



## Sutton & Epsom Keep The Wind In Their Sails

Sutton & Epsom 40 Old Colfeians 24 Saturday 4th October. The cheeky aside that last Saturday's break from league action was to commemorate Sutton winning their opening three fixtures of the campaign is untrue but has some historical merit. It was only the fifth time, in the league era, that such a start had occurred – the last being in 2012–13. Meanwhile, their opponents Old Colfeians had sounded a klaxon call of intent with the notable scalp of Sidcup in the previous round of fixtures. A tough tussle was expected at Rugby Lane between two sides that had shared the honours in this fixture last season. The hosts maintained their perfect start in a magnificent match between two quality teams, winning 40–24.

There was a welcome return for captain Freddy Bunting, as Euan McTaggart rejoined the ranks with a proud 100% winning record as caretaker captain. He was joined by Rob Hegarty, Michael Bennion and Ben Tame, as ailments and absences ruled out Finney, Ghumra, Lennard and O'Brien. The visitors were missing the mountainous figure of their captain and powerhouse, Andy O'Malley.

Storm Amy had created testing, blustery and unfavourable conditions. Sympathy immediately went out to the full-backs and hookers as a sense of foreboding descended upon Rugby Lane with expectations of a scrappy and error-strewn contest. Perhaps the only point of interest would be whether the Bunting boot might set a personal distance record for a successful penalty kick. How wrong we were. Both sides produced a thrilling exhibition of running rugby, combining for ten tries to the delight of all assembled.

Captain Bunting kicked off with the benefit of the gusting gale that fortunately blew across rather than down the pitch. After an impressive opening by Sutton that was thwarted by sterling defence, Bunting lofted a kick towards the wing. With perfect timing, Josh Rea arrived and, after an initial juggle, secured the ball to coast home under the posts. Bunting gratefully accepted the simple conversion for 7–0.

Five minutes later, the S&E pack exploited a perfect attacking position to advance towards the posts and Sam Lennie was unstoppable from short range. With the extras added it was 14–0 as the hosts made light of the conditions. The first quarter concluded with Sutton's third and finest score. Exploiting a generous narrow side, Archie Fitzgerald and friends interchanged passes from halfway for Laurence Wise to streak home under the posts. The conversion established an impressive 21–0 lead.

Old Colfeians, aided by a flurry of penalties, enjoyed their best passage of play and were rewarded with their opening try. Control and continuity in the hosts' 22 stretched the defence and the powerful presence of Estefan Ellis scored in the corner. The comeback was short-lived as Sutton exploited a penalty from ten metres in front of the uprights. Dan Jones ran wide, the ball was recycled, and a few carries later that man Jones was on hand to score. Bunting judged the wind to perfection for 28–5 as the Black and Whites secured the bonus point for their fourth try.

As the crowd discussed how many points the wind was worth, Sutton and Epsom pressed for more. For the final ten minutes of the half, S&E were frustrated by quality defence and an abundance of infringements. Referee Mr Edwards concluded the first moiety with the scoreboard showing Sutton & Epsom 28, visitors 5.

There had been a surprising lack of kicking and a refreshing desire to run the ball. The Sutton handling had been impressive with a minimal error count as forwards and backs combined to great effect. Old Colfeians, when given the opportunity, also looked to get the ball to their backs and showed enough to suggest there was still plenty left in this contest.

It did not require the wisdom of Solomon to imagine the coaches stressing the importance of the opening ten minutes of the second half: for Colfeians, to get an early score and a foothold in the game; for Sutton, to extinguish all hope and force the visitors into damage-limitation mode.

The men from Horn Park could not have asked for a more encouraging start as the powerful running of centre Louis Baker contemptuously brushed aside potential tacklers for a stunning solo score from halfway after barely a minute. Ryan Napper's conversion appeared to be perfection until the wind had the final say, leaving his team trailing 10–28.

A couple of minutes later, the exceptional Laurence Wise was forced from the field having been squashed beneath a considerably heavier opponent. As the pessimists trawled their memories for record reversals, the hosts responded in classical fashion. Sam Lennie made an eye-catching break, marauding into the opposition half and leaving tacklers in his wake or dumped on their behinds. Agu Benson continued the attack, cutting inside, and prop Dan Johnson arrived in support to score. The conversion never threatened, but Sutton had the comfort of a 33–10 lead with 25 minutes to play.

Old Colfeians were not deterred by this reverse and threw themselves at the Sutton defences with fury. Inches from a try they were penalised, and as hard as they tried it appeared that the home defences would not be breached. In the final ten minutes OC's full-back Chris Harris changed the game with individual brilliance. A mesmerising run from 40 metres deserved a try; he



was denied by the last man, but Ryan Napper was in support to cross the whitewash. The No.10 converted his score for 17-33.

Five minutes later, the elusive Harris was on halfway being pushed towards touch. He caressed the ball between on-rushing tacklers, re-gathered it and disappeared over the horizon for a fabulous score that spoke volumes for his vision. It was one-way traffic and belief was coursing through Colfeian veins as the lead narrowed to 33-24.

Before the Chris Harris show, Sam Lennie had left the field with a knock. The hooker re-entered the fray as Sutton worked their way into the opposition 22. From a perfectly executed catch-and-drive from an attacking lineout, the irrepressible Lennie scored his second try. Bunting converted for 40-24 and Sutton had finally secured the win. Moments later, the contest was over.

Arguably, this was Sutton's best performance of the campaign so far. The tempo, fluency and handling in the first half were exceptional in the conditions as they spread the ball wide at every opportunity. Wingers Archie Fitzgerald and Agu Benson offered a formidable threat on the flanks, avoiding being ushered into touch with their combination of strength, skill and rugby intelligence. The mobile back-row trio of Rea, Jones and Hegarty were always on hand to offer continuity. Laurence Wise provided the tempo at 9 while Freddy Bunting orchestrated the plays from 10.

The front row of Johnson, Lennie and Mount not only provided a stable set piece but also offered a great deal around the paddock, including three tries. It was a superb team effort from 1 to 18.

No team will relish playing Old Colfeians this season. The front-row trio of Rameaux, Holland-Oliver and Agorioge boast over 300 appearances and were a formidable unit. The centre combination of Baker and Storey were the creative hub in an experienced back division. The icing on the cake is the attacking threat of Chris Harris, who countered with great intent. They were unfortunate to be missing some regulars, leaving them short of their usual heft in the back five. In the second period they came back strongly and deservedly were rewarded with a bonus point, coming close to a second as the clock wound down.

Next Saturday, 11 October, Sutton visit the historic Crescent Farm for an encounter with one of their oldest rivals, Sidcup RFC. At this early stage of a long season the Black and Whites lie second in the league behind Beckenham, who also have the maximum 20 points from four outings.

#### **Sutton & Epsom:**

Bennion, Fitzgerald, Scott, Bibby, Benson, Bunting (capt), Wise, Johnson, Lennie, Mount, McTaggart, Duey, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.  
Replacements: Boaden, Tame & Munford.

#### **Old Colfeians:**

Harris, Ellis, Storey, Baker, Mutongwizo, Napper, Spaczil, Rameaux, Holland-Oliver, Agorioge, Collins, Ramdhan, Amor, Moles & Correa.

Replacements: Bantango, Blythe & Burkett.

John Croysdill

Image credit Robin Kennedy

---

## Reigatian Hoodoo Broken: Sutton and Epsom Scale the Heights

**Old Reigatian 14 Sutton and Epsom RFC 49.** Saturday 20th September.

Sutton and Epsom may have enjoyed the better start to the campaign with two victories compared to their opponent's two defeats but Old Reigatian could be considered the Black and Whites' Kryptonite. Since resuming league hostilities in September 2023 the Old Boys have won all four encounters amassing 142 points and scoring 20 tries. So for Rugby Lane supporters the 49-14 win was a most welcome end to the historical hoodoo.

There was a welcome return to the ranks for Gareth O'Brien and Sam Lennie but hat-trick hero Rob Hegarty and Ben Tame were absentees from the Sutton and Epsom squad. There was also the reappearance of Eric Duey in the second row after an absence of biblical proportions of three seasons. Referee Pierce Young's whistle announced the next chapter in the Old Reigatian v Sutton and Epsom story. Sutton and Epsom were to enjoy the first half benefits of the slope and the wind. This was amply demonstrated when Tom Lennard seized a loose ball in his 22 and kicked over the OR line for a drop out in the early moments.

Sutton and Epsom's first chance came after five minutes with a 5-metre lineout. The ball was overthrown and devoured by the



defence and the opportunity squandered. But Ewan McTaggart, wearing the temporary burden of captaincy lightly on his broad shoulders, charged down the clearance and with almost divine intervention it landed in Eric Duey's hands for the try. Tom Lennard added the extras for a 7-0 lead. The remainder of the first quarter was entertaining fare as expansive play was matched by dogged defence by all concerned. In the 20th minute Sutton and Epsom were held up over the line but Reigatian relief from the long clearance was fleeting. The ball was run back and Gareth O'Brien sidestepped his man near halfway and scorched home for a fine solo score. Tom Lennard extended the advantage to 14-0.

