

THE HISTORY OF SUTTON & EPSOM RFC *Founded in 1881*



Club History

Jeff Hume - 12/01/2004 (*updated 01/02/2011*)

Picture this. It's the early 1870's and our British Empire is at its height. Queen Victoria has at long last returned from her mourning at Balmoral. Sutton is no longer a small thinly spread village straddling the London - Brighton turnpike road. Since Thomas Alcock became the lord of the manor, he has proved to be a shrewd property developer. Sutton's population, having leapfrogged Carshalton in the 1850's, has doubled to 6,600 in the last decade. The town is now served not only by the Croydon - Epsom railway but by new lines to Epsom Downs and Mitcham Junction. The economy is booming and it is a time of great social change. Parliament has committed England to compulsory education. The weekend now starts at Saturday lunchtime, generating an enormous public demand to be amused on Saturday afternoons. Public hangings have only just been stopped, as have deportations of



Sutton

1. 1872.
2. 55.
3. Sutton.
4. Quarter of a mile from Sutton,
S.E.R.
5. "The Cock," Sutton.
6. Rugby Union.
7. H. F. Knightley, Founder's Court,
Lothbury, E.C.
8. Red and blue in broad stripes.
9. Played 21, won 7, lost 6, drawn 8.
10. Won 18, lost 10.

convicts to Australia. William Webb-Ellis is on his last legs.

Rugby Football is a game played with 20 a side and without the distraction of having a referee.

It is at this point that a few intrepid souls, such as Arthur Jackson, the Burrows brothers and James Spencer introduced the sport to Sutton, forming a Club which used the Cock Hotel as their changing room and played on a ground in Western Road. Alcock's 1873 Football Annual records that in their first season, 1871/2, the Club boasted 55 members and played 21 matches, winning slightly more than they lost of these in terms of goals (i.e. converted tries). We also know that they played against Streatham in 1872/3. We cannot tell why but this Club disbanded after only a few years.

Nevertheless Rugby was clearly here to stay and they were succeeded in 1879 by a team known as the Sutton Madcaps, whose career was apparently "short and inglorious". The stage was set for something more permanent.

In the autumn of 1880 our own Rugby Club emerged, initially as a section of the Sutton Bicycle Club which had itself been formed in June 1879. Technical innovations, such as the invention of the High Wheel Bicycle or 'Penny-farthing' to replace the Velocipede or 'Boneshaker', meant that Cycling had become the new rage. What also attracted people was speed; a bicycle was usually quicker than a carriage on public roads and motor cars were not allowed on the British highways until 1896. The chain driven 'Safety' bicycle had yet to emerge.

BICYCLING NEWS.

Sutton.—Saturday, April 10th, to Sunbury, seven members. Good roads to Hampton, beyond very heavy, both upper and lower roads. Tea at the Magpie, recommended. Head-quarters were reached at 9.30. Members are requested to muster well on Saturday, 17th, for inter-club run with Croydon B.C.—R. S. FARDEN, hon. sec.

[April 16, 1880.]

covered ½ mile on the track in 1 minute 19.8 seconds, earning him the national amateur record.

Although some entrepreneurs elsewhere were staging indoor events and a number of professional cyclists had emerged in the north (rumblings here of the 1895 Rugby League issue) the Sutton Club concentrated on outdoor meets which were



“Strictly confined to amateurs”. The club uniform was initially a Navy blue suit with a badge, in the form of a shield with monogram. By 1885 that had developed into “dark blue, deep braid, black stockings, cricket cap”. The Club colours were however “chocolate and amber”.

High wheel bicycles were best suited to summer road conditions. Therefore the club decided to incorporate Rugby to keep its members together and in good form during the winter months.

Our first Captain of Rugby was Herbert Hooper, the 19 year old son of a carriage builder, and he was mainly responsible for the Rugby Club's formation. The Hooper family had moved to London from their roots in Devon and Exeter and now lived, with their two servants, in Benhill Wood Road, Sutton.

Herbert played at any position behind the scrum. Slightly built but with great speed, he was a fearless tackler and could apparently drop goals from almost any angle.

The 52 members of the Sutton Bicycle Club, with Lord Egmont as its President and Charles Crute as its first Captain, were great enthusiasts. The Sutton Club advertised its meets in both *The Cyclist* and *Bicycling News*. There were both regular Saturday outings on the public roads – “Impromptu Run leaving HQ at 3.30pm” – and open competitions at the Crystal Palace un-banked cinder track, which was considered very fast. In June 1883 one of its members, A Thompson,



Quite aptly, he went on to become a surveyor in later life .

He is pictured here in the standard uniform of the time which consisted of a thick woollen jersey with knickerbockers fastened below the knees. Rugby boots were at that time unstudded & little more than standard workmens' boots.

There were suitably encouraging press reports in *The Herald* in March 1881 of our first game, against a scratch team, and in November 1881 of our first match against another club, the Croydon Clifton's, at their Duppas Hill ground.

The title of Sutton Football Club was adopted in our second year, no doubt asserting that Rugby not Soccer was the true sport of Football. We have to remember that the schism between the kicking and carrying codes was then very recent.

