

TT No.230: *Justin Holmes* - Saturday 24th April 2010; **Exeter City** v Charlton Athletic; Coca Cola Football League 1; Venue: St James Park, Exeter; Score: 1-1; Admission: £16.00; Prog: £3.00; Attendance: 6,835; Match Rating: 3.

When the Charlton fixtures came out and I was cherry-picking which of their games to attend over the season, a trip to the county town of Devon had my name written all over it, not only because it was Charlton's first visit to St James Park in almost 30 years, but also because the fixture computer was kind enough to send Charlton there in late April, making the trip a far more attractive proposition than one in mid-winter would have been.

I arranged to arrive in Exeter early to enjoy a few hours walking around the city, and it certainly did not disappoint, with historic streets to meander through, enjoying lunch beneath the attractive cathedral, and a pleasant stroll along the River Exe.

On arriving at St James Park, which is about a quarter of an hour walk from the city centre, the old-fashioned nature of the ground made for a pleasant change from most modern Football league stadia. Away fans are housed behind one of the goals and, perhaps not unreasonably, is the worst part of the stadium, consisting of just a shallow terrace of around 8 steps without any cover. To the left of this uncovered St James Terrace, there is an old-fashioned all-seater grandstand, whilst the other two sides of the ground have been redeveloped in recent years. Opposite the away terrace is the "Big Bank Terrace", which does what it says on the tin, although the design is slightly unusual as one of the corners is "cut off" to accommodate the passing railway line, whilst the remaining length of the pitch has a single tiered all-seater stand running the length of the pitch. It's a stadium which pleasantly combines a hark back to how stadia used to be with modern facilities, and I must say it made a very pleasant change to be able to stand to watch Charlton. It must be said that the stadium also served as a reminder of how far Charlton have fallen - just three seasons ago, Charlton were visiting the likes of Old Trafford and Anfield, whilst just two seasons ago, Exeter were playing the likes of Forest Green and Droylsden in the Conference. All credit to Exeter for the rapid transformation in their fortunes.

Special mention must be made of the matchday programme which was a truly superb effort, one of the best I have encountered in terms of interesting and varied articles as well as number of pages. Not many times I say this about Football League programmes, but it was well worth the £3. It consists of 96 pages and with comprehensive information about all aspects of the home club and plenty of information on the visiting team too, it later helped fill much of the time of the long train journey back to central London.

Much was riding on this game for both teams. Although Charlton were almost certainly assured of their place in the end of season play-off lottery, a win would

keep them very much in the hunt for automatic promotion, particularly as they would face the current holders of one of those places, Leeds United, at home next weekend, whom they were only three points behind. Exeter badly needed points too, with only one point separating them from the relegation zone, although it must be said that to survive in League One would be a magnificent achievement following back-to-back promotions from the Conference and considering how strong League One has become. This would be a difficult place for Charlton to gain the much-needed victory, as none of the top clubs in League One have taken three points away from Exeter.

The first half of this game was a pretty tepid affair, although both sides conjured up a couple of good chances, most notably when Deon Burton hit the crossbar for Charlton. A goalless score-line at half time was a fair reflection of the game though. Exeter were a transformed side in the second half, obviously drawing inspiration from playing towards their "Big Bank" of fans, and it was probably deserved when they took the lead on 60 minutes when some sloppy Charlton play in their own box led to an Exeter corner, and Geroge Friend headed in a flicked-on cross past the despairing dive of Darren Randolph. Surprisingly, this didn't seem to spark much of a reaction from Charlton, however ten minutes they almost scored an equaliser when a free kick from the Spaniard, Miguel Angel Llera was curled low around the wall but hit the post and bounced clear. A couple of minutes later though and Charlton were level, when an excellent pull back from Nicky Forster found Kyel Reid in all manner of space inside the penalty area, and his shot wasn't the hardest and was cleared away by Scott Golbourne, but not before it had crossed the line as the linesman indicated and Charlton were back on level terms. This sparked by far the best and most exciting period of the game, which became end to end with both sides having wonderful chances to win the game, and particularly in injury time at the end of the game, Charlton could very easily have claimed all three points as they forced a succession of corners and peppered the Exeter goalkeeper with shots, however the game ended in a 1-1 draw, which overall was a fair result. Charlton had some wonderful opportunities to score in the final quarter, but Exeter deserved something from the game with a confident and display. It's a point which does little to help either side though, with Charlton now surely having to brace themselves for the play-offs, and Exeter's point taking them two points clear of the relegation zone, but with an always tough trip to Hartlepool and a home game against in-form Huddersfield rounding off their campaign.

A day out to Exeter certainly comes highly recommended - where one can combine spending time in a very pleasant city before the game, before enjoying League football at a traditional, friendly venue.