



New Year Cheer For Sutton and Epsom Rugby

6 January 2025



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 ambisimistrous 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 pinquid 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 & Hiron.

Image courtesy Robin Kennedy