Although reported links with the Bicycle Club soon petered out, we undoubtedly continued to rub shoulders. For instance the rugby playing Allport family provided both Robert as the Cyclist's second Captain and his father Franklin as their Vice President. The two Clubs also continued to use the same watering hole as their HQ.

Pictured here in 1892 are two lady cyclists pedalling their tandem tricycle along Hill Road in Sutton.





From the very start of the Club until 1924 changing accommodation was provided at the Cock Hotel, a well known coaching inn which stood next to the cross roads (and the old toll gate) at the top of Sutton High St. The Cock was also the local mecca for social activity and an ideal venue for players and supporters to become suitably 'refreshed' after a game. It seems that we provided brisk trade because the hotel was

completely rebuilt in 1896; also providing us with a 100 seat function room.

Amongst those who helped to shape the Club in those early days was Arthur Jackson, who had played in those



early 1870's pioneering matches. His three sons all played for the club.



Most of the records of the early years have, regrettably, been lost. However we do know that we played Saracens in 1883/4. Pictured here is the following season's team, captained by Harold Bawtree, complete with their 'Umpire' Mr Bartlett.

Prominent among the Club's early players were the four Allport brothers, one of whom had played in the club's first game. Dr Alfred Allport, a fine forward, went on to play for Guy's Hospital (as pictured here), Blackheath, Surrey and England (5 caps between 1892-4).

In September 1890 the Club was elected to the membership of the Surrey County RFU. 1895 to 1906 were good years for us. We won the Surrey Cup in 1897, 1898 and 1900. Crowds of 3,000 were by no means uncommon for home games. One of our star players was

Charles Nickalls, a particularly quick three-quarter who always played in running shoes and seldom kicked. In a match at Mitcham Green he broke through and was racing for the line when a spectator tackled him and knocked the ball from his hands. The referee, apparently unsighted, refused to award the try maintaining that Nickalls had merely dropped the ball!

The 1897/8 team, pictured here, had good reason to look proud, with a results card of: Played 23. Won 21. Drawn 1. Lost 1. Points for 306. Points against 21. Unsurprisingly, they also won the Surrey Challenge Cup. Sutton decided not to enter the Surrey Cup in the succeeding season, as by doing so they would have had to scratch good-class fixtures to meet inferior clubs in the preliminary rounds.



In those days the team wore chocolate coloured jerseys, which followed the club colours of the old Sutton Bicycle Club, with an intertwined crest woven in the letters 'SFC'. Indeed the earliest photos show some players with a similar emblem across the full chest.

Our players in the late 1890's included the prop forward George Fraser, who subsequently joined Richmond, played a remarkable 17 matches for the Barbarians and won 5 caps for England (1902 - 1903). Many other Sutton players were selected for the Surrey XV.

In November 1901 we travelled to Paris to beat Stade Francais, then the champion club of France, by 6 - 4 on their home ground. A large party of friends and supporters crossed the channel and the fixture was a great success, being reported in both the *Auto-Velo* as "Le Match International" and in *The Sportsman* as "The Englishmen win a keen game". They did however gain revenge on us by 16 - 4 when we returned to Paris in the following season; and by a goal and two tries to two tries when we made our third and final visit to play them in November 1903.

Our captain for two seasons in the early 1900's was Eugene Colman, a fine half-back who unfortunately had a glass eye. In one game on very wet ground his partner R. B. Downing was about to pass when he was startled to hear "Stop! I've lost my --- eye!" The game had to be held up while the players searched for the lost optic.



For a number of years after its foundation the Club played on ground at the corner of St James' and Western Roads, near to the

pitch used by the local pioneers of the game in the previous decade. Unfortunately it was to be many years before we found a permanent home and it seems that during these early and important times we were hampered by being always on the move.

After using a number of other pitches, which have been overtaken by buildings, we moved to a ground in Grove Road in 1894, only to have to move back to Western Road in 1901. However this pitch in turn fell foul of the builders and in 1904 we moved to a pitch adjoining the Recreation Ground in Gander Green Lane. We must have felt this would mark an end to the Club roaming, as a large sum of money was raised to carry our drainage works and to erect a covered stand. However in 1911 we were off again; this time to a pitch in Manor Park Road.

In June 1896 the Club organised a sports day which led to many other popular sports meetings in conjunction with the cricket club at their ground in Cheam Road. These continued as a regular feature until a few years before the First World War.



We see here the hand of Sir Harry Barclay, a player in the club's early days and Sutton committee member for over ten years. He also became the Secretary of the Amateur Athletic Association, for which he was knighted. During his 16 years in that post he made a vast number of forward thinking changes. However history best remembers him for his blazing public row with Victoria Cross holder and pre war middle distance runner Albert Hill, prior to the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp. Harry decided that Albert, who had sustained an injury and at 31 years old was in any event also considered at too old, should compete in either the 800m or the 1500m, but not in both. Albert insisted and came away with not only the two gold medals, but also a silver in the 3,000m team event. Good decision!

