

Passion in the suburbs adds weight to 'non-event

Simon Barnes finds much to commend on a minor stage as Enfield take on Yeovil Town

To return to Enfield's football ground after a gap of, I think, 19 years, was to drive a relatively deep fissure through the variegated seams of time. I recalled making a pilgrimage across London to watch mighty Tooting and Mitcham take on Enfield in an "important" match at the top of the Isthmian League.

I covered Tooting and Mitcham for the *Balham and Tooting News*, and surely all of Tooting and much of Balham rejoiced in the soaring header of Nicky Glover. Alas, not enough to prevent Enfield's victory. Glover, a man of austere, almost monk-like appearance, later that season left Tooting after socking one of his mates on the pitch. He then joined Enfield, perhaps knowing that he had left his best years behind him at Sandy Lane, Mitcham.

On Saturday, then, brimming

with memories of the colossal importance of the ancient strife of the suburbs, I saw Enfield, in fourth place in the Icis League premier division, receive a visit from the leaders, Yeovil Town, and dispatch them 3-0.

The Southbury Road ground is also the home of Saracens, one of the leading rugby clubs in the country. If anything spelled out the difference between the importance of the sports in the national life, it was this.

Enfield are not one of the leading football clubs of the country; they are not even one of the leading non-league clubs, playing as they do in the league below the Vauxhall Conference. The facilities, small-scale but certainly comfortable enough, are at least adequate for both concerns, however.

This is a footballing nation. Football matters, with heroic ab-

surdity, to the finest performers of the Premiership and to the lowliest of players on the park pitches you can see beyond the ground. It wouldn't be worth doing if it didn't matter. And after all, it is no more absurd to care about the fate of the men of Enfield than the men of Manchester.

There, striding onto the pitch, was a figure who had never dwelt long on the question of football's absurdity: Graham Roberts, looking not much more senescent than when he was a ball-winning midfield player for Tottenham Hotspur in the early Eighties; but he looked middle-aged even then.

When not engrossed in his appointed task of confrontation,

Roberts would make occasional forays upfield, a practice he would charmingly refer to as "makin' me surgin' runs". At 37, he surges a little less these days, but as Yeovil's player-manager (and a former Enfield player-manager to boot) he lurks about moodily at the back.

He is considering his options, and is expected to make an announcement about his future, at least as a player, in midweek. Perhaps the weekend drubbing will help him to make up his mind. The thought that even he might have had enough football is, in a way, a relief.

Non-league football is a business much misunderstood by those who have nothing to do with it. It is not

quaint or charming at all. It is as brutally, absurdly serious as any other form of football.

The patterns of football remain consistent at this level, as at every level. This was a game of the managerial master-stroke: George Borg, the Enfield manager, swapped a midfielder player for an attacker after half-time, played briefly with three up front, and his boldness won the day.

The dashing substitute, St Hilaire, managed to collect a mighty shove in the box, and Moran scored from the penalty with a flourish. St Hilaire then found himself adroitly positioned when the goalkeeper's mistimed punch fell to him, and he cracked the volley home emphatically. A couple of minutes later, at the end of a swaggering passing-movement, Moran himself was brought down and had another penalty. He

put that one away, too, not with relish.

Enfield are an ambitious non-league club — this being, of course, a footballing tautology. It is the task of all non-league clubs to be endlessly ambitious and always the same place in football's scheme of things. That, after all, is the way things are meant to be. There was another non-league team I covered in those far-off Balham and Tooting days: doing pretty well, as recall, in the Southern League. What was their name? Ah yes, Wimbledon. I wonder what happened to them?

ENFIELD (4-4-2): A Pape — A Hannigan, McGrath, S Terry, P Underwood — P Moran, Fitzgerald (sub: M St Hilaire, 46min), J Tucker, Edwards — S West (sub: D Annon, 80), S Marsh (sub: D Gentle, 63).

YEOVIL TOWN (3-5-2): A Pennock — G Roberts (sub: C Moores, 58), R Cousins, L Harvey (sub: J Whale, 66) — M Engwell, C White, G Kemp, J Turner, J Gill — A Pounder (sub: D Birkby, 73), V Patmore.

Referee: R Styles.