

The 'Dream Team' at Twickenham

The October meeting of the Sporting Forum Study Group took the form of a visit to the home of English Rugby, Twickenham.



The crowds gather

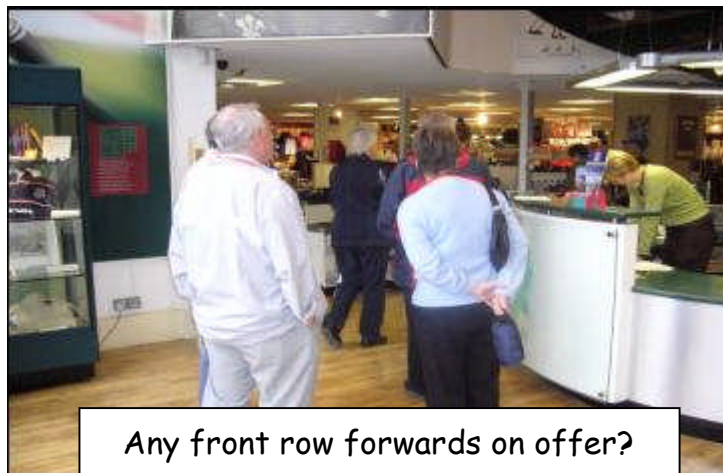


An explanation of what happens in the bar

Ask any true rugby supporter where the match-day day begins - they'll answer "in the pub". Ask the Sporting Forum study group where their visit to Twickenham began - you'll get exactly the same answer - in the pub!

A most congenial hour in the local carvery at very reasonable prices provided the ideal aperitif for our visit to the home of English rugby, Twickenham. If you have seen pictures of the stadium on TV it looks big, but just stand on the outer perimeter look up at the three-tiered structure

towering above, and ask yourself what is this architectural giant doing in a leafy suburb of the metropolis? Within minutes of our tour starting the questioned was answered - Twickers started as its life in 1907as" Billy Williams' cabbage patch" and it has evolved into the world's largest designated Rugby stadium, with a seating capacity (when completed) of 83,000. Two excellent photographs of the stadium and surrounding land provided a wonderful insight how in some thirty years the façade had altered, and with work still progress, is still developing.



Any front row forwards on offer?



On high, looking down on everyone



I doubt if we could af FORD this suite!

Our tour whisked us, by high speed lift, to the upper (3rd) tier and the Hospitality Suites located 35 metres above the pitch, add another 15 metres to the roof level and aircraft lifting off from nearby Heathrow seemed almost at eye level. These hospitality suites are all sponsored, and the names of many familiar businesses and institutions featured prominently.

Down a tier to the middle level and suddenly the décor of wall and flooring became rather more swish. Tastefully plastered walls, all finished in a neutral wash, replaced the painted breezeblocks. The pile of the carpet became thicker. The ambience in these areas was more akin to inside of 5* star hotel - and it didn't stop there. Steeped high in tradition the Presidents' room and the Council chamber had their walls covered with portraits of every President of the RFU since 1871. Three historic paintings depicting scenes from yesteryear gave a wonderful



The Royal Box - who is in *the* seat?

feeling of the simplicity, rawness and Corinthian approach in the early years of Rugby Union.

The Royal Box was our next stop, with a handy shelf on which to place your handbag, and certainly more legroom than your average seat on a charter flight to Spain.

Down in the lift to ground level and the main gates - a gold plated lion stands in prominence alongside four sculptures of player action. Pity the gates are not wide enough to allow the team coach to pass through! A state of the art medical centre is handily located close to the players' changing facilities. The area outside the dressing rooms is covered with plaques commemorating 'great' English triumphs,

although the debate still continues if this inspires the opposition more than the home side. A look inside the England dressing room revealed the 'communal' bath no longer featured, although individual baths were still there, these are filled with ice and used by the players after the game.



It was now time to go pitch side for a close up view of the immaculate manicured playing surface, which incidentally was being mown by hand. Surprisingly there is no under soil heating at Twickenham, and no match has ever been cancelled due to the state of the pitch. In the event of possible problems a large inflatable tent is erected over the pitch and warm blowers installed.

The playing surface looked more like a bowling green. It was difficult to comprehend that this was the arena where 30 mud-covered men, at times reminiscent of two herds of marauding buffalo were locked in mortal combat. Who'd be a grounds man? There were five large devices on the pitch, which at first appearance seemed to be watering devices. However, they were identified as portable sodium lamps used to stimulate the growth



of grass as the playing surface is almost totally enclosed by the surrounding stands. This equipment was imported from Holland, where similar types are used in the horticultural industry. At £55,000 for each item the grass ought to be lush.

One unwanted feature of many town and city centres, and also sports stadiums is pigeons, and the associate deposits they leave. No such problem at Twickenham - a Sparrow hawk is under contact, and the evidence (or lack of it) proves a job well done.



No! Look this way

The tour was scheduled to last one hour ten minutes, thanks to our excellent guide, Lyn, we stretched it out to over one and a half hours. This did slightly curtail our time in the Museum of Rugby, but nobody was too concerned.

One of the 'watering holes' within the ground is the aptly name 'Scrum Bar'. On big match days it usually dispenses 30,000 pints of beer. However, on a rare occasion of an Irish win (over England) that figure rose to 60,000 pints. Cheers!



Sponsor! What sponsor?



Who is the interloper in the line out?