The regular Boxing Day fixture with the powerful Croydon club, on whose ground the match was always played, provided the club with its most lucrative gate. However Sutton's nearest and dearest rivals were Streatham and these matches received much publicity. In 1901, after many years of trying, we finally beat Croydon. It must have been quite an occasion as a special train was run to take our supporters to the match.

The result must have done wonders for our confidence as we then proposed that the annual match with Croydon should alternate between our respective grounds or at very least they should travel to us the next year. When this was refused we arranged to play Streatham on future Boxing Days. They were quite happy to alternate and 2000 spectators watched Sutton register a 14 - 4 home win on the first of these matches, which continued until the outbreak on the First World War.

In 1905/6 a change was made in the Club colours, abandoning those inherited from the Bicycle Club. Previously players had worn chocolate coloured jerseys, with a crest woven in the letters 'S.F.C', and amber collars and cuffs. The members thought that these looked a bit nondescript when faded. It was therefore decided to



adopt the broad black and white rings, sported here by the 1906/7 team, in which we continue to play.

'The Great War', which put a stop to all rugby football, took a terrible toll on our membership. Out of 74 who served in HM Forces 16 paid the ultimate price, including C I Macfarlane, the Club Treasurer, who fell in the first three months and John Williamson, the Captain, who died six months later. Many others were disabled. Three received the Distinguished Service Order and seven received the Military Cross.

Most of us have the imagery of civilians being coerced into enlisting in local pals regiments for Lord Kitchener's 'New Army'. So it is interesting that although a sprinkling of Club members joined either the Queens Royal West Surrey Regiment or London regiments such as the HAC, our allegiances took us into many different regiments, from the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry right up to the Gordon Highlanders. More exotically, one member served with the Artists' Rifles and another with the Calcutta Light Horse. Perhaps the clue is that all bar 12 of those who served did so as officers. On a lighter note it is to be hoped that AJ Adams was not confused when joining the



RAF's predecessor; the Royal Flying Corps!



On 20th May 1919, Ernest Henderson, who as well as being a leading player had been Hon. Secretary and Team Secretary in 1913/14, called a meeting at which it was decided to restart the Club. Two pitches were provided by the Council at the Sutton Recreation Ground. Our first post war match was against Park House, then at Mottingham in Kent, on 4th October, which we won 16 - 3. Due to a railway strike the journey there and back was made by lorry and the players washed in cold water from small basins placed in front of the hut which served as a changing room.

Ernest, a winger, had been a prolific try scorer. In 1910/11 he had scored 33 tries and in 1911/12 again over 30 tries. In the 1912/13 season, having been selected to play for Surrey against Middlesex, he was described in *Sporting Life* as "Sutton's official try-getter" as he had scored something like 100 tries in just over three seasons.

He went on to captain the A team in 1919/20, despite by then not having fully recovered from his war injuries, before playing a final season with the 1st XV in 1920/21.

The quest for a ground of our own was on again and in the 1921/22 season we secured a ground near the Angel Bridge, London Road, on the way to Rosehill; with teams travelling by lorry from the dressing room at the Cock Hotel. Although we spent money levelling and preparing the ground and erecting a hut, the venue was never attractive either to players or to the dwindling number of spectators. In fact the land became so swampy



in the winter that we had to move to an adjoining piece of land. The 1924/5 team, pictured here, started to use Sutton Baths in Throwley Road, which had both a swimming pool and 'slipper baths', as the club's dressing room.

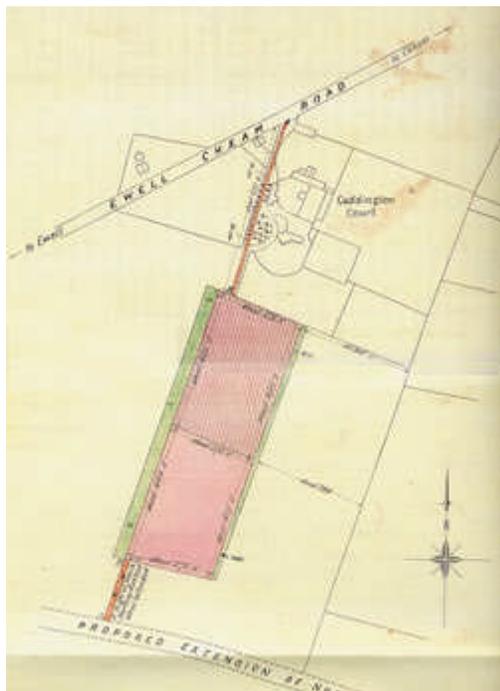
Having struggled since the Great War to survive, 1925/6 saw the first indications of a revival. For the first time in nearly twenty years matches were played by a B (ie 3rd) team. John Gilbert began negotiations with Cheam Sports Club over a first class piece of ground on part of the land used by the Cricket Club and we eventually secured a 21 year lease, with a 14 year break clause. This time substantial money needed to be raised for rent, pitch levelling and a pavilion with changing facilities. Many individuals and organisations made donations including the RFU and indeed the Cheam Cricket Club. Numerous events were held including 'The Frivolities Concert Party' in Sutton Public Hall.

