind behind them. S&E had brought in Matt Symonds and Josh Rea to replace Jordan Huie and Jac Davies. Sam Lennie was elevated from the bench to make his first start as hooker with Dan Jones switching to the flank. The Black & Whites incurred an early injury when Callum Gibson was replaced by Tom Boaden within the opening ten minutes. The visitors enjoyed more of the possession and territory in the first quarter but the conditions and ferocious defence by all concerned limited opportunities. Reeds progress was additionally hampered by frustrating penalties. On the half hour excellent Sutton defence turned over the ball in their 22 and Dan Jones broke the shackles with a stunning burst to halfway. RW responded in kind and won a penalty which they decided to kick for points. The reliable Jack Jesty opened their account for a 3-0 advantage.

From the restart Sutton were gifted the chance to level the scores but as is their wont they kicked to the corner in search of greater rewards. The gamble was justified as the forwards completed their primary task of securing possession. The war of attrition was declined in favour of spinning the ball wide. The ball was transferred adroitly to Angus Findlay who again demonstrated his increasing aptitude for scoring in the corner. Even for the prodigious Freddy Bunting a touchline conversion against the wind was beyond his scope but his side led 5-3. Reeds Weybridge sought to take advantage of the wind and kicked into the home 22 where a scrambling Gareth O'Brien escorted it to touch. Another chip ahead appeared to harmlessly roll dead but the referee brought play back for S&E pulling down the lineout. Jack Jesty stepped up to regain the lead at 6-5 in time added on. A feature of the match was the numerous injury breaks throughout and it meant Sutton had plenty of time to reply.

Having secured the restart Sam Lennie twice carried powerfully in the 22. It was the host's who now had a penalty that gained no advantage. Usually when the ball is brought back for an indiscretion the defence can reset whilst the offence carefully considers its options. On this occasion the RW team had overpopulated their left flank leaving their right as weak as the Ardennes in 1940. Gareth O'Brien was alert to the possibilities and took advantage of Sam Lennie as his decoy as he glided through the remnants of the defence to celebrate his 50th cap in style. Freddy Bunting accepted the extras after the minor inconvenience of replacing the ball on the tee. The Black & Whites led 12-6. There was still four more minutes of the additional eleven to go. The final Reeds attack was snuffed out by excellent smothering defence by Adam Bibby and Mr Carter finally ended the half with Sutton ahead by 12-6.

The second half began to recall striking parallels with the final fixture of last season. Formidable attacking waves crashing against adamant defences. The hosts besieged the visitor's 22. The game was set on an endless loop with Sisyphus and Tantalus starring for Sutton and Horatio playing the lead for Reeds. The Black & Whites seemed bereft of the traditional timber equine solution. Recent clinical efficiency in their opponent's 22 was replaced by frustration against an impenetrable defence. The elements added a slightly comical note as the wind hampered clearance kicks of sufficient distance. However, the Reeds solution of running a penalty 5 metres from their line and kicking to their wing was hardly a prosaic solution. It might require some training ground practice or only play that card on a still afternoon. The ball ended up being caught by Sutton as it descended near the Reeds' line in the corner.

Meanwhile for the Rugby Lane crowd the habit of declining the kickable three points was being questioned in the grandstand. As the game progressed the penalties became increasingly adjacent to the uprights. Fuelled by their libations the crowd implored, beseeched and vociferously heckled for a 9-point lead. The captain was impervious to the obscenities of the mob. In gathering gloom with normal time evaporating the Sutton pack delivered at the eleventh hour. Tom Boaden forced his way over for the try to break the magnificent defence of the opposition. The Bunting conversion missed by inches as S&E held a 17-6 lead entering time added on. For the second half the crowd would enjoy 14 additional minutes.

