

TT No.134: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 2nd January 2010; **Aston Villa** v Blackburn Rovers; FA Cup 3rd Round; Venue: Villa Park, Birmingham; Score: 3-1; Admission: £18.00 (Holte End Upper); Prog: £2.00; Att: 25,453; Match Rating: 3*.

This wasn't a game I intended to take in. Indeed, having already visited Villa Park a few seasons back, I was not particularly keen to do so again, however unfortunately the ongoing Arctic weather conditions meant that beggars can't be choosers in terms of finding football to watch. My intention was to follow Charlton's game at Walsall, however despite early optimism from the referee himself at a 9 o'clock pitch inspection, shortly after arriving in Birmingham I found out that the game had been called off after inspecting again at midday. My desire would then have been to go to a non-league game in the West Midlands, however, unsurprisingly almost all games there also fell-foul of the weather. The only game with any certainty to be on was the FA Cup 3rd Round tie between Aston Villa and Blackburn Rovers, and so I caught a local train to Aston, from which Villa Park is a 15-minute walk.

Being an FA Cup tie, ticket prices were at a sensible level, and bearing in mind that the Holte End is where the most passionate Aston Villa support is to be found, I decided to buy a ticket in the Upper Section for £18. Located towards the back of one of the largest behind-the-goal stands in Europe, I was a little distant from the action, however on the plus side such a position does give a better panoramic view than is often gained from sitting closer to the pitch. I bought a programme which, by Premier League standards, I found most disappointing, with only 36 pages, very limited information on the opposition and most features focussing on obscure stories from many decades ago and little about the magic of the FA Cup. Presumably this was a reduced effort compared to that produced for league games, and to be fair, the programme was at a reduced cost of £2. However, the programme reflected the tepid interest in the world's oldest cup competition, with Aston Villa making seven changes from their previous league game, which was more than matched by Blackburn making eight. The lack of interest also seemed to extend to the fans too, as the attendance was around 10,000 below that for league games at Villa Park, despite ticket prices today being considerably cheaper.

As for the game, Aston Villa started much the better side and it was no surprise when they took the lead after 12 minutes, with the 18-year old Nathan Delfouneso glanced the ball in from a fine cross by Ashley Young. With one of their first attacks of the game, Blackburn had the chance to equalise on the half hour mark. However, the Villa reserve keeper, Brad Guzan, pulled off an excellent save from David Dunn's penalty, celebrated all the more by the Villa faithful with Dunn having played for several years at Birmingham City. They were made to pay for Dunn's miss 6 minutes later, when the excellent Ashley Young was again the provider with an excellent free-kick this time for Carlos Cuellar to glance in a header past the keeper. With Villa looking by far the more dominant side, the

game seemed to be put beyond all doubt when El Hadji Diouf was sent off just before half time for a ridiculous two footed lunge near the corner flag. However, as can so often happen, going down to ten men seemed to invigorate the side and on 53 minutes, Blackburn reduced the arrears when Guzan dropped a cross to the feet of Nikola Kalinic, who tapped in from a couple of yards. Blackburn continued to be much improved from their limp first half performance, and the outcome was in doubt right up to injury time at the end of the game, until Aston Villa won a penalty of their own and the Norwegian international John Carew coolly sent the keeper the wrong way with virtually the last kick of the game to send Aston Villa through to the fourth round.

This was an entertaining game at a very decent stadium, tinged with disappointment that the atmosphere in the Holte End was not as passionate as I had hoped, which may not have been the same as for league games, which links to my next disappointment that a cup competition which has so much history and tradition, which has provided so many wonderful childhood memories, is now treated very much as a second rate competition, an inconvenience, to the Premier League teams, and such lack of interest in the sporting elements of the game reminded me how so many aspects of lower-league and non-league football are much more enjoyable in my opinion.

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