

TT No.181: Justin Holmes - Sat 19th February 2011; **Weston-Super-Mare** v Bishop's Stortford; Blue Square South; Venue: Woodspring Stadium, Weston-super-Mare; Score: 3-1; Admn: £10.00; Prog: £2.00; Att: 191; Match Rating: 4.

This was one of those days where, having booked a coach journey down to Bristol, I still hadn't made my mind up at the time of setting off about which game to go to from a selection of half a dozen games. Heavy overnight rain meant I could strike a line through the Bristol clubs in the Western League en route, with their games either postponed or too much at risk, and so I headed out on a 20 minute train journey to the North Somerset coast for the Blue Square South game between Weston-Super-Mare and Bishop's Stortford. Delays to both the coach and train journeys ensured I would come crashing through the entrance gates with the teams about to kick off.

Weston-Super-Mare is quite an intriguing club. First of all, they can boast the very impressive claim to fame of never having been relegated in their history, all the more impressive when one considers they were formed in the 19th century, although luck has played its part in maintaining this statistic in recent times, as in three out of four seasons between 2007 and 2010, they have occupied a relegation place but were reprieved on each occasion.

The Woodspring Stadium, located about a 20 minute walk south-east of the town's train station, has surely some of the most basic facilities that one would find at this level, and being relatively newly built in 2004 and in an industrial part of town, is rather bland and not easy on the eye.

To start with the positive, there is an impressive large stand of terracing behind one of the goals. Along one length of the pitch, where one enters the stadium, there is a shallow but long all-seater stand, whilst only hard, single level standing is available around the rest of the ground, albeit with a small covered area behind the other goal. The resources, facilities and support give the feel of a club that is probably a couple of divisions higher than would be its natural placing, but full credit to Weston-Super-Mare for apparently punching well above its weight in the Blue Square South.

I am usually loathe to criticise matchday programmes at non-league level, understanding the thankless task that is taken on by volunteers in non-league football, but unfortunately Weston-Super-Mare's offering, considering the status of the club and the price of £2, is quite dismal, being comparable with many County League publications - indeed, I have seen many better offerings at that level. The 36-page programme has plenty of colour in it, but almost exclusively for the benefit of advertisers, of which the programme is heavy. The cover is printed with the same paper as the rest of the programme, and although the essential information about the teams, the league and season is contained, there can be little justification for the £2 charge for it.

Coming into this game, both teams looked reasonably comfortable in mid-table, with Weston Super Mare in 12th place and Bishop's Stortford two places behind, but they have both played more games than all of the teams below them, as many as four, and recent form suggests they still have work to do to guarantee survival. The home side had picked up just three draws from their previous seven games, before beating FA Cup heroes Dover Athletic away last time out. Bishop's Stortford, who comfortably have conceded the most goals and have the worst goal difference in the division, are in terrible form, having picked up just two points in their last nine games since their last win on January 9th, including a 0-4 home defeat last time out to Woking. Last month, the two teams drew 1-1 in Hertfordshire.

The match started quite evenly, but the home side took the lead on 24 minutes when a free kick was headed powerfully across the keeper and into the net by Simon Gilbert. Just as it looked like Weston Super Mare would take a deserved slender lead into the interval, Bishops Stortford equalised a minute before the interval with a smart spin and shot from 12 yards out by Harlee Dean. However no sooner had Dean got the visitors back on level terms, he gave his side a mountain to climb as, within a minute of scoring, he got himself sent off for an elbow after the referee consulted with his linesman, forcing the visitors to play the whole second half with ten men.

On many occasions, going down to ten men seems to galvanise a team, however that did not appear to happen here, as Bishops Stortford were barely a threat in the second half and it seemed only a matter of time before the home side would claim the three points, although they needed yet more help from the away team to secure them. I watched the Bishop's Stortford goalkeeper, Ross Kitteridge, way back in early July as he played a trial match for Charlton Athletic at AFC Wimbledon. With an uncertain display on that day, it came as little surprise that Charlton did not sign him up, and he had a second half to forget today. On 58 minutes, his attempted clearance from a back-pass was charged down, and as the ball rolled to the centre of the 18 yard line, he just beat Weston's Duncan Lynvall to the ball but could only fumble the ball, allowing Gilbert to nick the ball and score his and his team's second of the game with an easy finish into an unguarded net. This seemed to make the points safe with the away team looking impotent going forward, but they made sure of the points when some good trickery inside the box allowed Justin Porter to beat Kitteridge at his near post from an extremely tight angle a minute from time. For most of the second half, Kitteridge suffered persistent good-natured stick from the home fans - hopefully for him, it was just "one of those days".

On the subject of the fans, it should be noted that whilst the level of support at Weston-Super-Mare is low for this level, averaging around 200, what support there is passionate, vociferous but good natured and knowledgeable, and indeed, the overall impression was of a club that is friendly, that makes the most of its limited resources.