It would have been easy for the Reeds Weybridge team to have been downcast after their Herculean defensive efforts had been thwarted so late in the game but they demonstrated tremendous team spirit to switch to the attacking mode. They were given a quick boost when Josh Rea received a yellow card for a high contact reducing Sutton to 14. Finally, they managed to create space and fullback Marcus Clark set off like a giraffe being released from captivity. He outpaced the initial cover and then stepped out of the covering tackle to complete a wonderful try from halfway. If Freddy Bunting's miss was unlucky then Jack Jesty's appeared to be cursed as it was blown narrowly astray at the last instant.

Trailing 11-17 Reeds threw everything at Sutton who did not help themselves by conceding numerous penalties. As inevitably as a game of amateur darts finishes with multiple efforts at double one this match was to conclude 5 metres from the Black & White line. Reeds resorted to their most powerful ball carriers to smash their way over. Sutton were equal to the task with a collective



will and tremendous tackling. Finally, the defence employed the 'Irish Kiss' and prevented the Reeds man getting to the deck. Mr Carter awarded S&E the scrum and blew the final whistle to end a titanic struggle with Sutton & Epsom worthy winners by 17-11.

For the hosts the centre combination of Bunting and Bibby neutralised the potent opposition backs. Sam Lennie was mightily impressive with his throwing on a blustery afternoon and his penetrative carries. The pack to a man tackled ferociously and demonstrated admirable control in difficult conditions. Against a less resolute defence Sutton could have been out of sight. Once again the team impressed in the final moments with their heroic resistance by preventing a decisive score. Reeds failed to capitalise in the first period when they had the elements but the second half showed that a favourable wind does not guarantee points. In adversity Reeds Weybridge showed great character and no little skill first to survive and then to threaten to win the match.

Next Saturday Rugby Lane supporters can enjoy back-to-back home fixture with the 2pm game against Beckenham. The Kent team are enjoying another fine start to the season and are in pole position in the table. The visitors will be keen to repeat their 29-14 success at Blamoral Avenue in September. However, Sutton will be wanting to add another top of the league scalp to those of Sidcup and Medway whose colours have been downed at Rugby Lane already this campaign. Finally, hearty congratulations to Jo Evans who on Sunday in the match against Battersea Ironsides became the first Sutton woman to play 100 league matches. Jo has been a stalwart of this remarkably successful squad that has risen through the leagues to the exalted status of playing in the Women's Championship South 1 rubbing shoulders with the likes of Richmond, Bath and London Irish.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Symonds, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Boaden, Rea & Hilton.

Reeds Weybridge

Clark M, Brown, Maitland, Clark J, Endeley, Jesty, Palmer, Day L, Day R, Beavis, Goodwin, Finn ©, Ewington, Wasko & Wastie.

Replacements: Howe, Tyndale & Homfrey.

Epsom rugby scrape a point lead over Gravesend

Gravesend 22 Sutton & Epsom RFC 23. Saturday 30th November.

Sutton and Epsom RFC visited Gravesend RFC in October last season at the height of the high tackle hysteria. In a match not so much punctuated by penalties as strangled by draconian enforcement Freddy Bunting collected five penalties. However, the hosts won 36-29 outscoring the visitors 6-2 in tries with a brace of penalty tries and a double from the totemic Samraj Chahal. The Black & Whites returned to the delightful Rectory Field facility that rather contrasted the unflattering portrayal of Gravesend in Andrea Arnold's recent film "Bird". One hopes the council were well compensated for the depiction of their town that raises the question: Is all publicity good publicity? S&E absquatulated again with the points sneaking home 23-22.

Sutton fielded the same starting XV that had snuck past Thurrock in the previous round, apart from an esoteric switch for the wingers. Tom Boaden returned to the bench and was joined by debutant Sam Lennie, the last arrival of the Christchurch triumvirate, who had flown in from New Zealand and not Dorset. An accident in the environs of Clackett Lane delayed the Sutton arrival but their blushes were spared as Mr Goksaran's tardiness that meant the kick off was delayed until 3:15pm. Finally, Freddy Bunting kicked off to the petanque end. Gravesend, belying their lowly league status, dominated the early exchanges. However, they struggled to cross the gain line owing to S&E's resolute defence. They squandered two opportunities in the opening ten minutes. Firstly, losing an attacking line out deep in the 22 and secondly knocking on with the line in sight.