On the half hour the sizeable following support from Rugby Lane were applauding their third try. A 5-metre lineout appeared to have been superbly defended as the packs slid towards touch but Dan Jones erupted from the heaving masses to score. Tom Lennard maintained his kicking excellence for 21-0. Emboldened by their lead and with Lennard exploiting the slope with intelligent kicking Sutton and Epsom dominated territorially. The valiant home defence once more held up the Black and Whites over their line. Once more it was only a temporary respite. Kyren Ghumra ran the ball back and Sam Lennie saw a gap in a scrambling defence to touch down for the bonus point score. Lennard maintained his 100% record for 28-0.

There was still time for the visitors to add another score to their first period riches. It was arguably the best of the first half five. The forwards provided clean ball on the 22 and it was spun wide. Laurence Wise ran the perfect supporting line from Number 9 to collect an inside pass that opened up the defence and he sauntered home. The Lennard boot made it 35-0 and the referee concluded the half with Sutton and Epsom handsomely placed having made the most of the topography and meteorological assistance.

The hosts would enjoy the benefits of the slope and a strengthening wind. Even with their talented back division and their habitual winning of this fixture a 35-point deficit was considerable, perhaps not Everest but certainly Himalayan in proportions. Old Reigatian began the second half with great intent pegging back the visitors in their 22 and laying siege. It was one-way traffic with 5-metre penalties and lineouts accumulating as the Black and White line was put under the severest pressure. But courageous Sutton and Epsom defence repelled every attack.

Having survived the siege Sutton and Epsom scored on their first visit to their opponent's 22. The returning Sam Lennie brushed aside defenders in his usual imperious manner and passed to his fellow countryman Adam Bibby to score under the posts. Tom Lennard caressed over the conversion for 42-0. As the game entered the final quarter Sutton and Epsom faced disruption in their ranks. They lost Gareth O'Brien through injury and Adam Bibby through indiscretion. The former did not return but the latter reappeared after the mandatory 10-minute breather.

Finally, Old Reigatian scored a try that their efforts certainly warranted on an afternoon where the scoreboard did not reflect the nature of the contest. The score followed another period of sustained pressure. The ball was relayed to the left and Jonny Bridges manufactured the break and having been tackled stretched to the line to score. He celebrated his try with a finely struck conversion for 7-42. The weather deteriorated as the wind intensified. The Sutton and Epsom pack was now in the ascendancy but the Old Boys demonstrated immense character and were rewarded with a second try. Exploiting a retreating opposition the impressive Number 9 Max Nicol sniped with clinical efficiency to score. Bridges' kick made it 14-42 with five minutes left on the clock.

Sutton and Epsom had the final word with a magnificent seventh try. Steve Munford passed and looped near halfway to create an overlap. Agu Benson stormed down the touchline and passed to fellow flyer Kyren Ghumra who timed his pass to perfection for the ubiquitous Dan Jones to score triumphantly under the posts. The 100% Man, Tom Lennard, made it 49-14 and brought his personal tally to 14 points. In the dying moments a final Reigatian attack was thwarted by an interception near the Sutton and Epsom line to deny the hosts a consolation.

For the Black and Whites Tom Lennard had a first-rate afternoon, kicking superbly, whether tactically or bisecting the uprights, and marshalling a back division that impressed in defence and attack. The team defended superbly and the seven tries reflected their attacking intent in a strong overall display. Old Reigatian are in transition with the departure of familiar faces but they should take heart from their defence and resilience from the first to the last minute. Their backs were slick with ball in hand and will pose a threat to all teams. Max Nicol at 9 has the quality to get the best out of the backs and their collective passion and hard work in defence will provide a solid platform for improved results.

The league has a Saturday off whilst England play Canada for the World Cup. The competition returns on October 4th when Sutton and Epsom host Old Colfeians at Rugby Lane.

**Sutton and Epsom:** O'Brien, Benson, Scott, Bibby, Ghumra, Lennard, Wise, Johnson, Lennie, Mount, McTaggart (c), Duey, Rea, Jones and Finney. Reps: Boaden, Fitzgerald and Munford.

**Old Reigatian:** Woodford, Coyle, Parker, Allen (c), Bridges, Holder, Nicol, Garrec, Marshall, Collister, Grant, Jones, Blackburn, Brooks C. and Niven. Reps: Lee, Brooks O. and Flynn.



John Croysdill

Photo credit: Robin Kennedy

## Dartford fail to bridge the gap with Epsom rugby

**Sutton and Epsom RFC 33 Dartfordians 29** Saturday 13th September

Last season's meetings between these two clubs reflected the Sutton and Epsom campaign. The early encounter in Bexley was one of several tight matches where the Black and Whites prevailed. The Rugby Lane return bore witness to a rampant Sutton and Epsom win in their end of season pomp. However, the hosts were greatly assisted by injuries to the experienced forward duo of prop Stephen Garrett and lock Lewis Potter who collided before the break and went straight to A and E. On the opening Saturday Sutton and Epsom enjoyed a resounding 49-19 success at Bromley RFC. In contrast, Dartfordians endured a chastening 80-14 loss at the hands of a sadistic Sidcup. There was mitigation for this dire defeat as the Kent Club were handicapped by absentees on a golf weekend. At this time of asking the sides shared ten tries and Sutton and Epsom won a hard fought contest 33-29.

Sutton and Epsom had three changes to their squad with the return of the experienced front row duo of Boaden and Mount. In addition, there was the opportunity to see the mercurial talents of the lesser-spotted Archie Fitzgerald on the wing. The shrill blast of Mr Simon Matthews' whistle initiated proceedings with the visitors playing towards the Cabbage Patch on an afternoon of changeable weather. Dartfordians started brightly before a superb 50/22 from Tom Lennard put Sutton and Epsom on the offensive. The Kent side's resolute defence turned over the ball on their line and their bold counter was rewarded as moments later they were back in the Sutton half. It took another fabulous 50/22, this time by Adam Bibby, to set up another scoring opportunity. Rob Hegarty duly obliged surging over the line from a 5-metre scrum for the first try of his personally profitable afternoon. Tom Lennard added the conversion for a 7-0 after 17 minutes.

Not downcast the Dartfordians started to dominate possession and territory. A defensive lapse had the hosts defending deep in their 22 before a clearing kick. There followed a stunning break by fly half Gubby Thomas that had Sutton scrambling to cover a chip ahead. After a momentary respite Sutton conceded a penalty only for the away team to kick the ball dead in search for the attacking lineout. However, it was not long before they had another chance to punish a Sutton indiscretion. This time the penalty resulted in a 5-metre lineout. The ball was secured and winger Liam Brencher was stopped on the line before lock Ryan Chandler forced the ball over for the try. The conversion went astray but with the first period drawing to a close the Bexley-based side only trailed 5-7 and the scoreboard now reflected more accurately the balance of play as driving rain descended upon Rugby Lane.

Crucially Sutton and Epsom raised their game scoring two tries deep into time added on. On both occasions it was the forwards who earned the garlands. Second row Kieran Finney was the first scorer touching down under the posts. As the away team discussed the score in a huddle Tom Lennard hit the upright limiting Sutton's lead to 12-5. Soon after the Rugby Lane crowd were applauding another try. Following a searching kick another lineout ball was secured and Rob Hegarty was celebrating his second score. With the successful conversion the whistle went to end the first half. At 19-5 to Sutton and Epsom the pristine new scoreboard's score rather flattered the hosts who had struggled to find the fluency of last week. Dartfordians were unfortunate to trail at all let alone by 14 points as they had the better of the half in those important currencies of territory and possession. The visiting forwards had carried powerfully and full back Joe Scott's incursions into the line had been a constant threat.

Alex Mount announced his return at the start of the second half with a thunderous tackle on Harvey Whyte but the centre managed to complete a precise kick to the Sutton 22. The Dartfordians pack resembled an unstoppable juggernaut as the catch and drive's relentless advance of 15 metres had a sense of foreboding and inevitability with flanker Kieran Clarke scoring. Sutton's lead was reduced to 19-10. The wind dropped but the rain increased as conditions became difficult for handling. Quality back row play from Dan Jones won Sutton a penalty that was advanced to the corner. The lineout was dropped but recovered by Mount before his fellow prop Dan Johnson lost control near the line. The reinvigorated Kent players confidently ran the ball from their line and averted the danger.

Soon after, another penalty gave the Rugby Lane team chance to make amends with a lineout in the opposition 22. Finney secured the ball and Howes broke into the open field. The forwards carried up to the line before scrum half Laurence Wise espied a route to the line to score the Black and Whites' bonus point try. Tom Lennard stepped up to make it 26-10. As the final quarter approached Dartfordians went in search of a way back into the game. The crowd thought that Mr Matthews was raising his hand aloft for a try but inches from the line he spotted an infringement. Undeterred the visitors continued to lay siege and finally they were rewarded as fullback Joe Scott scored by the uprights and Thomas Gubby added the conversion as the margin was now 17-26 with 10 minutes remaining.



