

**TT No.146: Justin Holmes** - Sat 1st January 2011; **Colchester United** v Charlton Athletic; Football League One; Venue: Community Stadium, Colchester; Score: 3-3; Admn: £19.00; Programme: £3.00; Att: 6112; Match Rating: 5.

For my first game of 2011, I chose to head to north Essex to follow Charlton, to visit a new stadium which hopefully would have nothing in common with Colchester United's previous home, Layer Road. I will always mourn the loss of traditional and old grounds, certainly when they are replaced by identikit stadia, a category which the new Community Stadium at Colchester certainly falls into, but Layer Road was one stadium that I did not shed too many years for when it was consigned to history, finding standing in the away end a thoroughly unpleasant and claustrophobic experience.

With the Community Stadium having been on the northern outskirts of the town, the football club lays on double decker buses from near the railway station to the stadium, for a cost of £1.50 return and is certainly an excellent, convenient and efficient service in both directions. The stadium has been built in an open and remote location, adjacent to the A12 dual carriageway, with a somewhat bleak feel to it. A dull overcast day probably helped me form this feeling, to be fair. I made my way into the North Stand of the stadium to take my place in the "Away end", and there's no denying that the stadium is impressive, whilst sensibly being built with a relatively small capacity considering the low attendances that Colchester attract - ensuring the stadium retains a close-knit and not empty feel to it. Three stands are almost identical in size, being single tiers with steep steps of seating ensuring excellent, close and unobstructed views of the action. The main (west) stand is slightly larger than the other three, incorporating corporate boxes. A feature of all of the stands - which are all independent of each other - is the partially transparent rooves to allow more daylight into the stands and onto the pitch. So, whilst this stadium has no real character or uniqueness, it is certainly a very comfortable place to watch football. The 84-page programme was decent, with plenty to read and attractive on the eye.

For the home side, this was their first game since December 11th thanks to the snowy and icy conditions, but are quite handily placed in the league, just outside the promotion play-off positions in seventh place. Charlton were finally able to get some action on Wednesday at Brighton, and currently sit in third place in the league.

The match turned out to be a rip-roaring affair, which had just about everything. The break from playing action seemed to have done Colchester good, as they started the match with attacking, incisive football, with Charlton's defenders looking rather calamitous at times. It seemed like it would only be a matter of time before the home side took the lead, which they duly did on 16 minutes through Matt Heath's stooping powerful header from a corner. Within a couple of minutes, Charlton were level thanks to a penalty from Johnnie Jackson after a silly

handball offence by Andy Bond. Just six minutes later and Colchester went back in front when Bond redeemed himself with a finely stuck shot from the 12 yards. Colchester were full value for their lead, but a potentially game changing moment came five minutes before the interval, when Paul Benson's powerful header was kept out by David Perkins' hand on the goal line - resulting in a penalty and a red card for the Colchester defender. Jackson converted his second penalty of the game by placing the ball low to the keeper's left - the opposite side to which he scored his first. So, the two side went in level at 2-2, a score-line Charlton would have surely been happy with, so poorly had they been playing. The second half was a much more even affair - as would have been expected with the previously superior team now a man short - but once again Colchester went into the lead on 64 minutes, when Anthony Wordsworth struck home through a body of players. After having a goal disallowed for offside, Paul Benson levelled matters for Charlton on 76 minutes with a wonderfully acrobatic finish. Benson thought he'd given Charlton the lead for the first time on 83 minutes when he nodded home a fine cross by Kyel Reid, however the goal was remarkably chalked off for an alleged push on the defender. Things got worse for Benson with a couple of minutes left, when he was sent off for a block tackle after the referee consulted with his linesman. Whilst I may be biased, it looked another poor decision. There was still time for Colchester to almost win it, but Matt Heath could only head straight at the keeper. So, the points were shared, a result that will probably satisfy both sides - Colchester after playing for 50 minutes with ten men, and Charlton after playing quite poorly.

07/20