The Club opened its 1927/8 season on its new ground, initially still changing at Sutton Baths but now travelling in style by char-a-banc. It was the dawning of a new era. To cap it all the 1st team, pictured here under their captain H C Dean, had a magnificent season. Played 22,



won 19, drew 1 and lost 2,

scoring 402 points to 95. We even started a fourth XV. In fact it was now clear that we needed some overspill pitch space and John Gilbert (who sadly died in 1932 at the early age of 32) was again the driving force behind finding the solution.



In 1928 we purchased the first part of our present Rugby Lane ground, then a small working farm known as Cuddington Court Farm (formerly Manor Farm) which grew corn and potatoes. It had been part of the Lord Northey's manor of Cheam. There were then no adjoining houses and indeed initially no fencing or hut. This pitch became popular with the junior teams, being

only three minutes walk from our main pitch at Cheam Sports Club ground. The Rugby Club's membership doubled in two years and we grew a fifth team. Social events of that season included a dinner at the Mitre Tavern, Chancery Lane and a dance at the Victoria Hall, Southampton Row.

The 1929/30 season saw the committee again under pressure to keep pace with a rapidly growing membership. A further piece of Cuddington land was purchased, adjoining the first, and laid out to grass for the 1931/2 season. That gave the club a total of three full pitches.

1931 started with a Jubilee dinner to celebrate the Club's first 50 years. Walter Pearce, the RFU President, attended along with a number of legendary internationals: Sir Wavell Wakefield, George Stephenson (shown here in the obligatory Players cigarette card), Adrian Stoop and the former Sutton player Dr Alfred Allport. Their speeches included opinions on what was wrong with the game at that time:

"In Ireland we hold the view that the specialism that goes on in forward play is altogether wrong. We think a man who is fit enough to play for his country should be able to pack down in the scrum in any place. You need one specialist hooker, two wing forwards and the other five can pack anywhere."



Readers should note that although the celebrated George Stephenson won 42 caps for Ireland, they were all as a back.



Since the Club's earliest days its spiritual home had been the Cock Inn, Sutton. However in April 1931 there was some form of falling out with its tenant and the minutes record that "in future the Club's headquarters shall be the Red Lion in Cheam". A long association was started with this ancient hostelry, Committee meetings for some years being held in its back room. It took 30 years to avenge the slight, but the old Cock Inn was finally demolished in 1961 whereas the Red Lion (pictured here in c1875) goes from strength to strength!

In July 1936, we purchased the Cuddington Court farmhouse, which forms the old part of our present clubhouse, together with a small amount of surrounding land. In time and with some shuffling up, we then had sufficient space for a further but slightly smaller pitch, at the far end on our land, known as the 'Cabbage Patch'. In 1938 a wooden stand was erected alongside the main pitch, which was then the one nearest the clubhouse.

The new Clubhouse 'opened for business' for the 1938/9 season and to mark the occasion we played a charity match in aid of Sutton & Cheam hospital against a side raised by Adrian Stoop, the former international. For the first time in our history the Club had its own bar.



Cheam had since the 12th century a village brewery which stood on the corner of Ewell Road and Malden Road (now the Broadway) with its own deep well. This picture shows it before Edward Boniface's sale in 1898 to the vividly named Messrs Little & Thunder, who also owned the rival Mitcham brewery. Sadly the Mitcham & Cheam Brewery Co was acquired in 1912 by Page & Overton of Croydon, who promptly closed down both the Cheam and Mitcham operations.

Clearly this action did not endear the Croydon company to our committee for we decided from the start to 'import' beer; initially from the Truman brewery in East London, which also fitted out the Club bar. A pint of bitter was charged at 8 old pence (just over 3p) and mild at 7 old pence. We made a profit even at these prices and the bar has been a significant contribution to club finances ever since.



In 1938, we changed our name from Sutton Football Club to Sutton **Rugby** Football Club. Back in 1923 our soccer playing neighbours Sutton United ("them that play in the vertical stripes") were pressed by the Athenian League to drop the 'United' bit, which had come about from the merger in 1898 of Sutton Guild Rovers and Sutton Association. The plan was for them to become Sutton Football Club, which no doubt seemed more appropriate than the strange title of Sutton United Athletic Club which they had adopted in

1903 on a further, property inspired, merger with Sutton Rovers Cricket Club. There was however a fatal flaw; our rugby club had got there first (1883). To the FA's credit they blocked the name change and Sutton United FC remains today just that.

From the start of the 1939/45 war many members were away in the services and consequently the Club's finances became tight. We therefore took the opportunity in 1940 to invoke the 14 year break clause in our Cheam Sports Club lease. The records show that they accepted our plea of poverty and let us off some of the outstanding rent provided we removed our 'pavilion' which we can deduce was a fairly ramshackle structure. In the same year the first bomb hit the Cheam Sports Club ground and soon trenches were being dug to prevent aircraft from landing.