With the match back in the balance Sutton and Epsom produced some of their best rugby. The rain stopped, the sun shone and a rainbow covered the ground. For Sutton and Epsom there was a pot of gold at the end of it. They declined a kickable penalty in front of the posts 30 metres out as Tom Lennard drilled the ball towards the corner. A clean catch, the pack on the move and a jubilant Rob Hegarty completed his hat trick. With his fourth successful kick Lennard made it 33-17 with 5 minutes of normal time remaining and one would have thought that the win had been secured.

There was plenty of time to add there having been several stoppages for injuries and the visitors dominated every second of it. After five minutes of time added on Dartfordians scored their bonus point fourth try courtesy of a wonderful solo effort from Harvey Whyte who glided through the defence. Soon after a stunning run from Joe Scott from halfway was thwarted by a timely cover tackle from Kyren Ghumra. The Kent club continued to turn the screw as the field was littered with Sutton players requiring assistance. The visitors scored with the final play as Harry Wright crossed the whitewash to gain their second bonus point. The contest culminated with Thomas Gubby's conversion to leave the final score 33-29 to the Black and Whites.

In a keenly contested match that could have been claimed by either side the turning point was the two late Sutton and Epsom tries in the first half. The Dartfordians inspired by the athleticism of locks Chandler and Akinsete carried powerfully all game. Joe Scott made considerable yardage from 15 in a back division not afraid to run the ball out of defence. After a traumatic game last weekend every supporter from Kent will take great heart from how strongly their team have bounced back and finished strongly to push Sutton and Epsom to the very end. Once again scrum half Laurence Wise was not only at the heart of Sutton's play but also scored a try. Rob Hegarty's return of three tries highlighted once again how clinical he is when he has the ball in the last few metres. Sutton and Epsom were not at their best which was more credit to the visitors than to the detriment of the host's play but they earned the spoils for another 5 points.

Next Saturday Sutton and Epsom travel to Old Reigatian for a 3pm start against their Surrey rivals who are looking for their first win of the campaign following defeats to Old Colfeians and Sidcup. Dartfordians will host Beckenham to complete the testing trio of the top three for their opening three fixtures this campaign.

#### Sutton and Epsom

Ghumra, Benson, Scott, Bibby, Fitzgerald, Lennard, Wise, Johnson, Howes, Boaden, McTaggart ©, Finney, Rea, Jones and Hegarty. Reps: Mount, Tame and Munford.

#### Dartfordians

Scott, Kpaka, Soler-Gomez, Whyte, Brencher, Gubby, Chappell, Garrett, Hooban, Chapman, Chandler, Akinsete, Williams, Clarke and Wright. Reps: Banks, Tuffley and Taylor.

Photo credit : Robin Kennedy

---

## Sutton and Epsom rugby season opener

Having enjoyed their first winning season since lifting the Level 5 title in 2018-19 Sutton approached this new campaign with renewed vigour, optimism and purpose.

The opening fixture was a delight for those with a sense of history. It may have been the first league encounter with Bromley, but they were originally the formidable Catford Bridge who first crossed swords with Sutton in 1897. Bromley had gained a thoroughly deserved promotion from Counties 1 Kent by avenging their opening day defeat at Ashford with a final day 22-7 win over the Toucans. It was a notable campaign with only two other losses, against the second strings of Canterbury and Sevenoaks, and a draw at Dover. Indeed, Sevenoaks II lost their last three matches including a crucial 28-30 epic against Bromley. On this opening afternoon of the new season it was Sutton who excelled, running in eight tries in a 49-19 win.

### First half dominance

Agu Benson was the only debutant in the Black and White ranks. Bromley were weakened by a wedding but could still call upon the experience of centurions Hawkins, Scott and the Griffiths brothers. On a sunny but breezy afternoon at the Warman Sports Club the hosts kicked off against the genteel backdrop of Hayes CC 2nd XI v Chislehurst CC 2nd XI.

With the regular pitch unavailable the home team dominated early possession and territory despite playing against the slope. The pattern of the game in the opening ten minutes was excellent continuity by the Kent team being neutered in the Surrey 22 by aggressive and organised defence. Almost the visitors' first visit into the hosts' territory resulted in a penalty. Tom Lennard,





making his 50th league appearance and deputising in the kicking duties for the absent Bunting, made it 3-0.

The opening try followed a bizarre incident. A long Lennard clearance went straight to an opponent on halfway but its trajectory was in perfect alignment with the sun. The catcher lost sight of the ball which struck his shoulder, ricocheted and rolled into the in-goal area for a Sutton 5-metre scrum. Grateful for the celestial assistance Sutton scored as Gareth O'Brien jinked through the defence. The Rugby Lane men led 8-0 but soon offered Bromley a chance to open their account.

A poor kick out on the full just outside the 22 was followed by a penalty and in the blink of an eye the Warman crowd were anticipating a score from a 5-metre throw. The ball was overthrown and recovered by Dan Jones allowing Tom Lennard to lift the siege. Bromley's wastefulness was punished as Sam Lennie made a telling break that released Laurence Wise near halfway and the scrum-half did exceptionally well to evade the cover to score. At the end of the first quarter the Black and Whites led 13-0, rather against the run of play.

A spirited Bromley once more put Sutton under the cosh as wave upon wave of attack ran into the adamant defence deep in the visitors' 22. The defence was rewarded with a penalty which Wise took quickly and sprinted off down the touchline. The ball was switched to the open side and the ubiquitous Dan Jones carried it deep into the 22. The pack trundled towards the line before releasing the backs as Agu Benson walked in for a debut try in the corner. From touch Tom Lennard impressively added the conversion for a 20-0 advantage.

Moments later the Lennard boot created the next try as a 50/22 was followed by a penalty kicked into the corner. From the ideal attacking platform Sutton scored their bonus point try just after the half hour. Sustained pressure resulted in a 5-metre penalty and Gareth O'Brien scored his second for 25-0.

The scenario did not improve for the home side in the remainder of the first period. Ewan McTaggart, deputising as captain, stole a lineout ball. Sam Lennie made the break and was ably supported by fellow Kiwi Adam Bibby who weaved his way through the defence with a mesmeric 40-metre run to gift Kyren Ghumra his first try. Lennard added the extras for 32-0.

The mighty McTaggart once more seized a loose ball and the visitors, oozing confidence, opted to run out of defence. Agu Benson took it into enemy territory and passed to fellow wing Ghumra to run in a stunning score. The first half ended with a chastening score reading Bromley 0 Sutton & Epsom 37.

## Bromley's fightback

It was imperative for the hosts to rally and ideally get the opening score of the second period to gain a foothold in a match that had rapidly gone against them. However, Sutton resumed where they had left off and created a perfect scoring opportunity after a minute. The final pass was intercepted with the line begging and Bromley survived.

Buoyed by the reprieve the Kent team were soon on the attack. Securing the ball from a 5-metre line their overwhelming pressure from the pack led to a try from close-range to open their account. Jonathon Griffiths added the conversion as the Warman crowd applauded a much-deserved score.

A determined opposition was frustrating the Black and Whites and ten minutes later they had conceded a second try. Once more the pack powered over with lock Harrison Pullen the beneficiary and Griffiths' boot making it 14-37. A stunning comeback victory was very unlikely but a bonus point for four tries was certainly achievable at this stage.

To the great credit of the Warman warriors the Black and Whites never regained the fluency and dominance of their first half performance. However, they did add two further tries after butchering another golden opportunity with a wayward pass. The seventh try was of the popular but mundane variety as the excellent Sutton lineout ushered Sam Lennie over the line for a catch-and-drive score.

The eighth, and final try from the visitors, was far more spectacular. Kyren Ghumra gathered a kick and evaded the close attentions of two tacklers to run the ball back 35 metres to complete an impressive hat trick. Tom Lennard added the simple conversion for 49-14 and his personal century of points for the Rugby Lane team.

Bromley, however, had the final say in this highly entertaining match. Full-back George Hawkins scored following some wonderful attacking play. The conversion came back off the upright and referee Oliver Munn concluded the match with Sutton victors by 49-19.

## Reflections and next fixtures

Last season Sutton opened their account with a 50-7 triumph over Old Colfeians at Rugby Lane. This was another impressive first outing with eight tries. Captain McTaggart led from the front not only carrying powerfully but disrupting the Bromley lineout. Hooker Lennie once more excelled in a sterling performance in the loose by a mobile Sutton pack. Laurence Wise at scrum-half



injected a high tempo into the match creating one try with his tap penalty and scoring another with a marvellous solo run.

