

Sutton & Epsom triumph over the elements

27 October 2026



Gravesend 12 - Sutton & Epsom 17 | Venue: Rectory Field 24th October

After the drought and the heat came the rain and the wind, adding to the belief that, but for the weather, the British would have nothing to talk about. The elements played a considerable part as conditions deteriorated during the match, impairing handling but maximising the physical contribution made by all concerned in an enthralling encounter.

Sutton & Epsom held firm to gain an impressive 17-12 away win as the hosts secured a bonus point with their final play.

Sutton & Epsom made two changes from their victorious Bromley squad. Gareth O'Brien returned from injury and club stalwart Jack Howes was a late call-up for "Father Eric", who appropriately had paternal duties. Gravesend also had eleventh-hour disruption, so the versatile Ben Kite was left flying high at 10 rather than 9 when George Bruce withdrew.

Under leaden skies and a blustery wind, with a dire forecast, the game began. In the early exchanges S&E struggled with their lineout but had the edge in the set scrum, whilst number 8 Les Falefatu impressed with his carrying for Gravesend.

After ten minutes Gravesend failed to execute a move and the ball splashed down to the sodden turf. A Sutton & Epsom player reacted instantaneously and completed the hardest part by kicking the ball with commendable precision over the try line before being flummoxed by the bounce when first to arrive. It was a case of Wittgenstein's axiom "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent" in terms of the name of the enterprising but unsuccessful soul. No try, and back for a scrum from the initial knock-on.

The Rugby Lane men did not have too much time to wallow in self-pity as they opened their account a minute later. A powerful initial carry brought them to within five metres. Multiple phases later the stubborn home defence was breached as hooker Sam Lennie emerged from a mass of steaming humanity with the glory. Freddy Bunting was grateful for a conversion at the easier end of the scale of difficulty for a 7-0 lead.

At Rectory Field S&E have learned in the past that it is the Hope that kills. It took only a couple of minutes before Gravesend replied as Ben Hope secured his traditional stunning solo score with a run from near halfway. Unsurprisingly, in the conditions, the conversion from the flank faltered as the hosts trailed 5-7.

The home team were now enjoying a period of ascendancy. One assault was thwarted when a speculative kick resulted in a mark. Such exotic delights were shelved as they adopted route one and carried to the Sutton & Epsom line. Carry after carry and the Surrey men stood firm, with the ball adjudged to have been held up over the line.

Then it was Sutton & Epsom's time in the limelight. They advanced the ball with the boot and impressive catch and drives to encamp deep in the opposition 22. In addition, their scrum dominance began to bear fruit in terms of penalties. The visitors were soon to discover that the home XV were equally cussed and adamant in defence as they forced a penalty when a stray S&E hand erred on the deck near the line.

As the interval approached, both teams searched for that telling moment. Gravesend had made light of the conditions, enterprisingly running back kicks from their 22. However, in time added on, Tipene Maxwell's chase was rewarded with a fine tackle that led to a Sutton & Epsom penalty.

The three-point option from 15 metres in front of the posts was declined. There was logic in opting for a scrum. When their attack floundered and they returned for another penalty, the senior supporters chuntered in unison as not only the kick at goal was declined but also the scrum. It was as incongruous as witnessing Johnny Rotten performing at an eisteddfod. The tap and go led to more rousing home defence and the half concluded with Sutton & Epsom 7-5 up.

Second-half surge

With the infallible value of hindsight, the opening 15 minutes of the second period were the key to the match. During this phase Sutton & Epsom played their best rugby and, with two tries, created a 12-point lead.

The Surrey men started the second half with renewed relish and it took only a couple of minutes for their pack to be rewarded with a try from towering lock Ewan McTaggart to put S&E 12-5 up. On this occasion there was to be no instant reply from the hosts.

The Rugby Lane eight increased the pressure at the scrummage. From one penalty the ball was drilled into the corner and, though the first lineout was disrupted, from the next the Sutton & Epsom catch and drive culminated in a Dan Jones try. The conversion failed but Sutton & Epsom extended their advantage to 17-5.

The playing conditions had deteriorated markedly, with heavier rain and the wind now blowing with increasing vigour in

the hosts' favour. Gravesend rallied in search of a try to get within a score. It was no surprise that, when offered a kickable penalty with 15 minutes left on the clock, they opted for the tap penalty. It felt a bit like Groundhog Day as again the referee indicated the ball had been held up over the line.

To add to the drama, the game became one with uncontested scrums. This decision resulted in the traditional confusion, consternation and conniptions.

The game became an increasingly truncated affair, with many stoppages the result of Sutton & Epsom infringements, and it was no shock when the referee issued yellow cards. The first to go was replacement Gareth O'Brien for being offside and he was soon followed by Tom Lennard. Despite Sutton & Epsom being reduced to 13, the game was already in time added on.

Sutton & Epsom had the chance to relieve the siege but their clearance failed to make touch. A fine arcing run from the 22 looked destined for a score but fell just short. After penalties and multiple carries, the hosts were belatedly rewarded when Brad Money added his five cents' worth to score. The successful conversion ended the game with Sutton & Epsom 17-12 victors.

A performance of character

Sam Lennie, rather like Matt Whitaker of yesteryear, was awarded Man of the Match by the hosts for the umpteenth time. In his current form he reminds one of William Hazlitt's comment on Cavanagh, the great fives player of his day: "there was not only nobody equal, but nobody second to him."

However, this Saturday, in truth, it was a performance of character, determination and defiance by the whole squad that was the source of the victory, and it was almost invidious to single out the likes of Josh Glanville.

For Gravesend, their back-row triumvirate of Money, Chahal and Falefatu revelled in the conditions and were only subdued by exceptional Sutton & Epsom defence on their line. As for the back divisions, they will be praying for more favourable conditions for the return fixture at Rugby Lane but, then again, the game is scheduled for 6 February.

Rectory Field, as ever, was a most convivial location after the game as juniors and infants rubbed shoulders or shins with players from as far back as the 1960s. This season there is an additional bonus, thoroughly appreciated by this correspondent: the game is shown on a big screen in the clubhouse, meaning that the less intrepid can avoid exposure, trench foot and desquamation and watch in luxurious comfort.

Next Saturday Sutton & Epsom return to the home comforts of Rugby Lane to play Horsham. In the rest of the league, Beckenham lost their unbeaten status but remain in pole position, although only five points separate the top eight clubs.

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

Gravesend: Betts, Barnes, Hope, Sims, Cooke, Kite, Brady M, Brooker, Dadson, Steel, Mackenzie, Brett, Money, Chahal and Falefatu. Replacements: Laqueretabua, Sims and Brady C.

Bob Haimes

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Photo from a previous fixture – credit Robin Kennedy