In 1940 the Government set up a volunteer Home Guard force comprised of those in a reserved occupation, or too young or too old to serve in the normal army. Our clubhouse became a Home Guard headquarters for two sections of the 55th Surrey (Sutton and Cheam) Battalion, one of which was raised by the Club. There was also an Air Raid Precautions (ARP) wardens post, No. 34, just opposite our entrance. Cheam was 'en route' for enemy aircraft attempting to bomb London and therefore received sporadic damage. Whether it was the continual presence of the Home Guard, all of whom became honorary members, or the cuties of the ARP pictured here with their stirrup pump, but the club bar opened seven days a week.



In 1940 our ground was struck by a stick of three 500 lb bombs. The middle one exploded and blew up our old wooden stand, but the other two were dealt with by a bomb disposal team. Here the local lads examine one of the bombs after it had been made safe. A number of the 55th Surrey were killed as late as June 1944, by a V1 'doodlebug' flying bomb which fell on the mansion in Nonsuch Park, only about 300 yards away from the public air raid shelters in the Park's south-east corner.



Young men were called up early in the war and 81 club members had been mobilised by May 1940. Overtures from other local clubs to form a combined side were dismissed and we managed to field a team on each week throughout every season of the 2nd World War. Selection took place just before each game, with preference given to those home on leave and those left out going into the next week's team.

Many of our traditional opponents could not raise a team but matches started to appear against Commonwealth servicemen stationed in England. These were very popular and well reported

matches, often linked to war time charities. Despite rationing the Food Ministry provided Mrs Elsie Read, wife of the war time secretary, with sufficient rations to provide the teams with a 'proper tea' i.e. bread and butter and jam. In one of the first, in March 1943, over 2000 people saw Vinty Cazalet's team, pictured here with the ever present Ernest Henderson on the left, beating a combined Australian and New Zealand Air Force team 4 - 3. Standing just to the left of the referee (in white) is Phil Lovering.

We seem in subsequent matches to have done quite well against the Australians but a January 1945 *Sunday Times* match report shows that we then struggled against a Kiwi side which contained several of their war time international players. Rugby was not the only international sport we played. In August 1945 we staged a 12 a side cricket match in which we beat the Australians 112 - 66, with Ernest Henderson scoring 33.

The determination to continue playing rugby throughout the 2nd World War gave us a flying start after peace was declared. In the season 1945/46, we were able to put out three teams compared to the five we had fielded just before the war.

In the immediate post war years the Club Stewards were the ever popular Mrs & Mrs Wixey. Frank ran the bar and his wife provided teas and evening snacks. It proved too expensive to have a contractor mow the pitches so the committee helpfully provided Frank, a retired Police Sergeant, with a 30 inch Dennis motor mower!! This did not last long and we eventually invested in gang mowers, initially towed by one of the sand and gravel lorries owned by Charlie Powlesland, a colourful Club member who with his brother Jack had 'emigrated' during the war from North Devon.

1947 saw us celebrating two thirds of a century with a Jubilee dinner at the 'Windsor Castle' in Victoria. Post war privations were still with us and the 'Black & White' for that season appealed for people to donate their old 'Rugger Jerseys, Shorts, Stockings and Boots' as these were proving difficult to obtain. Indeed it was not until 1948/9 that the clubhouse opening hours were not 'Supplies permitting'.

From the beginning of the war we had allowed our neighbours to cultivate part of the outfield next to their gardens, in response to food rationing and the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. They used this land not only to grow fruit and vegetables but also to keep chickens, goats and rabbits. Letters received after the war thanking us for the concession include a rather delightful one asking for extra time to crop his potatoes, to delay moving his blackcurrant bushes until autumn and reminding us that he still had a number of people registered with him for their egg ration!

Minds were inevitably still on the 21 members who had lost their lives in the 2nd World War and the 16 who had perished in the previous conflict. In 1948 it was decided to build the present War Memorial Stand. This was not to be constructed where the original had stood but next to the former 2nd team pitch. Because of the priorities of post war reconstruction it was left to Club members to provide both the planning and the labour. Engineering and project engineering fell to Bill Laithwaite who was a structural engineer. He subsequently gained some fame (or perhaps notoriety) in 1970 by disrupting a Barbarians v Springbok match at Twickenham, by sitting in

the middle of the pitch whilst sporting Sutton colours, in a major anti-apartheid demonstration orchestrated by the then Young Liberals Chairman Peter Hain whom *it has been alleged* sprinkled tacks on the pitch.