Adam Bibby was devastating whenever allowed any space and the wingers benefited with four tries. Debutant Agu Benson impressed whilst veteran Ghumra took the plaudits with a hat trick.

Bromley's preparations had been hindered by the drought and additionally they were short of key players. Their forwards carried with power but the telling offload was frequently prevented by a stubborn Sutton defence. Their lineout had an afternoon to forget under pressure from the opposition. The back line took every chance to run the ball with Harvey Young prominent. The hosts demonstrated great character to win the second half 19-12 and were competitive to the last.

Next Saturday, 13th September, Sutton host Dartfordians at Rugby Lane at 3pm. The Bexley club opened their account with a home game but endured an horrific afternoon against Sidcup. The Crescent Farm club denied Sutton top spot by annihilating Dartfordians 80-14 in a brutal display. Meanwhile, Bromley will travel to Beckenham in search of their first win of the season.

## Teams

Sutton & Epsom: O'Brien, Benson, Scott, Bibby, Ghumra, Lennard, Wise, Johnson, Lennie, Hilton, McTaggart (c), Finney, Rea, Jones, Hegarty. Replacements: Howes, Tame, Munford.

Bromley: Hawkins, A. Griffiths, Young, Rice, Richardson, J. Griffiths, Friday, Milne, Leach, Withers, Pullen, Walder, Laws, Scott, Brown (c). Replacements: Das Neyes, Rowley, Rushton.

Image: Rugby action from a previous game.

---

## Feast of Finals see Sutton & Epsom RFC runner-up

On Saturday, Dings Crusaders RFC hosted a veritable feast of four finals. A large and enthusiastic crowd was bathed in unbroken sunshine.

The day began with the amuse-bouche of Ashley Down Old Boys downing the colours of Hastings & Bexhill to the tune of 34-20. Next came the hors d'oeuvres, as Cheltenham North overcame Honiton 38-32. The penultimate plate served up a thrilling 28-24 win for Ealing Trailfinders over Old Bristolians.

The afternoon culminated in the main course: the Papa Johns Regional 2 South Plate Final between Sutton & Epsom and Drybrook. The latter, having lost this fixture 42-29 to Reed's Weybridge last year, came into this match on a season of unbridled success. Champions of the Regional 2 Tribute Severn League and winners of the Forest of Dean Combination Senior Cup with a 37-27 triumph over Cinderford, Drybrook now completed a trophy treble by vanquishing Sutton 36-27.

Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings, and the Squirrels dominated the early exchanges. A penalty was advanced to the 22. Having secured possession from their throw, Drybrook cut through the defence but lost the ball near the line. Fortunately, the referee brought play back for an earlier infringement. Fullback Haydn Lewis stepped up to give Drybrook a 3-0 lead. Sutton's start was further hampered by a cut to Ewan McTaggart's eye that temporarily forced the gargantuan lock off to be bandaged up.

The first signs of recovery came from a searing break by Tom Lennard that brought Sutton close to the enemy 22. Awarded a penalty, Sutton drilled it into the corner. McTaggart returned, the ball was won, and hooker Sam Lennie crossed the whitewash for the first try of the afternoon. Captain Bunting added the extras to give Sutton a 7-3 lead.

Invigorated, Josh Rea made a fabulous break that led to another penalty on the 22. However, the doughty Drybrook defence held firm. The game flowed end to end. On the half-hour mark, Sutton were awarded a penalty and Drybrook's Jack Moss was shown a yellow card. Opting for a try over points, S&E were rewarded as Sam Lennie forced his way over for a second try. Though the conversion missed, the Sutton supporters were soon celebrating again. McTaggart and Glanville secured the restart, and Adam Bibby jinked his way 40 metres to score a stunning solo effort. Bunting converted, taking Sutton to a 19-3 lead.

As has so often been the case in this annus mirabilis for Drybrook, it was their talismanic captain Mitchell Bourne who provided inspiration. He powered over the line from a catch-and-drive, with Lewis adding the conversion from the flank to close the gap to 19-10.

Approaching the break, Sutton were awarded a penalty near halfway. With clock awareness, Bunting knocked over the long-range effort to give Sutton a 22-10 lead at the interval.



The second half began swiftly. Drybrook's Mitchell Baldwin made a searing 40-metre break before flanker Bailey Watts applied the coup de grâce. Lewis converted to make it 22-17. With momentum on their side, Drybrook surged forward again. Cai Rogers made a stunning break, and McTaggart received a yellow card for high contact. Drybrook capitalised, scoring twice in five minutes. Cai Roberts crossed to level the match at 22-22, and Mitchell Baldwin added another try. Lewis converted to take the lead 29-22.

In a parallel to the first half, Sutton responded. McTaggart returned just in time for another attacking lineout. Lennie completed his hat-trick. Though Bunting missed the conversion, the score stood at 29-27.

Moments later, the pendulum swung again. Bibby was shown a yellow card, meaning the influential centre would miss most of the remainder. Sutton were awarded a penalty from 45 metres, but Bunting's kick narrowly missed.

Drybrook came close again with a clever kick that exposed Sutton's cover, but the defence scrambled back just in time. However, the respite was brief. Replacement Ioan Jones strode over for the crucial score, converted again by the nerveless Lewis to make it 36-27.

Sutton fought to the final whistle but could not close the gap. Drybrook's celebrations began at the final whistle.

Though Sutton came up short, their performance capped a season of definite upward trajectory. Drybrook were worthy winners, concluding a triumphant campaign—one that may require a carpenter to extend their trophy cabinet.

## Teams:

### *Sutton & Epsom:*

Scott, Ghumra, Bibby, Bunting (capt.), Huie, Lennard, Findlay E, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Rea, Jones, Hegarty.

Replacements: Hilton, Madadangoma, Duey, Tame, Davies, Nelson, Symonds.

### *Drybrook:*

Lewis, Chappell, Price, Baldwin, Roberts, Morgan B, Rogers, Jelf, Addis, Morgan L, Moss, Watkins, Watts, Peaper, Bourne (capt.).

Replacements: Hale, Morgan C, Greenway W, Rowley, Tinker, Greenway R, Jones

Image credit: Iain Frazerr

---

## Sutton & Epsom Secure Spot in the Final with Another 49-Point Display

### **Sutton & Epsom 49 - Harlow 19.** Saturday 10th May

A great deal of credit must be given to Papa Johns for their contribution to grassroots sport. Sutton & Epsom have finally caught up with their soccer neighbours in Gander Green Lane and heartily embraced the competition. In 2022 Sutton United had a day out at Wembley for the 2022 EFL Trophy Final sponsored by the renowned pizza supplier. United lost 4-2 after extra time having been denied by Rotherham's 96th-minute equaliser in normal time. In contrast to the soccer competition that had all of the League One and League Two clubs plus 16 category one academy teams the take up for the rugby equivalent has been apathetic. A picture of the end of season landscape was provided via the unreliable format of a club survey and the inaugural year was greeted with cascade of walkovers and the competition remains somewhat unloved despite a plethora of trophies being available that are spread liberally across the levels.

This season Sutton could have felt unlucky having been given a rare away first round tie and being in a section of the draw that would lead to two further away rounds. But the appetite for this competition is akin to a super model dining on nouvelle cuisine in the 1970s. Grasshoppers RFC generously provided a walkover in Round 1. S&E advanced to the next round against London Irish Wild Geese for a game due to be played at Hazelwood. However, a pre-booked tournament meant that no pitches were available and the game was switched to Rugby Lane. A grateful Black & Whites scored a magnificent seven goals in a 49-33 triumph. Destined to be on the road again they were saved by the start of the cricket season and Crescent Farm was unavailable for Rugby and Sidcup RFC journeyed to Cheam. Another 49-point haul, including a hat trick from lock Ewan McTaggart, and a 49-27 win saw the hosts advanced into a semi-final against Harlow.

For devotees of Sutton Rugby Harlow RFC are a familiar foe having been promoted as champions of London 2 North they played





S&E from 1993-4 to 2003-4. So it was a delight for the Rugby Lane crowd to welcome back the Essex club on a beautiful sunny afternoon with a place in the final the prize for the winners. Sutton & Epsom fielded a strong squad featuring 11 from 18 of the players with the most league appearances from this season. Liam Batty initiated proceedings for the visitors who played towards the Cabbage Patch. S&E opened brightly looking to employ their back division at every opportunity. An excellent 50/22 from Tom Lennard put the hosts in a prime attacking position. The ball safely secured from the throw it went to the wing where Archie Fitzgerald touched down. Unfortunately, the final pass was forward but fortunately play was brought back for an earlier misdemeanour. Sutton took a tapped penalty and Rob Hegarty muscled his way over from short-range. Freddy Bunting mastered the breeze for a 7-0 lead after five minutes.

