

TT No.187: Justin Holmes - Saturday 26th February 2011; **Worthing** v Merstham; Ryman League Division 1 South; Venue: Woodside Road, Worthing; Score: 3-3; Admission: £5.00; Prog: £2.00; Att: 336; Match Rating: 4.

Less than a month after paying a visit to Worthing, I made a return to the West Sussex coastal town today to visit the more senior and larger club, Worthing. Today was to be a day of celebration at Woodside Road, with this match being declared Fans Day, to celebrate the 125th anniversary of Worthing Football Club, which included a reduced admission charge of £5.00, compared with the usual excessive (for this level) £9.00. This helped swell the attendance to the second highest of the season. Intermittently heavy rain overnight and in the hours building up to kick-off threatened to put a dampener on the occasion, but happily the pitch held up well enough to ensure that this would be one of only three games to be played from the scheduled ten games in the division today.

Woodside Road is quite a charming, old-fashioned, neat ground with plenty of character, and I was certainly struck by the friendly feel to the place. As one enters the ground, there is shallow banked terracing behind the goal, with cover available to one side of the goal. A large grandstand on one length of the pitch offers a good, elevated view of the action, although railing at the front impairs the view of the near touchline. Along the opposite length is a few steps of terracing, with a very small stand in the middle. Behind the other goal there also terrace steps, with another covered area. After being hugely critical of the "effort" of a programme at Blue Square South club Weston-super-Mare, last weekend, Worthing proved my point that clubs from lower divisions usually produce vastly superior programmes to that one. An attractive design, with plenty to read which is easy on the eye, interesting articles and all the stats and facts you could want, the 58-page publication was a very good effort by Worthing.

This game paired two of the apparent also-rans of the Ryman League Division 1 South, with both teams seeming to have little to play for this season, with Worthing harbouring only faint hopes of making the play-offs, in 10th place and eight points behind Burgess Hill Town in the final play-off place (with a further eight points to fourth placed Leatherhead), and Merstham in 14th place in the 22 team league, five-points clear of the relegation places. It's fair to say it has been all or nothing with Worthing recently, having won four games on the bounce prior to drawing their last home league game 3-3 and then losing their last three games, including an embarrassing home defeat to Sussex County League outfit Rye United in the Sussex Senior Cup, despite fielding pretty much a first team. Earlier in the season, the two teams shared six goals at Merstham.

The home side looked sluggish in the opening minutes with the visitors in the ascendancy, and indeed on just six minutes, Merstham took the lead when a long punt forward - which was to be a constant feature of Merstham's play all afternoon, was headed away unconvincingly by the keeper, who had come out of

his area, straight to Sean Rivers, who showed excellent composure to lob the ball into the empty net. The rest of the half was forgettable, with Worthing having more and more of the game but were repeatedly guilty of giving the ball away cheaply far too often, mostly due to Merstham's pressuring style of play which was ugly to watch but effective. A heavy hail shower marked the whistle for half time and the end of a dismal first half of football.

It did seem that the Worthing players would need something of a blast from the manager after a lacklustre display in the first half, yet within a couple of minutes, Merstham doubled their advantage with a similar goal to their first, with Rivers capitalising on another mistake by Worthing's Canadian goalkeeper, Tony Di Bernado. On 54 minutes, the home side were back in the game though, with a piece of either outrageous skill or fortune from Callum Saunders who struck from a narrow angle far outside the penalty area which flew into the net. Game on...but Merstham restored their two-goal lead within a couple of minutes thanks to yet another long ball forward, and Harry Ottaway sidestepped the keeper to roll the ball into an empty net. Worthing did not look the forlorn outfit they appeared to be in the first half by now, obviously buoyed by their goal, and for the rest of the match, it was almost constantly one-way traffic towards the Merstham goal. On the hour mark, Worthing pulled a goal back with Saunders' second of the game, volleying in a good cross at the near post from close range. On 70 minutes, the match was all square, man of the match Saunders this time the provider for a close-range header by Terry Dodd. After looking second best for the first 50 minutes of this match, Worthing will really kick themselves for not claiming all three points as they hit the woodwork twice, the side-netting and close-range shots were desperately blocked. This was truly a bizarre game, rarely have I encountered a game that was so dull and lifeless in the first half, but was an absolute scorcher in the second half.

07/20