Captain Bunting settled the visitors' nerves with an immaculate 45-metre strike for 3-0. His side now impressed with excellent continuity as rapid recycling aided forwards and backs alike. Gravesend, under severe pressure, conceded a penalty 10 metres out. The ball was prodded to the corner. The perfectly executed catch and drive ushered hooker Dan Jones over the whitewash for the opening try. Freddy Bunting's pin point accuracy made it 10-0. Five minutes later the Kent side found themselves in similar travails when they were not only turned over in their 22 but compounded the error by conceding a penalty. Another kick to the corner, another line out, another catch and drive ... another outcome. The home pack halted their adversaries so it was spun wide to winger Angus Findlay whose sublime footwork left the defender grasping thin air as the second try was scored. The metronomic Bunting converted for 17-0.

The Gs looked for a rapid response and the inspirational Samraj Chahal went blind from a scrum. Rhys Betts then chipped ahead



and a try was only thwarted by magnificent cover by Tom Lennard. Moments later Sutton provided the opposition with some degree of consolation when they conceded a penalty under the posts. Rhys Betts accepted the gift and the hosts trailed 3-17. The first half concluded shortly afterwards with no further addition to the scoreboard.

The second period started inauspiciously for the hosts when they kicked the restart out on the full. This was to be a rare blemish as they proceeded to besiege the Sutton 22. Following ten minutes of intense pressure it was centre Zac Filmer's perfectly angled run that opened the second half scoring with a try by the posts. Rhys Betts added the simple conversion and the home team trailed 10-17. Within five minutes a raucous Rectory Field sensed an equalising score but their team conceded a penalty one yard from glory. Undeterred by that misfortune the revitalised hosts continued to press for points. Finally, on the hour mark they levelled the scores. Sutton debutant Sam Lennie received a yellow card for a high tackle. The 3-point easy option was declined. They were rewarded when the redoubtable Samraj Chahal forced his way over. With Rhys Betts converting the scores were level 17-17 as Gravesend had scored 17 unanswered points. With S&E reduced to 14 the pendulum had swung dramatically in the favour of the Kent side.

Despite the numerical inferiority Sutton were the next to score. With Mr Goksaran hovering like Azrael the visitors were awarded a penalty and Freddy Bunting recaptured the lead at 20-17. A minute later following excellent work from Jordan Huie S&E had another penalty for a late tackle. A simple 3 points for a 23-17 lead, meaning Gravesend would need a goal to regain the lead, was declined and the penalty was run instead. The forwards approached the line and thought they had scored via Rob Hegarty. The referee adjudicated that he had been held up over the line. A relieved home XV cleared long.

Sutton were returned to their full complement but only momentarily. Ben Tame cleared out a ruck and was issued a yellow for high contact. Sensing blood Gravesend also declined an easy kick and went for glory. From the ensuing penalty their bravery was rewarded as replacement Nathan Fouche powered over. To add salt to the wounds of the Sutton Society For Kicking All Penalties Rhys Betts conversion drifted wide and Gravesend led 22-20. However, a couple of minutes later Freddy Bunting was given a long-range attempt from the sidelines to recapture the lead. Demonstrating as few nerves as a false tooth he bisected the uprights for 23-22 as the game entered time added on.

Gravesend immediately had a chance following a fabulous 50-22 kick that nestled in an ideal spot for an attacking line out. Sutton set themselves for the catch and drive and did not contest the ball. Remarkably the throw was not straight. The hosts cleared to halfway but then they conceded a penalty which saw them retreating back to the corner to defend another close-range line out. This time, roared on by the Rectory Field faithful, the Gs pack secured the ball. Numerous phases saw the hosts crab their way under the posts. The heroic Sutton defence refused to be breached and turned over the ball. From the scrum they secured the ball and dismissed it from the paddock for a very hard earned 23-22 victory.