The Black & Whites dropped the restart on their 22. Harlow took advantage and centre Casey Teague made a telling break with Brad Etherington in support the ball came to lock Bamidele Coker who lost control just short of glory. Denied the instant reply the visitors were forced back on the defensive. Captain Bunting turned down a kick at the sticks on the 22 in favour of the nudge to the corner. The Rams repelled the catch and drive and Sutton released their backs. A long miss pass by Bunting bounced favourably for Archie Fitzgerald, on a rare visit to the UK, to gather and score in the corner. Freddy Bunting made light of a challenging conversion for 14-0.

At the end of the first quarter the hosts were reduced to 14 men when Kyren Ghumra knocked on an attempted interception. It was a justifiable yellow as a wonderful floated pass on the Harlow 22 had created a fabulous opportunity to counter. Buoyed by the numerical advantage the Latton Park men went in search of their first score. Once more the ball was lost under the posts but, on this occasion, Harlow secured possession and a jubilant Matt Gleeson crossed the whitewash to score. Liam Batty impressively converted the winger's try to trail 7-14. However, Sutton soon restored their 14-point cushion. On the half-hour, having secured the line out ball, Freddy Bunting executed a set play to score. He added the extras to his try for a 21-7 lead.

If the home crowd thought this was going to be a pleasant processional bathed in sunshine they had a rude awakening. For the remainder of the first period the men from Essex gained the ascendancy. The back row triumvirate of Stalley, Hoole-Jackson & Etherington marauded forward. The centre combination of Teague and Lancaster made breaks and lock Bamidele Coker was producing an eye-catching display. Running back a Sutton clearance from halfway forwards and backs combined in unison. For the third time a probable score was thwarted by a fumble in sight of the line. However, as per Sutton's opener, play was brought back for a penalty. Prop Mobashar Mahmood powered over the line for the visitor's second try. Liam Batty made it 14-21 with an excellent kick.

With the first period approaching time added on the men in green made a stunning break from halfway deep into the Black & Whites 22 as the hosts scrambled in defence. In fact, S&E were saved when the play was interrupted by their physio treating an injured player who was in the path of the attack. Play was brought back for a knock on and a Harlow scrum. Brad Etherington picked up from a retreating pack and carried it forward for his back row comrade Dale Stalley to score. The conversion just drifted by the posts but the game was well poised with Sutton & Epsom leading 21-19. The first half concluded with Harlow on the front foot and the result very much in the balance.

The second half began with two key incidents, which on reflection, proved to be most significant for the final outcome and shifted the momentum in this encounter. In the first minute Kyren Ghumra made amends for his earlier botched interception by picking off a pass and sauntering in from forty metres. The Bunting boot made it 28-19. That most demoralising form of try to concede was followed moments later by a yellow card awarded against Harlow. The team of three showing consistency penalised a knock on that occurred whilst attempting to cut out a Sutton pass. Down to 14 the visitors were immediately punished. The penalty was kicked to the corner, the catch and drive was clinically executed as Dan Jones was ushered over the line for S&E's fifth try of the afternoon. Another immaculate conversion from the flank made it 35-19 and a game that was on a knife-edge had swung violently in favour of the hosts.

In addition, the Sutton defence was much improved in the second period as the organisation and alignment that had become an encouraging feature of the recent league campaign was present once more. Indeed the Black & Whites were to keep a clean slate in the second half. Another familiar feature, the impressive form of Adam Bibby, became evident the longer the game continued. His balanced running, gliding through the defence and bouncing off would-be tacklers combined with selfless passing gave the S&E attack another dimension. With the numerical advantage the Surrey men could have added three more scores. Firstly, they failed to pass the ball down the line where an eager Archie

Fitzgerald would have scored. Secondly, Kyren Ghumra was held up over the line by tenacious tackling. Finally, and most unexpectedly, Adam Bibby lost control of the ball under the posts in the act of scoring.

The dynamic Dale Stalley lifted the siege with a barnstorming break from the scrum that followed the Bibby boob. The flanker exploded down the paddock and reached halfway leaving a poleaxed Sam Palombo in his wake. The unfortunate 15 was ushered off the pitch to take no further part in the contest. Restored to their full complement the Rams tried to get back into the match.



They were aided by a flurry of penalties as they pressed hard for a morale-boosting score. The Black & Whites defence was now far more resolute and cussed resilience eventually saw them earn a turnover penalty near their line.

As the match continued the Essex team were not helped by injuries as key performers were replaced. The heat, the situation and the scoreboard made the game become increasingly scrappy. With the final whistle approaching the Rugby Lane team added two more goals to their ledger. Good fortune favoured the hosts as a probing kick bounced cruelly away from the cover and arrived in the hands of Josh Rea who triumphantly strode over. The Captain made it 42-19. Then Sutton maintained their numerical novelty of scoring 49 points in every round. A penalty awarded for a scrum infringement on halfway was kicked to the 22. Tom Lennard made the telling break from ten and Archie Fitzgerald, with his dubious hair colouring, collected his second try. Freddy Bunting maintained his 100% conversion record for the day, and in the competition, as his personal tally rose to 19 points and his side advanced to 49-19. Soon after the referee concluded proceedings.

After a thoroughly entertaining match Sutton & Epsom had earned their place in the Papa Johns Men's Regional 2 South Plate Final. The game had started with a Sutton swagger, no doubt the result of two comprehensive victories in earlier rounds, but Harlow had shown enough intent to indicate to the neutral observer that this might not be an easy afternoon for the hosts. Harlow hit back and by the break were more than in contention as only an errant conversion separated the teams at 21-19. However, the Black & Whites scored 28 unanswered points in the second half to gain the glory of a place in the final. That match will take place on Saturday 17th May at Shaftesbury Park. This fine facility is familiar to S&E as it was a venue during their National 2 season being the home of Dings Crusaders in Bristol. Their Plate Final will be one of four matches that afternoon as a festival of club rugby starts at 11am. The Sutton charabancs will not be departing at breakfast but at a more polite time of midday as their game against Drybrook is the last one on the menu at 5pm. The West Country outfit were Sutton's first ever Papa Johns opponent in 2023. On April Fool's Day the Mannings Ground men left Rugby Lane 31-0 winners so the 2025 Sutton vintage will be keen to make amends this Saturday.

**Sutton & Epsom:** Palombo, Fitzgerald, Bibby, Bunting ©, Ghumra, Lennard, Lovatt, Lennie, Howes, Johnson, Glanville, McTaggart, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.

**Replacements:** Madadangoma, Duey, Davies, Davis, Williams & Nelson.

**Harlow:** Creasey, Hunter, Lancaster, Teague, Gleeson, Batty, Enyon R., Mahmood, Davies, King, Coker, Garner, Stalley, Hoole-Jackson & Etherington ©.

**Replacements:** Alagoz, Clark, Terrington, Enyon O., Wright & Rundall.

Image credits: Robin Kennedy

---

## Epsom break Weybridge Reeds

**Reeds Weybridge 28 Sutton & Epsom RFC 33.** Saturday 22nd March.

The denouement of the campaign is rather lacking in a crescendo this season. This was the penultimate Saturday and it will be followed by yet another tedious blank Saturday. No doubt the boffins would argue that clubs need a rest before the frantic finale.

When these two teams met in December the nation was mopping up after Storm Darragh and everyone was grateful to avoid a postponement. A trio of Sutton tries edged out the visitors in a keenly contested match that ended 17-11. With Sutton lying fifth in the table and Reeds only a place below, expectations were for another even encounter. The crowd was not disappointed as Sutton & Epsom edged a game of fluctuating fortunes by 33-28.

Despite an ominous roll of thunder whilst the teams warmed up, the match was played on a dry afternoon on a very firm surface. The Whiteley Village location has arguably the most significantly advantageous slope in the league. Sutton kicked off with the advantage not only of topography but also the breeze.

The visitors started well, dominating possession in the opposition 22, running through their patterns. After a couple of penalties the pressure told as prop Callum Gibson forced his way over in the third minute for the opening try. Freddy Bunting converted for a 7-0 lead.

Reeds immediately illustrated the attacking potential of their illustrious back division as they ran back a kick and won a penalty. The chance to get on the scoreboard after winning the line out was squandered by a poor pass as the low ball was kicked through and a grateful S&E touched down for a drop out.

Five minutes later that attacking threat bore fruit with a sumptuous score from 40 metres out. Matt Stevenson was put into space



by an initial break and finished with élan as he left defenders floundering in his wake. Joshua Clark converted to level the scores at 7-7.

The Black & Whites returned to attack mode aided by a penalty kicked into the corner. Yet again the hosts demonstrated not only superb defensive organisation but also cussed tenacity as Sutton launched wave after wave of attacks. Dan Jones was halted by a high tackle near the line. The result was a penalty and hooker Rhys Day getting ten minutes off for bad behaviour. From the penalty Sutton forced their way over and their leading try scorer Dan Jones got his rewards. Freddy Bunting added the easy extras to restore the lead with a 14-7 advantage near the end of the first quarter.

