EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
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5th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

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Horsham spooked by Sutton & Epsom hat-trick

3 November 2026

Sutton and Epsom RFC 43 Horsham 26. Saturday 31st October. Rugby Lane

Spookily, in the annals of Sutton and Epsom RFC league history, there have only been two previous occasions when the club have played on Halloween. In the inaugural season of 1987–88 they won at home 14–3 against Old Gaytonians, and in 2009–10 they lost 14–9 at Haywards Heath. This campaign had seen four wins from five outings, but a points difference of plus two indicated that their matches had been extremely hard-fought affairs. The visitors, Horsham, had done the double over the Black and Whites last season and arrived full of confidence. For the home supporters, it was a delight to see their team at Rugby Lane for only the second time in 2026–27. The match did not disappoint, with the Black and Whites recording a 43–26 victory.

The only change in the Sutton and Epsom squad was the absence of the Lurch-like lock Ewan McTaggart, which enabled Steve Munford to add to his considerable aggregate of appearances. Horsham's Archie Fox initiated proceedings in conditions that were ideal for rugby and a delightful contrast to the previous Saturday. The hosts were immediately on the attack, but white line fever overcame Tipene Maxwell with Adam Bibby free. The visitors switched from determined defence to potent attack as centre Tom Saunders marauded into the 22, but this initial sortie came to nought. The early indicators hinted that a thoroughly thrilling afternoon was on the menu.

The frenetic pace continued as Sutton and Epsom were indebted to a superb Angus Findlay tackle. Equally, Horsham were grateful that the hovering Bibby received a pass on his laces and the subsequent kick ahead rolled safe a split second after he touched down. Finally, on the quarter-hour, the deadlock was broken. A sweeping attack by the Sutton and Epsom backs culminated with Gareth O'Brien sending over Adam Bibby for a try in the corner. Freddy Bunting converted from the flank for 7–0. A minute later, the home supporters were applauding a second score. Following a jinking break by Angus Findlay, the ball found its way to Adam Bibby, who sauntered in for his second. Freddy Bunting's kick made it 14–0.

Horsham joined the party a couple of minutes later with their opening score. Wonderful control from their pack saw them remorselessly advance to the line for flanker Tyrese Makasi to take the glory. The visitors would have been on the scoreboard, but ghosts in the machine meant that the board remained blank whilst spectators totted up the score to 14–5, with the kick drifting wide. Sutton and Epsom replied in an instant as the brilliant Bibby transformed from finisher to provider when he broke free, passing to Josh Rea and on to Euan Findlay for try number three. The Bunting boot erred, but Sutton and Epsom led 19–5. A minute later, Tipene Maxwell was touching down for his first try for the Black and Whites after a 40-metre charge on the half-hour. The hosts led 26–5 following four tries in a breathless 15 minutes to secure a bonus point.

Not to be outdone, the Green and Whites scored again in the blink of an eye. The formidable Tom Saunders accelerated through a gap and scored untouched from halfway. Joe Wilde added the extras as the Sussex men trailed 12–26. There were still ten minutes until the break. After six tries in under 20 minutes, the game seemed to be quietly meandering to the interval. However, Gareth O'Brien had other ideas as he changed direction to break the line. Tipene Maxwell quickly carried on the attack from the breakdown, and Euan Findlay burst into the 22 with only one man between him and the line. For the second Saturday on the spin, a delightful kick did not produce a favourable bounce for the number nine, but Adam Bibby was on hand to fall on the ball to complete his first hat trick for Sutton and Epsom. Freddy Bunting bisected the uprights and Mr Clinton Mill, soon after, ended the half with Sutton and Epsom leading 33–12.

At the interval, Horsham appeared to be in hot water. This was a rather ironic state of affairs as earlier in the week the Rugby Lane boiler had expired, but through the efforts of the committee in general and Jeff Parsons in particular, normality was restored. The players would enjoy 21st-century comforts rather than endure the Victorian public school charms of the physically and spiritually reviving benefits of cold water. Sutton and Epsom's euphoria at the stunning display by their backs was tempered by the knowledge that the Horsham pack had shown itself to be a formidable unit when in possession. The Black and Whites resumed attacking the clubhouse end with a 21-point cushion, with the Green and Whites eager for an early score to revive their fortunes.

