

TT No.140: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 16h January 2010; **AFC Hornchurch** v Bognor Regis Town; Ryman League Premier Division; Venue: Bridge Avenue, Upminster; Score: 3-0; Admission: £9.00; Programme: £3.00; Attendance: 207; Match Rating: 4*.

Oh, the relief of having non-league football to watch at 3 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon again! After a combination of waterlogged, frozen and snowbound pitches decimating the football fixtures for the past month, having to make do with games in the Football League and then, last weekend, the ultimate frustration of being unable to find a game to watch, today was "back to normal". Although even today looked in doubt...with many local non-league games called off as early as Thursday and many more on Friday, and with heavy rain falling in the south-east during Saturday morning onto saturated grounds due to the melting snow.

However, the pitch at Hornchurch passed a morning inspection, and on entering the ground, it was a huge relief to see a pitch in good condition with no standing water despite the recent heavy rain. That's not to say the pitch was perfect - as the game went on, the pitch cut up badly and produced erratic bounce which stumped players on numerous occasions. But, at least, the rain relented an hour before kick-off not to be seen again during the match.

As for the Bridge Avenue ground, which is about a ten-minute walk from Upminster Tube Station, it is certainly not helped by an Athletics running track between the pitch and the spectators. Despite that, it is neat, tidy and well-maintained ground with as many as six stands, three along each touchline, although none of them having any character. The clubhouse (distantly) overlooks the pitch from one corner. The programme was a reasonable effort containing good information about recent matches and the opposition, although there are certainly far better programmes in the Ryman League. Team sheets were also distributed to spectators ahead of kick off.

Going into this game, Hornchurch were down in 12th position in the league, although only four points off of a play-off place, so congested is the top half of the Ryman League if one disregards the run-away leaders, Dartford. The position of today's visitors was far more precarious, having found life little easier in this league after being relegated from the Blue Square South last season, finding themselves third from bottom in the league having played more games than both teams below them.

The first half was a fairly even affair, Hornchurch possibly just shading it although Bognor Regis, to their credit considering their position in the league, always looked to play good football and created some good chances. Just when it looked like the teams would go in level at half time, Hornchurch were awarded a very soft looking

penalty when Duane Jackman went down rather easily. Jonathon Hunt scored with a powerfully taken shot to the keeper's left.

In the second half, Hornchurch seemed to up several gears and Bognor looked a pale shadow of the team they were in the first half, however, the game remained in the balance until the 64th minute. When a Hornchurch forward was clearly brought down in the area, the referee waved play on, signalling that the defender got the ball. A more likely explanation for his decision could be that he was reluctant to award a second penalty to the home side. However, the linesman indicated a foul and the referee duly awarded a penalty. Bognor made a bad situation worse, when their defender Lewis Ide was sent off for abusing the linesman. Almost the entire Bognor team then surrounded the referee and were lucky that only Michael Birmingham was booked. Hunt stepped up to emphatically hit home the penalty for his and his team's second. From this point on, there was only going to be one winner, with Bognor looking more and more disjointed as the game wore on, scoring a third when Jackman had a shot parried by the keeper which fell kindly to the onrushing Mark Janney to tap into an empty net. The result could have been even more emphatic than the 3-0 final score-line, with Hornchurch hitting the bar and also guilty of wanting to walk the ball into the net rather than take a shot on several occasions.

So, a very entertaining game, for which both sides deserve credit considering the heavy and unpredictable nature of the pitch. As a result of this game, Hornchurch move within two points of a play-off place. Things however look ever more precarious for Bognor, although on the evidence of this game, should have enough about them to haul themselves to safety in the coming weeks.

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