Everything was in Sutton's favour — the slope, the breeze, and now the numerical advantage. However, they failed to convert pressure and a spirited Reeds continued to look to unleash their backs at every opportunity. The quality of the visitors' play also deteriorated. They were held up over the line, they opted to kick to the corner and kicked it dead and were frustrated.

After the half-hour mark Matt Whitaker replaced Ben Tame as the back row reorganised to accommodate the talismanic Number 8. The malaise spread to the decision-making. A fatal failure of risk assessment saw a clearance from the 22 declined in favour of running the ball. Optimist tackled, penalty gifted and try conceded. The ruthless Reeds attack took the opportunity as prop Kerran Beavis muscled his way over. Despite the conversion failing the hosts only trailed 12-14.

A two-point advantage with less than ten minutes remaining in the first half was not only insignificant but also well below par for this particular location. Sutton urgency began to look like desperation as another attempt to counter from their 22 ended with poor passing. The situation deteriorated as Captain Bunting was given a yellow for a collision in the centres. Joshua Clark stepped up and knocked over the subsequent penalty for a 15-14 lead.

As the travelling support from Rugby Lane pondered how it had gone so heinously awry they were served up one final unamusing amuse bouche before the break. They were awarded a penalty in front of the posts on the 22. Declining a simple three points to retake the lead when playing with 14 they opted to kick to the corner. Their bearings were faulty as the ball was kicked dead.

The situation could have swiftly turned from trying to terminal as a Reeds counter threatened to score. Small mercies for the visitors as Mr Lipetz-Robic blew his whistle to end the half with Reeds Weybridge 15-14 up.

At the break the hosts held the advantage not only on the scoreboard but also on the pitch with favourable conditions, a man advantage and a back division that was on song. It was going to be an uphill struggle for Sutton & Epsom in every sense of the phrase. Their defence would have to be at its best and they would have to find a tactical approach to maximise their strengths whilst mitigating the slope.

Thomas Boaden replaced Dan Johnson in the visitors' front row but the hosts turned the screw at the start of the second half. A flurry of penalties was followed by a warning to the Black & Whites as they were forced back in their 22. With a sense of inevitability a penalty was kicked to the corner and the Whiteley Village pack exploited the lineout to usher over lock Cameron Goodwin for their third try of the afternoon. Clark's conversion failed but Reeds led 20-14.

Sutton regained possession at the restart and won a penalty that they advanced deep into the enemy 22. This signalled the moment that veteran Matt Whitaker began to impose his considerable talent on the afternoon's proceedings. Playing his 201st game with all the hunger of his first he scored his 118th try — a typically abrasive carry leaving tacklers hanging off his powerful frame. Freddy Bunting inched Sutton ahead by 21-20.

The Black & Whites had appreciated that the road to glory on this afternoon would be on a path trod by their pack. The trio of Whitaker, Lennie and Gibson were at the forefront of a mighty effort to negate the slope as they carried relentlessly, compiling impressive statistics for yardage gained.

However, the quality back play of the hosts would remain a constant threat. Ten minutes later the partisan crowd were raising their glasses to salute their bonus point score as Reeds regained the lead. Once more it was superb back play with the excellent Will Jones at 15 creating the opening for replacement Nick Brown to score. It was advantage Reeds as they led 25-21.

In this fluctuating fixture the crowd did not have to wait long for another twist. Within five minutes S&E had their bonus point for a fourth try and had taken back the lead. Playing with renewed vigour and belief they demonstrated impressive efficiency as the pack turned pressure into points in the 22 with Rob Hegarty being the beneficiary on this occasion. The conversion drifted wide as the Rugby Lane team led by a solitary point 26-25 as the referee informed the protagonists that they had 15 left to play.

The visitors' chances were dealt a blow at the restart as Thomas Boaden was issued a yellow and Sutton again had to play with 14. The hosts tried desperately to make the advantage count. The Black & White line held, repelling a 5-metre lineout as they kept the ball with their tireless pack.

With five minutes remaining Reeds Weybridge were awarded a penalty. Joshua Clark stepped up and calmly bisected the uprights from 45 metres for a 28-26 lead.



As the match entered time added on the referee intervened once more to flourish a yellow card. A high tackle on Dan Jones meant that the hosts would finish the match a man down.

A minute later S&E had scored. Demonstrating superb control from a lineout, first Matt Whitaker and then Sam Lennie carried towards the line. The ball was spun wide to prop Callum Gibson who was in splendid isolation. He ran home his second try of the afternoon, concluding with a celebratory dive that was less Tom Daley and more of a belly flop. Freddy Bunting added the vital extras for 33-28, meaning Reeds required a try to draw or a goal to win.

Almost inevitably Sutton conceded a penalty at the restart to ensure high anxiety for the conclusion. Penalties followed as the ball advanced to the 22. The hosts declined the kick to the corner and tapped from a central position, no doubt searching for a try that would have a more advantageous position for the conversion.

The S&E defence stood strong until the hosts knocked on and from the scrum they dispatched the ball into the neighbouring pitch for a hard fought win.

The season concludes on Saturday April 5th as the Black & Whites head to Horn Park where Old Colfeians will no doubt be a much improved outfit to the one that lost 50-7 on the opening day of the season. Whilst Sutton were winning in Whiteley Village the Old Boys had a significant 31-17 win at Gravesend that secured their Level status.

#### **Sutton & Epsom:**

Findlay, Nelson, Bibby, Bunting ©, Scott, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Gibson, McTaggart, Glanville, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Boaden, Whitaker & Rea.

#### **Reeds Weybridge:**

Jones, Maitland, Stevenson, Forbes, Bennett, J. Clark, Beavis, R. Day, Agyapong-Ntrah, Goodwin, Finn, Ewington, Wastie & Corner.

Replacements: Howe, McKinley & Brown.

---

## Sutton & Epsom Win But Gravesend Earn Vital Points

### **Sutton & Epsom RFC 33 Gravesend 28.** Saturday 8th March.

Gravesend were the final visitors to Rugby Lane for this campaign, though there are a couple of road trips for the Black & Whites before the season concludes. In November, the Rectory Field crowd bore witness to yet another last-gasp defeat as the Kent team lost 23-22. On that occasion, it was a late Freddy Bunting penalty and heroic defence on the Sutton & Epsom line that thwarted a spirited comeback. This time, with the spectre of relegation looming, Gravesend had a degree of consolation with two bonus points in a 33-28 loss.

Angus Nelson made his Sutton & Epsom debut from the bench and became the 41st player to play in 1st XV league matches this season. The squad had eleven personnel or positional alterations from the one that triumphed at Thurrock the previous Saturday.

On a gloriously sunny afternoon, the visitors set the game in motion. The opening exchanges included the usual industrious forward play, ferocious tackling, and a pleasing desire to release the backs. For all the endeavour, the opening quarter remained pointless as well-drilled defences closed down the space and frustrating errors thwarted the telling moments.

Gravesend, having shown exemplary resilience against the Sutton catch and drive, escaped to the S&E half. Pouncing on an interception, the Kent team made a minimal gain, but from the next phase, scrum-half Nirees Kanaharajah kicked ahead. The ball rolled towards the line, and the cover was left prostrate and flailing haplessly as the Number 9 strolled past to score. Jack King split the uprights for a 7-0 lead for Gravesend.

No doubt, nothing focuses the collective mind of a team more than conceding the opening score, and Sutton's riposte was instantaneous. Swift handling and a break on halfway were exploited with a wonderful run by lock Josh Glanville, whose perfectly timed pass gave the glory to Adam Bibby, who touched down near the uprights. Freddy Bunting chipped over the conversion to level the scores.

S&E made early changes on the half-hour as props Johnson and Hilton were replaced by Boaden and Gibson. The hosts started to monopolise territory and possession as Adam Bibby's influence on proceedings increased with every passing minute.

As the first half was reaching its conclusion, Sutton & Epsom pressed hard for the lead. A simple penalty in front of the posts was



declined and was kicked to the corner. The catch and drive routine ran into heavy traffic, and the Rugby Lane pack were held up over the line. Moments later, a delightful handling move looked certain to see winger Matt Symonds score in the corner, but he was obliterated by a thunderous covering tackle.

Gravesend were demonstrating heroic defence, roared on by the many Rectory Field travelling supporters who had made the journey. As is so often the case in the modern game, play was brought back for an earlier infringement.

**Take 2:** Penalty kicked to the corner, and on this occasion, a rather more favourable action for Sutton. The catch and drive was exploited to the full as hooker Sam Lennie scored. The familiar sight of a Bunting touchline conversion made it 14-7.

Shortly after, Mr Scoular ended the first period. At the break, the game was in the balance. The tenacious Gravesend defence meant that Sutton would need to work hard and play with quality to win. Equally, with memories of the reverse fixture, if the hosts' performance dropped, the visitors would no doubt take advantage of any lapses. As is always the case, the opening exchanges of the second half would probably determine the final outcome.