For the 1948/9 season we provided all playing members with a small folded card entitled "To improve our Rugger" which included such sound advice as *"A scissors or similar movement should not be tried more than once in a matchForwards must always keep the ball close when dribbling.....Never pass the ball back directly to the scrum half in the line out unless you can jump and pass back in one movement. If you cannot, put the ball down and heel it"*

In the 1950's we had several caretaker-stewards one of whom, named Mr Marsh, clearly found difficulty with the transition from being a Cricket Club Steward. Indeed he had the temerity to protest to his new employers after a number of players returned very late (and perhaps tired and emotional) from the Club's end of season Supper at the Greyhound Hotel in Carshalton, only to find the door locked and their Stewards in bed. *It is alleged that* whilst Jim Lewis, the ex Navy club doctor, was hammering on the front door and shouting through the letter box Johnny Cripps clambered up a makeshift ladder formed of empty beer crates and through an open window only to find himself in Mrs Marsh's bedroom. Her husband reacted by shouting back through the letter box "Docter, docter you must see to my wife she's fainted" to which Jim replied "Well open the door you fool, I can't do anything standing out here." On being admitted to treat the patient Dr Jim met Johnny coming down the stairs shouting "Don't worry Jim I've got the keys". The unfortunate Steward was prevailed upon to re-open the bar until the small hours, but only after his wife had been tucked back into bed with a cup of tea. (Ed: HR in a rugby club has never been straight forward.)

In September 1951 Harry Cleaver, the President of the RFU, opened the War Memorial Stand and we also marked the occasion by a match against Surrey and the Club adopting a new crest. Early in that season, our previous unimpressive goal posts (some 26 ft high) were replaced by 'forty-footers'. These were not of course the padded metal posts we see today but major baulks of timber, which were in later years used to effect during pre season fitness sessions. It is to be hoped that Ernest Henderson, who had succeeded his father as President in 1932, enjoyed the Surrey match in comfort. When the lower tier of the stand had been completed Ernest was invited to take a seat to watch one of the Club's fixtures. He observed with some

annoyance that he could not see over the heads of other spectators standing in front. Bill's plans had to be re-drawn and the whole structure raised three feet. Like all good civil engineering projects it came in late and over budget, with Ernest 'saving the day' by lending money to the club.

At the time an interesting set of rules were devised. Use of the stand would be excluded from the privileges of club membership. Adults



would be charged one shilling and children six pence. There would be a special enclosure into which Committee members only could invite distinguished guests. The Treasurer asks that all members who have over the years sat in the stand or entered the distinguished visitors area without being properly invited should now settle up!

After a succession of Stewards the decision was taken on financial grounds to replace them Caretakers, placing much of the burden on club volunteers. Phil Lovering, Peter Haydon and Jack Powesland took over running the bar and cellar, whilst Naomi Lovering, Jane Haydon and Joan Grace took on the catering. The Clubhouse was much smaller than now, with the bar sited to the right of the entrance from the old hall. How everyone packed in for a drink remains a mystery. In the early evening they were so tightly packed that "you almost had to drink out of your mate's glass". There were no gas pressurised kegs and of course no lager. Beer was pulled up from the cellar 'on draught' but we also had firkins on the bar for those who wanted their beer 'from the cask'. It is said that Jack Powesland could walk up the steps from the cellar with a full firkin under each arm. So much to proudly recall; however in later years we also sold 'pipkins' - 7 pint *tins* of beer - including, to our lasting shame, Watney's Red Barrel!

In those days the Club ran a Cricket section, named the Magpies, which Jim Grace had formed. This played cricket "in not too serious a spirit" on Sunday afternoons from May to August. Indeed occasional Magpies cricket matches continued well into the 1970's, with "smoking allowed in the outfield and no particular limit to the number of fielders". For many years Jim also ran a Peacocks invitation rugby side which played on Sunday afternoons in distinctive blue shirts against other fun sides such as London South Africans, London New Zealanders and London Australians. Jim was helped by Bernard Utting of Streatham RFC and Digby Innes of Lloyds Bank RFC and in those amateur days the Peacocks often featured guests such as Richard Sharp and other internationals and county caps who played for the pure love of the game. The Peacocks were so popular that for a while we ran a 2nd team under the captaincy of Jerry Engerran.

As in so many other aspects of the Club at that time, catering for both the Peacocks and Magpies Cricket was for many years provided by that phalanx of Joan Grace, Naomi Lovering and Jane Haydon. Indeed Jane spent 40 years organising and helping to provide post match teas at the Club. This set the scene for a ladies tea rota which continued well into 1990's, with an awesome pressgang headed by Jo Sidders; a delightful lady who nevertheless dwarfed most players. Good on all you girls!

In 1952/3 we erected permanent floodlights along the clubhouse pitch so that the normal Wednesday evening training session did not always have to finish when the light faded.

In 1955/56 the Club celebrated its 75th anniversary, again with a match against the Surrey XV. The Club had recovered well from the 2nd World War. Having re-started with 3 teams, by 1946-7 we raised 5 sides regularly; until January 1947 when frost and snow made play impossible until late March. The Club's bathroom froze and the water pipes burst and stayed icy until the thaw. Nevertheless we ran 6 sides in 1947-8 and 7 sides in 1950-1. The club grew steadily until 1957 when there were 9 or 10 sides and the Clubhouse was bursting at the seams.

Sutton's local rivals for many decades were Esher and Streatham. Relative fortunes have varied greatly over the years but the highlight of 1957/8 was in December when all eight Sutton sides playing Esher won, recording 109 points for and only 8 points against, with six sides having no points scored against them. Lest our Club history records only the good times, a 0-0 draw with Upper Clapton in 1955/6 was reported as "pointless in all senses of the words."