Sutton played some of their most effective rugby of this campaign in the first half. Their defence was miserly, they were quick to capitalise on errors and impressed with ball in hand. They were clinical in the opposition 22 when scoring two tries. The second half transformation said more for the attributes of Gravesend than Sutton's deficiencies. Rob Hegarty's dynamism was a focal point throughout, Jordan Huie's running out of defence was exhilarating and Tom Lennard's all around game won plaudits. Close games come down to small margins and in Freddy Bunting S&E held all the aces in all the decks.

For Gravesend this was an unwanted hat trick being their third loss in a row by a solitary point to add to a single point defeat on the opening day to Old Reigatian, not to mention a 2-point deficit to Reeds. Such a run would make Jonah feel fortunate by comparison. The hosts defended aggressively denying Sutton time and space. They varied their game with forwards, backs and some astute kicking. They were undone by missed opportunities as more than one vital line out was lost and overlaps in the 22 were not perceived. In addition, they were up against a formidable kicker who missed nothing as he made the challenging look elementary.

Next Saturday December kicks off at 2pm with a visit from Reeds Weybridge who are proudly perched third in the league. The equivalent fixture last season culminated the campaign with Sutton winning with a Rob Hegarty try on the final play for a 12-7 success.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Jones, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Davies & Hegarty.

Replacements: Boaden, Lennie & Hilton.

Gravesend

White, Huckle, Cooke, Filmer, Bruce M, Bruce G, Betts, Alderson, Dadson, Brooker, Bird, Brett, Stener, Chahal & Hewitt.

Replacements: Fouche, Hampshire & Fisher.



Sutton & Epsom 33 Thurrock 29

Saturday 16th November: For Sutton supporters of a pessimistic disposition the arrival of Thurrock, winless after eight matches, would have brought back miserable memories of a trip to Southend in November 2017.

The Saxons broke their duck with a last second penalty that gave them a 32-31 first win of the season after eight straight defeats. For the optimists, that was years ago, away from home and the Black & Whites had defeated the league leaders in their last two Rugby Lane appearances. On this occasion the Rugby Gods smiled on Sutton & Epsom as they sneaked home with a last play try to inflict an agonising 33-29 loss on Thurrock who continue their quest for their Holy Grail of a win.

Sutton saw a welcome return from injury for Gareth O'Brien at 15 and for Josh Glanville following his Marrakesh meanderings. On an overcast afternoon Thurrock initiated proceedings attacking the clubhouse end. They were once more into the search for a first win for their dear friends back at Oakfield. It was a scrappy start with a penalty and a free kick awarded at the first two scrums and the S&E line out, that has been a source of strength this season, proving to be unreliable. The Black & Whites opened the scoring with a Freddy Bunting penalty for 3-0.

Undeterred the visitors proceeded to monopolise the game. Their forwards went through the phases and advanced steadily. Thurrock opened their account with a moment of the highest quality. Number 10 Charlie Chitty, with immaculate precision, chipped to the flank where winger Elliot Chew timed his leap to perfection to gather the ball under pressure and score in the corner. Harry Reynolds impressively converted from the touchline for a 7-3 lead.

The Black & Whites proceeded to litter the paddock with new and interesting ways to thwart their progress: misjudging a kick; kicking out on the full; gifting penalties and losing line outs. Eventually the visitors were presented with a kickable penalty that was gratefully accepted by Harry Reynolds as the Essex men extended their advantage to 10-3 at the end of the first quarter. A degree of urgency awoke the hosts and Tom Lennard recovered a charge down as Thurrock tried to clear from their 22. Fluent passing found Jac Davies in space and his deft footwork presented Freddy Bunting with a try. The Captain clipped over the conversion to level the scores at 10-10. The flow of the game was negated by errors and no infringement went unpunished under the gaze of Mr Morris. For example, a baffled Sutton pack were halted as they tried to execute a catch and drive from 10 metres out due to one of their fraternity joining in.