Sutton & Epsom made the perfect start to the second period. A delightful restart descended just outside the Gravesend 22 and was expertly taken, but formidable counter-rucking resulted in a penalty to Sutton. The familiar kick to the corner ensued.

From a scrappy lineout, S&E eventually secured the ball. First, Hegarty advanced, and then McTaggart got to within inches. The Rugby Lane XV was awarded a scrum near the posts. The ball was spun wide, and a long pass was propelled to Matt Symonds, and the winger juggled the ball before touching down in the corner. On this occasion, the Bunting conversion narrowly drifted wide as Sutton extended their advantage to 19-7.

The Black & Whites started to take control of the game but were being hampered by errors that thwarted their best moments. Gravesend were most unfortunate when they were awarded a penalty in their half. A prodigious clearance was picked up by the breeze and remarkably rolled the length of the pitch, and play returned to where it started.

This was to prove costly as, soon after, the ball was in the hands of Sam Lennie. The hooker is a genuine force of nature in open play, and he had plenty to do, but bouncing off tackles and brushing defenders aside, he raced in for the try. Normal service resumed for the Bunting boot, and Sutton led 26-7 entering the final quarter.

Gravesend could have been thoroughly deflated by this turn of events, but they responded with renewed vigour. It was their turn to pressure the line with 5-metre lineouts. Sutton were stubborn in defence as they resisted the opposition pack.

Success was temporary as the visitors were awarded a penalty. The Black & White line stood firm and turned over the ball to clear. In the blink of an eye, the reinvigorated Kent team were laying siege once more to the S&E line. Despite a defensive effort to make Horatio proud, flanker Nathan Fouche crossed the whitewash. Jack King did the necessary, and the visitors trailed 14-26.

Hopes of a famous revival for the Rectory Field faithful appeared to be scuppered five minutes later. Another sublime break by Adam Bibby into the 22 put flanker Dan Jones in under the posts for his tenth try of the campaign. Freddy Bunting added the extras, bringing his season's tally to 207 points.

33-14 up and three minutes to go, it looked destined to be a case of plucky Gravesend returning home empty-handed. To the eternal credit of the visitors, they responded in the manner any coach would want from a team threatened with relegation.

They proceeded down the pitch, aided by a penalty. Their excellent lineout secured the ball and won another penalty. This time, the catch and drive was executed to perfection, and flanker Brad Money cashed in with the try. The conversion by Jack King meant that if they could score another try, they would gain not only one bonus point but two as the scoreboard read 33-21 with the match already in injury time.

The above scenario looked impossible as Sutton took the restart and attacked in the 22. Ten metres out, they dropped the ball, knocking it on, and it was fly-hacked towards touch.

The fairy tale writers reached for their quills. The ending was happily Hans Christian Andersen for Gravesend followers but felt more like the Brothers Grimm for Sutton. Incredibly, the ball stayed infield several times, and by the time play was halted for a Gravesend penalty, it was deep in the Sutton 22.

Once again, it was kicked in the corner, and the visitors took the 'double your Money' option as the flanker scored his second try, and his side's second, in time added on. Jack King made it four from four, and the referee concluded proceedings with Sutton the victors by 33-28.

For Sutton, Adam Bibby was exceptional in defence and attack as his personal performances continue unabatedly on an upward trajectory. In addition, the second-row firm of Glanville & McTaggart demonstrated not only remarkable fitness, popping up all over the paddock, but also great handling skills with telling passes.





After so many agonising defeats this campaign, only the coldest heart of Ebenezer Scrooge would begrudge Gravesend such a joyous finale. If the Kent club survive the drop, they may reflect on that eleventh-hour score as their moment of divine deliverance, and we wish them well in their final two fixtures.

The league goes into abeyance next weekend, and rugby supporters will be able to gorge themselves on the trio of Six Nations contests.

**Regional 2 South East returns on 22nd March, with the Black & Whites travelling to Whiteley Village to face Reeds Weybridge, whom they defeated in December 17-11.**

#### **Sutton & Epsom:**

Findlay, Scott, Bibby, Bunting (c), Symonds, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Hilton, McTaggart, Glanville, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Boaden, Gibson & Nelson.

#### **Gravesend:**

White, King, Cooke, Sims, Huckle, Kite, Kanaharajah, Brooker, Dadson, Shorter, Bird, Hampshire, Money, Fouche & Chahal.

Photo credit Robin Kennedy

---

## Sutton & Epsom rugby's thorough victory

Thurrock 28 Sutton & Epsom RFC 53. Saturday 1st March.

Back in November, Thurrock were very unlucky to lose 33-29 at Rugby Lane as the mighty McTaggart crashed over for a try on the final play. The Black & Whites had only ventured once to Thurrock for a league fixture this millennium, and that was in November 2000 when they won 28-13 – not even Steve Munford was playing then. So, a return to Oakfield was long overdue. It is a wonderful facility, not only offering a magnificent pitch but also live streaming of their matches. Whether watching in situ or remotely, it was a superb spectacle with a dozen tries, with Sutton prevailing 53-28.

Having accommodated the stag weekend against Medway, the Sutton social calendar encompassed the wedding this weekend. Good news – I understand that none of the players will be attending the honeymoon of their erstwhile hooker. It is enough to make coaches pray for agamists. On the plus side, it was a delight to welcome back Kyren Ghumra to the colours. The hosts kicked off on a chilly but sunny afternoon on the occasion of Number 8 Matt Whitaker's 200th 1st XV league appearance.

It did not take long for Thurrock to open their account. The visitors conceded a penalty for not rolling away, and the ball was advanced to the 22. A controlled catch and drive and considerable pressure from their sizeable pack put Sutton back on their line. A delightful overhead pass enabled prop Josh Buller to walk in under the posts. Henry Bird added the extras for a 7-0 lead.

Sutton pressed hard to level the scores as they spread the ball wide but were thwarted by poor execution. It was a case of third time very lucky. Matt Whitaker marauded into the 22 and chose the exotic rather than the practical with his pass. The ball went loose, bounced off a defender, and ended up in Adam Bibby's arms, and he sauntered in under the posts. Tom Lennard converted for 7-7.

Within five minutes, S&E had the lead. In the absence of Freddy Bunting, Steve Munford had the armband and did not hesitate in taking three points for a kick in front of the posts. It might have been anachronistic, but it was much appreciated by the travelling supporters. Minutes later, Kyren Ghumra's arcing run was stopped by a high tackle. Playing the advantage, Tom Lennard lofted a kick into the grateful hands of Angus Findlay on the wing to score in the corner. The challenging conversion failed, but Sutton & Epsom led 15-7 at the end of the first quarter.

For those who thought that Thurrock's opener was going to be a blemish on a processional afternoon for Sutton, they soon had a reminder that this was very much a contest. The hosts took a scrum against the head near halfway, and Henry Bird made a devastating break – only a superb cover tackle from Adam Bibby prevented a try. However, some chicanery on the deck led to the Kiwi getting a yellow card. The 14 men escaped as the Essex pack were held up over the line.

The hosts sensed their chance, and a superb weaving run by Harry Reynolds enabled Kodie Holloway to score from close range. Henry Bird added the extras to trail by a solitary point, 14-15. The host's revival was undone by a penalty for crossing that enabled the visitors to return to the Tees 22. Formidable lineout control had the hosts on the retreat, and Sutton scored.

What a popular try it was as Matt Whitaker crossed the whitewash for his 116th league try on his 200th outing. Tom Lennard



converted, and the referee blew for the interval. Spectators gazed at the time and could only conclude, 'a good game is a quick game,' as S&E led 22-14 at the break.

The second period opened with a flurry of penalties being conceded by Thurrock. Sutton punished their lack of discipline with a classical catch and drive, with hooker Dan Jones ushered over the line. The touchline kick was missed as the visitors extended their advantage to 27-14.

It was now the turn for the Oakfield men to have a penalty and kick it towards the corner. Their fearsome forwards moved ever onwards, making a score look inevitable. Rather surprisingly, it was spun wide, but the excellent Henry Bird stepped through the cover to score, and he added the conversion for good measure. The scoreboard read 21-27, and the Essex men were refusing to lie down.

But a minute later, the Black & Whites had their fifth try as Josh Rea linked with winger Matt Symonds, who cut back inside for support, and prop Sam Lennie popped in under the posts. Tom Lennard made it 34-21.

The spirited hosts were rewarded for their fighting spirit and their determination to run the ball when they collected a bonus point for their fourth try 15 minutes into the second half. Having won a penalty in the Sutton 22, they opted for a scrum and spun it wide for Harry Reynolds to complete a thrilling score. Henry Bird made it four from four, and at 34-28, the game was once more in the balance.

The comeback was stymied when Thurrock were temporarily reduced to 14 for a late tackle, though it was a case of mistaken identity for the bemused miscreant who trudged off, no doubt to plead his innocence to the coaches. Then a dazzling run by Kyren Ghumra was denied by a superb covering tackle, but it was a temporary stay of execution. Soon after, it was the familiar catch-and-drive routine, with Dan Jones once more the beneficiary with his second score.

