

TT No.147: *Justin Holmes* - Monday 3rd January 2011; **Lewes** v **Welling United**; Blue Square South; Venue: The Dripping Pan, Lewes; Score: 1-3; Admn: £10.00; Programme: £2.00; Att: 766; Match Rating: 3.

A last-minute flash of inspiration this Bank Holiday morning took me to the wonderfully names Dripping Pan stadium, home of Lewes. The Dripping Pan certainly ranks highly in my favourite non-league stadia I have visited, although my last visit was nearly ten years ago - and there have been many developments since the club was in the lower reaches of the Ryman League. I recalled one of the nicest natural arenas for football, with the pitch set in a bowl, surrounded by large grass banks and with a quaint stone wall around the perimeter of the ground. With the club enjoying remarkable success since then - reaching the Blue Square Premier - a large amount of ground improvements was required, in order for the club to play at the higher level.

The worry always is that improvement works will detract from the character of the ground. In Lewes' case, there was no need to worry, with all improvements very tastefully and attractively carried out, whilst the ground still retains a beautiful rural charm. Behind one of the goals is now a large terraced stand with a roof not dissimilar in design to that found at Olympique Lyonnais. The tall traditional clubhouse still exists to its right. Along one length of the pitch is a modern all-seater stand which is one of the more pleasing on the eye. Behind the other goal is a small uncovered terrace, and along the remaining length of the pitch, hard standing is available on top of a large grass bank, which makes for an excellent elevated view of the pitch - despite floodlight pylons partially obstructing views. The chalky South Downs in the close background complete a thoroughly pleasant venue.

After remarkably (for a club of Lewes's size) reaching the Blue Square Premier, times have been harsh on Lewes, as they have spent the last couple of years battling for their very existence, so severe have their financial troubles been, as well as somehow managing to retain Blue Square football. Off the pitch, things are looking up, as Lewes have now become a member owned club. On the pitch though, this season is proving another struggle for them, sat just outside the relegation zone and have lost their last three games on the bounce. Today's match looked to be a daunting prospect for Lewes, with Welling in fourth place and would be joint top had they not been deducted five points for financial misconduct.

On a cold, dank day, the match pretty much went as predicted, with Welling impressing with their classy, cohesive brand of football and with Lewes guilty of sloppy play as a result of lack of confidence. It was no surprise when the visitors took the lead on 33 minutes when Andy Pugh worked some space and curled a lovely shot over the keeper from just inside the area. Things got worse for Lewes, three minutes later, when an unmarked Lee Clarke hammered home a pull back. So superior were Welling, it was difficult not to believe this was already game over

- so poor were Lewes, they made a double substitution on 40 minutes. However, Lewes gave themselves home deep into first half injury time when Chris Godfrey bundled his way into the penalty area before hitting home past the keeper.

The second half began with Lewes much more into the game, although they had a lucky escape just a few minutes in when an ill-judged back-pass hit the woodwork and bounced clear. However, Welling restored their two-goal advantage when Pugh scored his second, knocking home a nod down. Once again, this appeared to have won the game for Welling, but credit to Lewes, they continued to play good attacking football - whilst always looking rather limited compared to their classy opponents - and should have pulled a goal back when they had a shot cleared off the line and a powerful header was tipped onto the cross bar by the keeper. But in the end, a deserved comfortable away win for Welling, and a long struggle for survival surely beckons for Lewes.

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