With the interval approaching both sides looked to the boot for territorial advantage but more often than not gifted possession to the opposition. Sutton had recaptured their defensive relish and cut down the visiting ball-carriers who barely made a yard despite many phases. They were rewarded with a turnover from a knock on and a subsequent penalty in the middle of the park. The Bunting boot failed to find touch but the captain made amends by collecting the return. The Black & Whites surged into the 22 and won a penalty. Steve Munford pounced with a quick tap and flanker Dan Jones put through Adam Bibby for his first Sutton try. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 17-10 lead.

From the restart the Tees were awarded a penalty that they kicked to the corner to provide the perfect attacking platform. They secured possession and their advance was halted. The initial thrust was denied but moments later they exploited the narrow side to squeeze in at the corner. Replacement prop Ben Flatt's try was music to Thurrock ears. Though the conversion failed the visitors finished the first period trailing 15-17 with the contest very much in the balance. The second half opened with the first opportunity coming to the hosts after five minutes. Freddy Bunting took a simple three points from a penalty adjacent to the uprights near the 22. Leading 20-15 Sutton were fortunate moments later when Thurrock squandered a huge advantage. Overwhelmingly outnumbered by the visiting hordes who were sweeping into the S&E 22 the hosts were saved by an unforgiving pass that arrived at the bootlaces rather than the midriff. Moments later Freddy Bunting was adding a dollop of sodium chloride to the freshest of wounds. With a fabulous penalty from near to halfway the captain put his side 23-15 up. The Black & Whites appeared to be in the ascendancy and put together their best passage of play. Wonderful interchanges and telling support saw the joyous site of Rugby Lane's replacement prop,



Callum Hilton, diving over the line to score a fabulous try. Celebrations were cut short as the referee was concerned over the grounding of the ball and awarded Thurrock the drop out. A deflated Sutton suddenly saw a probable 15-point lead snatched from their grasp.

The game entered the final quarter with Sir reminding the hosts that the mounting penalty count in their 22 had reached the point of no return and he would be reaching for his pocket sooner rather than later. The Oakfield team took their chance. Despite dogged defence in the corner flanker Ben Timson forced his way over. Harry Reynolds made it a one-point game with another fine conversion as Thurrock trailed 22-23. Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last time, the Rugby Lane fans were delighted to applaud another Bunting penalty as he made light work of a 45-metre effort from the middle of the pitch. The hosts were 26-22 up with ten minutes on the clock. Sutton pressed hard to put away their stubborn opponent. Another quickly taken penalty looked like paying dividends again but the stunning break ended when a speculative inside pass in the 22 that came to nought.

Tension rose and the momentum switched to Thurrock as they entered the Black & White

A combination of careless play and poor discipline undermined the hosts and resulted in a Thurrock line out 10 metres from the line. The catch and drive was halted but at a cost as the referee lost patience and removed Josh Glanville with a yellow card. Now it was a 5-metre line out. The Thurrock forwards threw themselves time and again against the Sutton line. It was classic defence against patient and controlled attack with every inch being contested to the full. Finally, it went to flyhalf Charlie Chitty who dummied and skipped through the gap to score. Harry Reynolds added the extras and Thurrock led, in time added on, by 29-26.

Right on cue the Black & Whites produced their best rugby of the afternoon. The Bunting restart descended with the pack perfectly just outside the 22 and the ball was regained. The referee awarded Sutton a penalty but they declined the opportunity to level the scores. It was all out attack against heroic defence. The referee indicated a penalty advantage and S&E pressed on and spun it wide. The crowd roared as Jordan Huie sprinted down the touchline in classical style to score but there was a forward pass. Back for a penalty in front of the posts and again the kick was rejected. From the tapped penalty flanker Dan Jones exploited a tiny gap in the defensive wall and lock Ewan McTaggart was on hand for the glory of the winning try. Freddy Bunting, having wrapped up his half century of caps at Dartfordians last week, notched his century of points for the season with the last kick of the game. Sutton had won 33-29.