Given that Streatham RFC were our rivals, only those steeped in our sport's unique tradition of matching excessive combat on the field with excessive celebration off the field could understand that the two Clubs used to jointly run an annual dance known as the North Surrey Rugby Ball. These were held firstly at the old Greyhound Hotel in Croydon (by the underpass) then at the Selsdon Park Hotel and then back to the new Greyhound after it's rebuild.

Up until 1957 the structure of the Clubhouse was no larger than it had been as a farmhouse. We had one main changing room for the home teams from which visiting sides had to ascend a rickety staircase with a rope banister into what is now part of the Steward's flat. The bar area was also small. In the summer of 1957 Peter Haydon masterminded the construction of four visitors changing rooms. Not only did he design the building and obtain planning permission, he supervised club members carrying out the construction, including teaching some of them the art of brick laying. Many volunteers showed commendable adaptability. Amongst those who struggled was one "Crookers" Norrington; so called because of various indiscretions as a player due to his particularly poor eyesight. Those with trained building skills maintain that they can still recognise his contribution. In 1990 Chris Manning added a 1st XV changing room and a weights room.

We owe an enormous debt to Peter Haydon because in 1960/61 he went on to manage the construction of an ambitious two storey extension to the old Cuddington Court farmhouse, thereby changing the whole character of the clubhouse and giving us both an enormous bar area downstairs and a similar size function room upstairs. Not only did he design the building but spent countless hours managing the contractors. Finally, when funds were running out, he personally constructed much of the roof and put the finishing touches to the project. Other current members involved included Naomi Lovering and her sewing party who made heavy red curtains to partition the space for lightly attended functions. In 1992 we added an upstairs bar.

Over the years we have staged many fundraising and social events in the grounds including a Go Kart racing event (attended by local boy made good James Hunt complete with racing car), an appearance of the Austin and Cottle Circus (complete, in those days, with animals.), several public fireworks displays, three real ale Beer Festivals (in the last of which a young maiden decided to advertise her ample charms from the top of the marquee), a Jazz festival and many tented Christmas dinner dances.



In July 1971 the name of the Club was changed to Sutton & Epsom Rugby Football Club – allegedly to reflect more accurately the natural catchment area but mainly to coincide with the Boundary Commissioners' decision to move the County boundary. After having been simply Sutton for 90 years, the move was inevitably controversial and some members have been known to air the prospect of a return to our former name. Then there was that mysterious 'mistake' in 1978

to add a further full pitch and a further training area.

The Centenary, in 1981, included a series of prestige matches including one against a full Surrey XV including a number of former internationals. A dinner was held at the Royal Lancaster Hotel in London, attended by the President of the RFU and by Cliff Morgan, the BBC sports commentator and former British Lion & Welsh International fly half. The season ended with a large Club party touring Canada.

The 1978/79 season produced our best results for thirty years and in 1979/80 we won a record number of matches as well as reaching the final of the Surrey Cup, which had been re-introduced in 1970/71.

Up to the end of 1970's our 1st XV's fixture lists were, with the exception of cup games, made up of 'friendlies' - most of which had been in place for many decades. Indeed our annual fixture against Saracens, which started in 1883, had continued with only a few interruptions until 1967! There was talk in the RFU of establishing a country wide league structure. However there was much controversy as to the positioning of clubs and it took many years for it to become established.

In the meantime a number of ambitious clubs tried to set up 'Merit Tables' around the better clubs on their own fixture lists. In the London area they nearly all ran into difficulty as no club wanted to be in a table with a club that they thought was below their standard. The exception was Sidcup RFC which at the time fielded easily the strongest team below the 'established' clubs of Harlequins, Richmond, Wasps, Rosslyn Park, Blackheath and Saracens plus London Scottish, Welsh and Irish. Sidcup could not break into playing the top echelon of clubs but every other club was pleased to have Sidcup on their fixture list. Thus was born the Seven Counties Merit Table, with Brian Chapple (pictured here in his playing days) as its Secretary.



The merit table initially comprised Havant, Southend, Askeans, US Portsmouth, Maidstone, Upper Clapton, Streatham-Croydon, Oxford, St Mary's, Thurrock, Woodford, Sidcup and Sutton & Epsom. It proved impossible for every club to arrange and play matches against every other. Therefore the title was decided by the percentage of matches won, which of course lead to some hotly debated fixture meetings. The first year of the Seven Counties competition was 1981/82 and it ran successfully until 1992/93 by which time the RFU had established the national league structure and a decision was made to wind it up. Indeed we were in both competitions for the 6 years to 1992/93

1987/88 was the first proper season of the leagues and we were placed in London division 1, just below the National Leagues. Our league initially comprised; Dartfordians, Ealing, Esher, Guildford & Godalming, Ipswich, Lewes, Old Gaytonians, Ruislip, US Portsmouth, Upper Clapton and Sutton & Epsom.



Sutton was to maintain its position in that league, being neither relegated nor promoted, for a mighty 17 years; a record of consistency long outstripping most if not all

other clubs in the league system. Throughout much of this time the 1st team was coached by Clive Marshall who is pictured here with the 1989/90 team.

