



GILLINGHAM

A day out at Gillingham (it's JILL-ing-um) combines third-tier English football with seafaring English history.

LOCATION: Gillingham, Kent, about an hour east from London's St. Pancras Station

CONTACT: gillinghamfootballclub.com, 01634 300000, #Gills

NICKNAMES: Just Gills

WOMEN'S TEAM: Gillingham LFC plays in the Women's National League South at tier 3 of the pyramid. Home games are in nearby Chatham. See glfc2013.wordpress.com for more.

HISTORY: If you were to somehow lop off the top two tiers of the English football pyramid, Gillingham would look like a pretty big club.

They've been around since 1893, in the Football League all but a few years since 1920, and continuously in that league since 1958. They have spent fifty-five of those sixty years in the third or fourth tier. It's a good, long run in the league, but they were only in the second tier five years, from 2000 to 2005, finishing as high as eleventh in 2002–03.

Sometimes, the problem with getting up that high is that you make plans to stay there, which is to say you start spending a lot of money on facilities as well as players and their wages. Then when you get relegated, you still have those wages and debts to pay, only now you're selling tickets for the game against Halifax Town instead of the game against West Ham.

So it was that the Gills nearly ran aground and had to sell their stadium in 2008. They bought it back in 2011 and have consolidated since, mainly by selling promising young players. Of course, the thing about selling promising young players is that they go play for somebody else, and you stay in the third or fourth tier!

A few moments from their history bear mentioning:

In the 1980s they bought a player named Tony Cascarino from non-league Crockenhill; instead of money, they paid in track suits and training gear. Cascarino went on to play for Millwall (who paid a nice return of £225,000 for him), Aston Villa, Chelsea, and Celtic. One of his teammates at Gillingham was academy product Steve Bruce, a Manchester United legend and now the manager of Sheffield Wednesday.

In 1987 they set a league record by beating Chesterfield, 10–0—a week after beating Southend United, 8–1!

In 1993 it took a win on the last day of the season to stay in the Football League.

In 1999 they were in the Division Two (third-tier) final against Manchester City (haven't they come a long way!) and were up, 2–0, with two minutes left but gave up two goals and lost in a penalty shootout.

They had some good FA Cup runs from 1999 to 2004, making at least the fourth round each year. In the 1999–2000 Cup, they made the quarterfinals, their highest placement ever, but lost, 5–0, at Chelsea in front of 7,000 traveling fans.

They won League Two in 2012–13, only their second professional trophy, having won the same title in 1963–64.

In last year's FA Cup, they made the fourth round after beating then–Premier League Cardiff City, 1–0, at home on an eighty-second-minute winner. They then lost at Swansea, who no doubt thanked them for knocking out Cardiff.

I should also tell you that their one famous supporter was a man named Brian Moore. You've probably not heard of him, but you've probably heard his voice. He was one of the most famous British announcers of his day. His best-known calls were: "It's all up for grabs now" as Arsenal beat Liverpool on the last day at Anfield to win the title in 1989, and his radio commentary of the winning goal when Aston Villa won the 1982 European Cup, which is now written on the side of a stand at Villa Park. Moore was on the Gillingham board for years, and for twenty years there was a club fanzine called "Brian Moore's Head Looks Uncannily Like the London Planetarium." Apparently that's a line from a song by Half Man Half Biscuit.

RIVALRIES: Millwall and Maidenhead are the closest by geography, but the former is usually above Gills in the league and the latter is two leagues below them in the National League.

There is also a rivalry with Swindon Town owing to some testy, high-stakes matches back in the 1980s and '90s. They are in League Two anyway.

SONGS: There is a rocking anthem called "Home of the Shouting Men," but I don't recall hearing it when I was there. Honestly, I was there on a rainy Tuesday night and saw them lose, so I don't recall much singing at all.

2018–19 SEASON: 13th in League One, 4th Round FA Cup, 1st Round League Cup

2019–20 SEASON: League One (promoted in 2013)

STADIUM: Priestfield (capacity 11,582) has been their home since the club's founding, but three of the stands were built in the late 1990s. The fourth, the Brian Moore Stand, is an uncovered temporary stand where (trust me) you do not want to sit on a rainy and windy evening. The club originally intended to build a permanent Moore Stand, but now they have shifted to plans for leaving Priestfield entirely. It's an old place with no parking, and they want to maybe get out of the third tier someday.

Home rowdies will be in the Rainham End behind a goal, and away fans either in the Moore or the nearby end of the Gordon Road Stand.

TOURS: None.

TICKETS: Last year an adult ticket was £20 to £25.

GETTING THERE: It's half a mile from the train station, so a pretty easy walk. There isn't a bus that will help much.

PUBS: There are a few pubs right in the town center, including the Southern Belle and the slightly more old-fashioned Britannia next door. The designated away-fans pub is the Fleur de Lis, a few minutes away in Gillingham Road. Heading the other way a few minutes from the station, there are two small and very cool microbrew pubs: the Will Adams, and Past and Present. The Cricketers, a few minutes past the ground, is a good option for a sit-down meal.

GRUB: Other than the Cricketers pub, there isn't much near the ground. On the walk from the station, you can swing by the Gillingham Fish Bar, where I had a nice takeaway and talked footy with some visiting Bristol Rovers fans. Peter's Fish and Chips, closer to the station, also gets high marks.

Otherwise, check the next section for suggestions in nearby towns.

AROUND TOWN: Gillingham is, let's say, not known for being glamorous. Or even interesting. But in two nearby towns, there are a few sites worth checking out.

One is Rochester, where a well-preserved castle is worth a visit, as is a nice cathedral. There's a well-known Cathedral Pie shop in town as well. The Tudor Rose is a lovely pub on the River Medway there, and Mrs. Tickit's Pantry is supposed to be a famous place for afternoon tea. Baggins Book Bazaar on the high street is a local institution.

What I did was stop in Chatham (CHAD-dum) for lunch at the lovely Café Nucleus, which is a hidden gem in a garden just off the otherwise drab high street. And then I went to the historic dockyard there. Dating to the eighteenth century—King George III's seal is over one gate—this was one of the most important places for the British fleet and is now a museum where you can tour a submarine, a museum of lifeboats, a railway workshop, a 1940s-era destroyer, and a working ropery.