

TT No.44: *Josephine Wray* - Sat 6 September 2008; Coca-Cola Football League Division 1; **Brighton & Hove Albion v Scunthorpe Utd**; Result: 1-4; Att: 5529; Admission: £18; Programme: 72 pages, £3.

Having departed the train, I found myself being carried along with the sea of Brighton supporters underneath a sky bruised with the threat of rain. Ignoring signs advising a route to the ground (which would take spectators down a rather steep hill, only to go straight back up it after a small exploration of the quiet residential area), it quickly appeared that it was far more conventional for us to make use of the shortcut to the ground that a somewhat overgrown, muddy footpath provided, despite residential notices against this.

Deeply regretting my decision to wear white shoes, we trudged through in single file, in an almost assault course-fashion, using some precariously placed bricks as stepping-stones to cross the puddles which seemed impossible to edge. After ten minutes or so of this, feeling just about caked enough in a thorough soup of soil and foliage, the forest adventure halted and myself and the army of the heavily-fleeced fans marched on a road now in view, downhill leading directly to the ground which soon unfolded before us on the left.

Although I have been previously warned that the Withdean Stadium would surpass any of my expectations of the standardized concept of 'the football ground' that I have developed over the years when dad (*WebEd*) has taken us to matches, ranging from the aptly named 'one-man-and-his-dog' experience, to the play-off final at Wembley in May, I was not quite prepared for what my eyes presently beheld. The Brighton fan Nathan who I was accompanying to the game laughed at my reaction of shock and confusion as I took in initial glimpses of the very separate stands and quite definitive sectioned areas. Although resonate of stands of previous grounds I have been to, in my mind they seemed severely incongruous with one another, as one would find when confronted with a toddler's scattered building blocks.

We traversed through gangs of fans donning woolly hats and dodged the scattered wearers of the odd waterproof cape (available for purchase from one of many of the vans lining the entrance) which seemed not only to hold a rigid shape so well that it quite possibly defied the elements but also made the wearer look somewhat like a budgeted Merlin magician. It may be justified the undoubtedly hefty price-tags adorning the garments. Next a glossy, quite hefty match programme, was acquired in exchange for three pounds on our journey.

We eventually made our way towards the South Stand after climbing over the many empty rows of seats (which we excelled at). We then assumed our positions on adjacent plastic seats, definitely feeling the weight of the very full, black clouds looming overhead. It was only once I was seated towards the top of the South Stand that I became aware of just how far from the pitch the away fans' stand was. Knowing that an athletics track bordered the infield, I expected there to be

some distance between the action and the spectators situated at the goal ends of the pitch. However, the small away stand somehow seemed even further set back than I had imagined, even with the bend in the track.

A crackling tannoy system blaring a colourful mixture of genre-spanning music declared that the match was soon to commence, and the players, miniscule from the stands, dispersed across the pitch. From the somewhat negative spirits of the fans regarding previous team performances, it was clear that confidence was low across the board, even before the ball had even moved. The fears, or even expectations, of supporters were confirmed soon into the match.

Although Brighton seemed to be holding the vast majority of possession, this was only done with a certain comfort in their own half, and once they were in Scunthorpe territory, the players found themselves in alien land, confused and impatient with passes, lacking co-ordination and courage enough to attack the goal. The frequent but futile attempts that were made to break through Scunthorpe defence seemed disorganised and half-hearted, and were easily intercepted by the opposition.

Frustration and tension seemed to build up in the stand too. The many attempts made by supporters nearby to liven up the atmosphere in the stadium were very soon extinguished due to the nature of the discordant blocks, which rather than reverberating the cheers and encouragement as one would normally find, served only to smother and drown them, being so far away and disjointed.

Brighton lost the match due to mistakes. Scunthorpe seemed dominant where these errors were made, and confidently took control, maximising on these opportunities by clearly breaking through the Brighton defence and making attempts on target. We looked on, contending with intermittent showers which definitely echoed spirits, as the away team began scoring goals. The home crowd began dribbling home in their utter annoyance at a side who seemed totally lost in the wilderness for the majority of play.

It seemed increasingly more apparent to me as the match progressed that the away stand was distanced as far as it was from the rest of the stadium for a good reason. The cheers of the 300 or so visiting fans were inaudible and so could not add to the embarrassment that was evidently felt by the home supporters as they watched on in an expected agony at their team, who seemed to struggle to gel for a large part of the match. Although some solid efforts were produced by the seemingly unmotivated side, resulting in a single goal, it was just too little too late to recover from the damage that Scunthorpe had done, or rather, that they had enabled to happen.