Horsham dominated possession from the start of the second period and were good value for the opening score of the second half after ten minutes. Again, they were indebted to their forwards. Powerfully, the juggernaut pack advanced and, after multiple phases, captain Jacob Denhart forced his way over from close range. Joe Wilde's conversion made it 33–19. The visitors had commendably turned the tide in the third quarter, and their fourth, bonus-point try arrived on the hour mark. Sutton and Epsom captain Rob Hegarty appeared to have lifted the siege with a familiar muscular carry towards halfway. The Coolhurst men turned over the ball, Tom Saunders made the initial break and then the forwards took over, with prop Freddy Kilfeather the beneficiary with the try. As Joe Wilde's kick sailed over, the game was now in the balance, with Horsham only nine points adrift as they trailed 24–33 with twenty minutes on the clock.

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ISSN 2753-2771

In the final quarter, the mood of the crowd changed as cheers for tries from their scintillating back play were replaced by appreciative roars greeting every thunderous tackle from Sutton and Epsom's defence as concern grew over the outcome. There was considerable relief when the hosts were awarded a penalty and Freddy Bunting stepped up for a kick at goal from 40 metres, with the ball soaring over the posts. In recent times, the Rugby Lane team had opted for the kick to the corner, but the pragmatic approach was not only popular but also successful as they now led 36–24.

Slowly but surely, Sutton and Epsom regained control by monopolising possession as the game condensed in the middle third. This impressive game management and discipline was strikingly undone. The Black and Whites conceded a penalty and, after an injudicious aside to Mr Mill, they were marched back a further ten metres. Perhaps sportsmen should adhere to the cautionary advice of Baruch Spinoza: "The world would be happier if men had the same capacity to be silent that they have to speak." The visitors were threatening another score that would have potentially secured an additional bonus point and guaranteed another dramatic finish for Sutton and Epsom. However, the kick to the winger landed safely in the grateful hands of the home defence, who called for the mark.

It was Sutton and Epsom who were to enjoy the final score in time added on as they recalled memories of their first-period panache. A wonderful move with forwards and backs linking swept down the pitch. Perhaps it was appropriate that Angus Findlay scored, as he had enjoyed a splendid afternoon in attack and defence in arguably his best performance for the first XV. Freddy Bunting took his tally to 13 points. There was just time for the restart to be secured and the ball booted to touch to conclude a very entertaining game, with Sutton and Epsom impressive 43–26 winners.

Sutton and Epsom's success advanced them to second in the league, a solitary point behind Beckenham. The fluency and potency of the backs was a joy to behold. Adam Bibby was transformed from perennial provider to try-scoring tormentor. In the second half, Horsham threatened a spectacular comeback, but Sutton and Epsom showed steely resolve in the final quarter to secure a thoroughly deserved victory. Horsham were hampered by notable absentees but showed great character in the second half. Their forwards were superb, and in Tyrese Makasi they have the archetypal number seven who combines all the attributes of that key position. He was tireless in his work, tackling and carrying with power and pace all afternoon. In their backs, Tom Saunders added to his reputation as one of the most potent attackers in the league.

After an exhausting six games on the bounce, the league goes into abeyance before hostilities resume on 14 November. Time for teams to lick their wounds, exorcise the ghosts from round six and return reinvigorated for the run of games up to Christmas. The Black and Whites will be visiting Old Elthamians for the first time since the 2011–12 campaign, which was the source of horrific nightmares for Sutton and Epsom as they entered Dante's Inferno and experienced all nine circles of Hell in a season of a full haunted house of 26 defeats from 26 outings.

Sutton and Epsom

O'Brien, Bibby, Maxwell, Bunting, Findlay A, Lennard, Findlay E, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Tame, Glanville, Rea, Jones and Hegarty (captain). Replacements: Howes, Scott and Munford.

Horsham

Fox, Wadley, Sanders, May-Miller, Grogan, Wilde, Sakakini, Earle, White, Kilfeather, Denhart (captain), Anderton, Lovett, Makasi and Howard. Replacements: Murphy, Brock and Thompson.

John Croysdill

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