

Sutton & Epsom rugby's thorough victory

4 March 2025



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.