At present for Thurrock it must feel like they have offended the Goddesses Tyche and Fortuna with clowders of black cats haunting their every turn. The team are no doubt exhausted from taking the positives from every game. However, this match brought their first bonus point for four or more tries and saw their highest points tally to date. Their effort and spirit could not be faulted as illustrated by taking the lead in time added on whereas despondency and a 'here we go again' feeling would have been understandable. Their pack carried well, the Chitty brothers at halfback offer great potential and in Harry Reynolds they have a quality kicker. Hopefully the tide will turn for them sooner rather than later.

Sutton have started to get into that pleasing habit of winning close games which speaks volumes for their fitness, camaraderie and determination. Adam Bibby was outstanding in defence with his ability to make the tackle and be back on his feet in a instant being invaluable and his try was a fitting reward for an excellent afternoon. On a day when the team struggled to find their rhythm they still found a way to win because their defence was again of the highest quality. Next Saturday is another rest from the hurly-burly of league action. The campaign continues on 30th November when the charabanc heads for the Rectory Field for a match with Gravesend.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Findlay, Bibby, Bunting ©, Huie, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Jones, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Davies & Hegarty.
Replacements: Hilton, Rea & Wise.

Thurrock



Frear, Reynolds, Poole, Clifford ©, Chew, C. Chitty, S. Chitty, Miles, Percival, Catchpole, Libby, Watts-Adams, Orr, Timson & Jennings.
Replacements: Flatt, Aminu & Giroud.

Sutton & Epsom Come Back Victorious

Dartfordians 26 Sutton & Epsom RFC 30. Saturday 9th November.

"When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions." Good old Bill could have been referencing injury lists afflicting rugby coaches. The Sutton selectors were hoping that the rest weekend would bring better news. For the Black & Whites there was the return to the colours from the sick bay for Messrs Gibson & Wise. "For this relief much thanks" as the Bard would say. Their return to Bourne Road was a nostalgic one for Sutton & Epsom as Dartfordians were one of the 11 teams that composed the original London One table for the 1987-88 inaugural league season. Though S&E had to wait until the last game of the following campaign to play in Bexley as in those days you only played each opponent once. For this time of asking on an afternoon of fluctuating fortunes Sutton eventually prevailed 30-26.

There was a much more winter feel to proceedings this week with not only the earlier 2pm kick off but also the permanently overcast sky and colder temperatures. Freddy Bunting kicked off towards the appropriately named War Memorial Clubhouse following the minute's silence to commemorate the fallen. The omens looked favourable as probing runs by Jordan Huie set up S&E for an initial assault. The ball was swept wide and Angus Findlay set off for the corner. However, a combination of excellent cover and the pass inside not being cleanly taken meant that the tie remained scoreless. That was to be the last highlight for the visitors for a considerable time. Dartfordians solid set piece and dominant line out provided the platform for the excellent Jarlath Hetherington to dictate terms from 10.

After five minutes the hosts declined an easy 3-point penalty and kicked into the corner. The pack secured the ball and flyhalf Hetherington combined a well-chosen line, deft feet and pure power to score the opening try. His conversion put the icing on his cake for a 7-0 lead. Elliot Soler-Gomez reclaimed the restart for Dartfordians and Sutton conceded a soft penalty soon after. Further pain was denied when Dartfordians throw in was adjudged to be crooked allowing the visitors to clear. Sutton's next attack ended tamely but they were brought back for a penalty. Captain Bunting stepped up to narrow the gap to 7-3. The Bexley men were soon pressing for another score. The much-improved Sutton defence denied them twice. Firstly, a turnover in the 22 and then when an impatient attacker failed to release the ball with line at Dartfordians mercy. It was third time lucky on the half hour when prop Ted Rackley muscled his way over the whitewash after sustained pressure. Captain Hetherington added the extras for a 14-3 lead.