Trailing 28-39 with fifteen left on the clock, the valiant Thurrock team started to fade as Sutton looked to stretch the game. The Oakfield men were unable to gain the quick retort that had been the case earlier in the contest. Sutton & Epsom started to monopolise territory and possession and were eager to increase the score.

The next try came from the most familiar source as Matt Whitaker collected his second. If it is appropriate to get a try on one's 100th appearance, it is only logical to get two on your 200th. Tom Lennard split the uprights as the Surrey men led 46-28.

The match concluded with captain Munford deciding that Mr Whitaker should not hog all the glory for the old guard. He gathered a loose ball by the ruck 40 metres out, saw a gap, and scuttled his way in under the posts. An appreciative Tom Lennard made his personal tally 13 points, and Sutton had a 53-28 victory.

It was a splendid occasion - a magnificent St David's Day lunch preceded a thoroughly entertaining match on an excellent pitch, overlooked by the superb Howie Evans Stand. Regional 2 South East will be much the poorer without Oakfield and Thurrock RFC.

Next Saturday, 8th March, Sutton host Gravesend in their last home league fixture of this campaign.

#### **Sutton & Epsom:**

O'Brien, Ghumra, Scott, Bibby, Findlay, Lennard, Munford ©, Lennie, Jones, Gibson, McTaggart, Tame, Hegarty, Rea & Whitaker.

**Replacements:** Madadangoma, Hilton and Symonds.

#### **Thurrock:**

Frear, Aminu, Bird, Holloway, Reynolds, Clifford, Chew, Cowman, Percival, Buller, Catchpole, Locker, Watts-Adams C, Lewis & Jennings.

**Replacements:** Worster, Ulph & Watts-Adams M.

---

## Sutton and Epsom Soar in Nine-Try Extravaganza

Sutton & Epsom RFC 59 Dartfordians 20. Saturday 15th February.

1988, the first league season, was when Dartfordians last visited Rugby Lane on the final day of the season. On that occasion, the visitors were safe in the knowledge that they had retained their league status, but this time around, the Kent club were looking for vital points in their struggle to avoid the drop. Considering that the Black & Whites had to come from 21-3 down to win the reverse fixture, having been aided by injuries that reduced Dartfordians to 14, the Bexley-based club arrived with realistic hopes of success. By the final whistle, the visitors had endured another afternoon blighted by injuries and, despite a spirited



performance, were overwhelmed 59-20.

On a chill and overcast afternoon, Sutton welcomed back not only the Stag weekend adventurers but also Matt Whitaker in his 199th league appearance. Dartfordians kicked off attacking the clubhouse end. No doubt responding to the need for a strong start, the visitors dominated the first 15 minutes of this encounter. Gareth O'Brien was soon scurrying to gather a ball rolling into the corner and was rewarded for his efforts by being bundled out of the in-goal area. Soon the Kent team were attacking from a 5-metre lineout. Though thwarted when held up in a maul, the visiting pack earned a reprieve as S&E fumbled at the first scrummage.

Under the baton of Jarlath Hetherington, the 10 orchestrated a telling attack from the subsequent set piece, switching the focus from the open side to the blindside. Resolute tackling was not enough to deny Dartfordians as lock William Tuffley did superbly to score in the corner. Hetherington's touchline conversion missed, but his side had a morale-boosting 5-0 advantage after ten minutes.

Moments later, a superb kick ahead by winger Elliot Soler-Gomez produced a 50/22 and had Dartfordians in prime position to extend their lead. Stoic defence denied Dartfordians as they were held up over the line. Sutton shunned the traditional drop-out option of clearing as far as possible for an attacking short ball they hoped would initiate a telling counter. It did not, and the packs were soon settling down for a Darts scrum in a most advantageous position.

With clinical efficiency, they exploited the blindside with a powerful carry from Number 8 Harry Wright that saw him touch down in the corner. The conversion from the flank failed, but the hosts trailed 10-0 and had yet to have the ball in the opposition half. The second try was not a moment to allude to Wildean wit as stentorian words urged Sutton to raise their game.

The response was instantaneous as Adam Bibby pursued the restart and charged down the clearance kick. He appeared to be second favourite to reach the ball, but the bounce favoured S&E, and the centre scored, putting Sutton 5-10 down.

The Bourne Road boys viewed this as an unfortunate and temporary aberration as their excellent defence neutered the Black & Whites, who attempted to spread the ball wide. Using the same successful formula as before, Dartfordians kicked for territory and were soon in the 22 looking for another score. The S&E defence matched each assault and, for the second time, held up the visitors over their line.

It was the hosts who scored next. A surging break by Freddy Bunting gained a penalty, and he advanced his side into the enemy half. The ball was carried into the 22, and Tom Lennard caught a pass aimed at his laces, straightened the line, and passed to Josh Glanville, and the lock gave Sam Lennie his first try of the afternoon. Lennie intelligently dummied the touchdown in the corner and sauntered round under the posts. An appreciative Freddy Bunting added the extras for the 12-10 lead on the half-hour.

Moments later, the Kiwi hooker scored a sublime solo effort. Collecting the ball in the middle of the field, he set off with not only 40 metres to go but numerous defenders to avoid or dismiss from his presence. Changing pace and direction, he relentlessly advanced until he reached out to score with two tacklers hanging off him. Captain Bunting made it 19-10, and Sutton were in the ascendancy.

Before the break, with echoes of the reverse fixture, Dartfordians suffered the cruellest of blows. Prop Stephen Garrett collided with lock Lewis Potter, and after a lengthy delay and excellent work from the physio teams, they were patched up. However, both had ended their afternoon's rugby and departed for A&E to tend to their wounds. The visitors had lost two of their pack, both players having over 100 appearances, and they were forced into significant changes.

Their cause was not aided when Sutton secured the bonus point before the break with their best rugby of the half. Excellent continuity and sweeping attacks resulted in winger Angus Findlay scoring in the corner, and the Bunting boot took the interval score to 26-10.

Dartfordians needed a reprise of their opening efforts of the match. To their great credit, they immediately put Sutton on the back foot. A wonderful break with beautifully timed passes saw the hosts desperately scrambling to cover in their 22. The initial thrust was parried, but eventually, sheer weight of numbers told, and the superb Jarlath Hetherington was rewarded for his efforts with a try. Though unable to add the conversion to his score, Dartfordians were back in the contest at 15-26.

Perhaps with Medway memories still resonating, the Black & Whites were in no mood to let a sizeable lead slip from their grasp again. Steve Munford took a quick tap penalty, and Rob Hegarty punished a retreating defence with a 30-metre break to the 22. The ball rapidly went to the flank, where Freddy Bunting stood his man up and strolled in for the try. The gluttonous points accumulator added the conversion for 33-15.

Hetherington tried to rally his troops with a wonderful kick and collect, but the visitors were superbly turned over in the Sutton 22. Replacement Matt Whitaker made a powerful break, ably supported by Adam Bibby, and yet again, Freddy Bunting was the man in the right place at the right time to collect his second try of the afternoon. The conversion failed, but the 38-15 lead



appeared to be unassailable.

Approaching the final quarter, the Black & Whites cut loose, and Adam Bibby was at the centre of some of their best running rugby of the season so far. The NZ centre has won plaudits for his exceptional defensive qualities all campaign and has become an increasing attacking threat as each week goes by, but in this match, he was exceptional.

With a perfectly timed and angled run, he sliced through the defence, and a delightful dummy saw him cruise through to score his second. Freddy Bunting advanced his personal account, and Sutton led 45-15.

From the restart, Sutton attempted some champagne rugby from near their line. Sadly, the result was not a magnum of Dom Perignon White Gold but rather a flat spritzer. Some extremely speculative long passes culminated in an isolated Angus Findlay being put in a deep slurry pit of trouble. Ryan Chandler gratefully accepted the gift, and a joyous Dartfordians had scored their fourth try, equating to a vital bonus point.

Though the conversion slipped narrowly wide as referee Stronge blew the final whistle, the visitors had a much-deserved consolation as Sutton & Epsom won a highly entertaining match 59-20.

Once again, there is no league action next week, and the programme returns on 1st March with the Black & Whites heading to Thurrock. Meanwhile, Dartfordians will host Gravesend in a pivotal match in their fight for survival.

### **Sutton & Epsom:**

O'Brien, Scott, Bibby, Bunting (C), Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Jones, Tame & Hegarty.

Replacements: Howes, Whitaker and Rea.

### **Dartfordians:**

Scott, Cappuccio, Taylor J, Nichols, Soler-Gomez, Hetherington, Chappell, Garrett, Sweeney, Chapman, Tuffley, Potter, Williams, Chandler & Wright.

Replacements: Hooban, Taylor M. & Ola.

Photo credit: Robin Kennedy