In 1985 the Club was the first winner of the Middlesex County Club Sevens Competition at Twickenham and also won the Seven Counties Merit Table Sevens. In 2000 the Club won the Plate Competition of the Surrey County Sevens Tournament.

The 1988/89 season under Rowland Cheall's captaincy proved memorable, with a 1st XV results card of: Played 37. Won 31. Drawn 1. Lost 5. Points for 837. Points against 312. Indeed we only missed promotion to the National leagues on points difference with a penalty missed in the last match making us the runner up.

The Club won the Surrey Cup in 1984, 1990, 1991, 1997 and 2000, were losing finalists in 1994 and 1996.

In August 1995 the IRB finally gave in and announced that players could be paid, thus ending the era of 'shamateurism' which existed in some parts of our sport. Whilst others Clubs were swept along in this development, some with dire consequences, Sutton & Epsom kept its financial head and competes to this day as a Community Amateur Sports Club.



In May 1996, more controversy as members reluctantly agreed to a proposal that the first team should play in a modified black and white strip; abandoning the wide hoops in which every regular side had played since 1905, in favour of thin stripes. This was said to be "improve the 1st team's performance by increasing their pride in being selected". Club stalwart Tony Walker, speaking against the motion at the Spring General Meeting,

observed acerbically that "during all the years I have agonised whilst watching the 1st XV playing, I never realised that winning could be secured by such a simple change".

In the 1998/99 season we revamped our clubhouse considerably by removing the two old bars and building a new 'central' one and we laid new carpet throughout. The Memorial Stand was refurbished and individual seats installed. The new bar was funded by a bequest from John Lee (aka with his brother Mick as Tweedledum and and Tweedledee). The cause was appropriate not only because of John's own capabilities but because he had, many years before, famously been smitten by a slender lady called Jane, the landlord's daughter at the Crooked Billett in Penge. The arrow struck deep when John discovered that this lady could sink a pint so fast that she took over as anchor man for his 'boat race' team, ensuring that it did not lose a match for many months.

Following this, we turned our eyes towards the rest of the facilities and in 2001 raised more than £60,000 from members through a Bond Issue. We then set about a series of major improvements including the long awaited replacement of the Clubhouse's leaking roof.



Much of the Club's history relates to man's struggles against fellow man. However perhaps the biggest change to the Club's structure came about from Jamie Paxton's initiative in the late 1970s to build upon the schoolboys side. This led to the development of a huge Mini & Junior section with the number of players now exceeding those in the adult teams. The ranks of those who have come through now feed our 1st XV and on occasions the professional game. International jerseys on our clubhouse wall bear further testament to the standards reached by

the players and the RFU Seal of Approval (achieved in June 2003) to the Club's organisational and coaching standards.

In the 2000/2001 season we launched a Development Squad to facilitate the movement of players from our Junior Section into the senior sides. It was the success of the season.

Sutton has for many years had an enviable record with our regular Saturday 'Veterans' teams. From the Johnny Cripps's 'Cripples' team in the 1960s, through Paul Dommerson's champagne and guinness 'Serfs' team, Peter Hatch's 'Vets' team that was unbeaten for two consecutive seasons and many later incarnations. In recent years we have concentrated upon Sunday Evergreen Cup matches, with Adrian Jenkins and Roland Cheall's team taking the tri-

county Cup in both 2002/3 and 2003/4. They were runners up in 2004/5 and are shown here regaining the Cup after a particularly bruising encounter in 2005/6.

In 2001/2 there was another major shift in the character of the club with the launch of a fully fledged ladies side. The team enjoyed their full fixture card so much that at the end of season they were promoted in one leap by two leagues.

They have also brought an enormous exuberance to the club, most notably demonstrated to all during the half time interval in our 2002 Surrey Cup final (picture regrettably missing).



On an epic Saturday 22nd November 2003 the clubhouse was packed to capacity as members watched on a big screen Jonny Wilkinson's famous drop goal in the dying seconds of extra time giving England victory over Australia by 20 -17 to win the World Cup. The enthusiasm generated by England's achievement not only secured record bar takings for a Saturday morning but lead to a major resurgence in the game at all levels. It particular there was a boom in the number of our Mini & Junior players and the extension of our squads to start at the Under 5 level.

With our ladies squad by then well established, 2004/5 saw the establishment of fledgling girls squads at Under 14 and Under 17. This at last filled the gap in which so many promising players had been lost between the end of mixed sex Mini Rugby at Under 12 and Rugby played by our adult lady members.

Pictured here is the U14's squad in festive spirit with their coach and Surrey RDO Jo Martin. We await the U17's squad's tour photos!



However 2004/5 was also marked by the eventual relegation of our 1st XV from the London Division 1, after 17 unbroken years since the inception of league rugby. Having challenged on a number of times to go up into the National Leagues this was a bitter blow and we now have to work hard to regain our natural place. Our 'temporary' demise and one of the factors behind it was marked by a Daily Telegraph article headed 'Boot money still alive and kicking' by By John Inverdale, which lamented the position.

