

TT No.126: Justin Holmes - Sat 19th December 2009; **Sheffield Wednesday** v Swansea City; Football League Championship; Venue: Hillsborough, Sheffield; Score 0-2; Admission: £16.00 (Kop Stand); Prog: £3.00; Att: 18,329; Match Rating: 3*.

Hillsborough is a stadium that has long been on my wish-list to visit, and although the game itself probably did not justify the long trek north in Arctic conditions, the stadium certainly did. As I set out long before sunrise and wading my way through deep snow to get to the train station, I was wondering if I would be able to make the long trip up to Sheffield, although happily the trains were surprisingly bang on time and so I managed to make the coach (for the bargain price of £1 booked with Megabus) for the long trip north. Arriving at Meadowhall Interchange, next to the Meadowhall Shopping Centre, I made my way to catch the tram for the direct, 40-minute ride through Sheffield Centre to the Lepping Lane stop, which is a short walk from the stadium.

Before entering the stadium, I stopped off at the memorial to the Hillsborough disaster, which is a very subtle and unremarkable memorial which is probably how it should be. From there, I bought my programme for £3 which is everything that would be expected of a football league programme - glossy hardened cover and full of information and photos - and was a good read before the match and during the long trip home. I then made my way to the Kop Stand clutching my e-ticket which I bought online. Although this form of ticketing will disappoint those who like to have a proper ticket as a memento of their day out (but you can still get one by buying your tickets on the day for an extra pound), you certainly can't beat for convenience the ability to choose your exact seat from the comfort of your own home, print off your ticket and take it straight to the turnstiles for admission - hopefully more football clubs will follow suit with this system.

Inside the stadium, I found it to be wonderfully old-fashioned and full of character, which made an excellent contrast to the usual similarly laid out soulless stadia in the top two divisions. I made my way up the steep path from the turnstiles and refreshments area up to the back of the vast Kop Stand, and to my seat which was right in the middle of the stand with an excellent unimpeded view from right behind the goal. As for the game, it's fair to say that the omens were not good for an open, entertaining game laden with goals. Sheffield Wednesday were in terrible form. After a decent start to the season, they had mustered just two points from their previous nine league games, lost their previous four games and hadn't even scored in their last five. Perhaps not too surprising then that they had shown their manager, Brian Laws, the door after their last game. As for Swansea, a team I confess to having a large soft spot for having lived in the region for several years and still mourn the North Bank roar at the Vetch Field, they found themselves flying high in sixth place, although as well having conceded the second fewest goals in the Championship, they had also scored the second fewest goals.

On a bitterly cold afternoon, Sheffield Wednesday started the game pretty well, backed by a passionate and vociferous support whipped into the mood with a rendition of "Hi Ho Sheffield Wednesday!" just before kick off to the tune of "Hi Ho Silver Lining". However, Swansea scored after just five minutes when Darren Pratley was sent clear and slotted the ball coolly past the Sheffield Wednesday goalkeeper, Lee Grant. This was likely to prove a major setback for a team in such dire form, but Sheffield Wednesday had most of the possession for the first half hour of the game and made regular forays, deep into the Swansea half, without ever really looking like they would score. Swansea then scored a second on 36 minutes, Darren Pratley again the man on target, converting a cross decisively with a crisp finish from 12 yards out. This was fairly harsh on Wednesday, but the proceedings could easily be summed up with Wednesday doing the huffing and puffing, but Swansea were clinical with the couple of chances that came their way. For the rest of the first half, it was plain to see the Wednesday players badly lacking in confidence and belief against a Swansea side that looked very average - or maybe they were doing just enough to maintain their lead. As for the second half, this was a very disappointing affair, with Wednesday seeming to lose more confidence with every minute that passed and Swansea seemingly more than happy to coast to a comfortable away win, and the game duly ended with a 0-2 win to the away side.

After the game, I caught the tram to the city centre and went into Wetherspoons for a burger and a beer before catching the train back to London, also costing just £1 using the Megatrain service. As someone who has no particular fondness for Sheffield Wednesday, it is sad to see such a sleeping giant of football, with a large, passionate but on the whole friendly support and with a stadium fit for the Premier League, falling on hard times which has lasted too many years now. Judging on today's performance, Sheffield Wednesday need to appoint an experienced manager to raise morale as quickly as possible or another drop to the third tier is surely inevitable. As for Swansea, well it is often said that if you can win when not playing well, as was certainly the case today, that is the sign of a good side, and indeed, all being well and provided they remain consistent enough, Swansea should surely make the play-offs come the end of the season. Although this was a long day out in perishing conditions, it proved to be a relief that I had planned to go to this game, given that only a handful of unappealing non-league games survived the snow and icy conditions in my native south-east. I would thoroughly recommend a trip to Hillsborough as a 40,000-capacity stadium with excellent facilities but which is one of the very few major stadia which has managed to retain a traditionally passionate feel to it.

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