With the first half drawing to a conclusion Sutton conceded a penalty at a scrum for an injudicious use of a hand, to strike the ball, that was not mistaken for a foot by Mr Garland. Once more the hosts were in prime position in the 22. Possession was secured by the pack and as the Black & Whites went into reverse it was spun wide. There was to be no repeat of the earlier Jarlath Hetherington try as he was felled by two tacklers but crucially he released the ball and lock Connor Faulkes squeezed into the corner. A fabulous touchline conversion by Jarlath Hetherington put his side 21-3 ahead. The half ended with S&E pressing hard for a score to gain a foothold in the contest. A huge overlap was ignored and a simple pass was inexplicably dropped. These errors epitomised a frustrating first forty for S&E whose best work had been negated by out of character mistakes. For the second match in a row Dartfordians re-started with a healthy advantaged.



The previous round they defeated a defiant Old Tiffinians who came close to overturning the deficit. Could Sutton do better or would it be a repeat of their Old Tiffinians experience on their last away day outing? The Black & Whites had the perfect start to the second

period. Playing at a high tempo the forwards swarmed into the 22 and were awarded a penalty. The visitors threatened the line before providing Tom Lennard with the ball. The Sutton 10 then made a bid for the highest pass above pitch level in Sutton history as the ball ballooned towards the touchline. Groans turned to cheers as it was held and flipped inside for Matt Symonds to score his first try for the senior side. Freddy Bunting converted from the flank and Sutton trailed 10-23.

The momentum and hope was nearly hastily dented. Perhaps over-confidence coursing through S&E veins made them attempt to run it out against superior numbers from their 22. Having not learned their lesson they eventually conceded a penalty adjacent to the uprights. All assembled at Bourne Road were stunned when the reliable boot of Hetherington failed to extend his sides advantage. Moments later the travelling support were also surprised when Freddy Bunting missed a far more challenging penalty but they have been spoiled by his familiar excellence. Five minutes later he had a far easier opportunity to make amends and Sutton trailed 13-21.

With 15 minutes to play the fates dealt a cruel blow to the hosts to remind one of the opening Shakespearean verse. Having already lost one of their front row to injury a second was forced from the field of play. The remainder of the match had to continue with uncontested scrums and Dartfordians were forced to play with 14. In addition, the talismanic Hetherington also had to watch the denouement from the sidelines as he was helped from the pitch to sympathetic applause. Minutes later Sutton took advantage. Excellent pressure and swift continuity was rewarded by a try from the forwards. Flanker Dan Jones was the man on the spot to benefit with the score. The Bunting boot made it a one-point game as Dartfordians held a precarious 21-20 lead.

As Sutton & Epsom pressed for the lead they won another penalty and Bunting put his team 23-21 ahead with a minute remaining. However, there would be considerable time to be added on due to the earlier injuries. Then the Bunting boot became influential again. He struck a wonderful clearance using his allegedly weaker left foot to win a 50/22. From the attacking lineout the forwards delivered. The ball was secured and the catch and drive presented Dan Jones with his second try. The conversion was mathematically significant and Bunting bisected the uprights for 30-21 and a vital two-score advantage. All credit to Dartfordians as they redoubled their efforts in search of bonus points. Following the cruel injuries they endured only the most cold hearted would not have viewed hooker Jack Hooban's try, that earned two bonus points, on the final play from a catch and drive as a fair reward in their 26-30 loss.

This was a commendable Sutton comeback from 18 points down made more impressive because it was on the road. Injuries obviously assisted S&E but their second half showing had already hinted at the triumph to come. For Dartfordians a couple of missed opportunities in the first half ultimately proved costly. Rugby Lane will host the next league fixture and Thurrock will be the visitors. In contrast to the last two visitors, Sidcup and Medway, who arrived as league leaders the Essex club have had a tough baptism to this league and are bottom of the table and still searching for a first win.

Sutton & Epsom

Findlay, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Symonds, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Boaden, Hilton, Tame, McTaggart, Jones, Davies & Hegarty.

Replacements: Gibson, Gerhard & Baker.

Dartfordians

Cappuccio, Nissinen-Le, Soler-Gomez, Taylor J, Adams, Hetherington, Taylor P, Rackley, Hooban, Chapman, Potter, Faulkes, Williams, Wright & Chandler.

Replacements: Tuffley, Heylen & Brent.