

TT No.257: Justin Holmes - Friday 22nd April 2011; **Ebbsfleet United** v Chelmsford City; Conference South; Venue: Stonebridge Road, Northfleet; Score: 1-3; Admission: £11.00; Prog: £2.50; Att: 1368; Match Rating: 3.

For my opening game of the Easter weekend, I headed to north Kent for a game between two teams right in contention for promotion from the Blue Square - Ebbsfleet United, who were relegated from the Blue Square Premier last season, and Chelmsford City, aspiring for promotion to Blue Square Premier level for the first time in their history.

The home of Ebbsfleet United (formerly, of course, Gravesend and Northfleet), is located about a five minute walk from Northfleet train station, or about double that distance from Ebbsfleet International train station, and it's a ground which, depending on your point of view, is full of character and a nostalgic reminder of how football grounds used to be, or is a rundown, dilapidated ground that is in urgent need of modernising. Personally, as someone who is getting increasingly bored of characterless and soulless grounds even in non-league, I would tend towards the former point of view. Along one length of the pitch is terracing, with a very old-fashioned stand covering the middle third. On the opposite side is a smaller, just as old fashioned but more attractive all-seater stand, with plenty of obstructing pillars to get in the way of one's vision. Behind one of the goals is a bank of uncovered terracing. On my last visit to Stonebridge Road seven years ago, behind the other goal was a bank of covered terrace which generated a terrific atmosphere. Since then, the terrace was declared unsafe and so the club has placed a stand of seats on top about half of the terrace, but the very dated stand structure remains in place. Even down to the old-fashioned toilet blocks and clubhouse latched onto the condemned terrace/now seated stand, Stonebridge Road feels like a ground that has been frozen in time for 40 or 50 years which, for me, visiting it makes a refreshing change. The programme was a good read, glossy attractive to the eye, plenty of interesting articles to digest and all the necessary stats and facts.

Going into this game, Ebbsfleet United were virtually assured of a play-off berth, in third place in the league, eight points clear of the two teams immediately outside of the play-off positions with just three games left to play. It's fair to say that it is as unlikely as that they could overhaul Braintree Town, who were seven points better off, to claim the title and automatic promotion. But Ebbsfleet have been in excellent form, having won their last four games, scored 8 goals without conceding in their last three games, and are unbeaten in their last six games, and a win today would guarantee a play-off berth. One of those teams immediately outside of the play-offs was Chelmsford City, in seventh place, and with the play-offs well within sight, as they are just two points behind fifth placed Woking and three points behind fourth placed Welling United. Last time out, Chelmsford were beaten at home by second placed Farnborough, but won their previous two games.

When the two teams met in Essex earlier in the season, Chelmsford threw away a two-goal lead as Ebbsfleet won 3-2.

The weather was absolutely glorious, although with temperatures around 25c and with strong sunshine making watching a game of football seem rather tiring and inappropriate, one has to sympathise with the players tasked with running around for 90 minutes in the direct sun. So, credit to both teams for producing a reasonably entertaining game of football. Chelmsford had more to play for, and it showed, as they forced the pace in the opening minutes, so it was something of a surprise when Ebbsfleet took the lead on 17 minutes, when a perfectly taken free-kick was headed powerfully home by Tom Phipp. 11 minutes later and Chelmsford were back on level terms when the ball dropped kindly to Rob Edmans about 15 yards out, who took his time to pick his spot to blast the ball into the net. 1-1 was how it remained at half time, and in the second half, Ebbsfleet seemed rather lethargic and sloppy as Chelmsford dominated for long periods and deservedly claimed all three points when Mark Haines headed home a corner on 52 minutes, and then eight minutes from time, substitute Ali Chaaban superbly spun past a defender before dribbling his way into the box and coolly, slotting home from just inside the box. Ebbsfleet did threaten to create a couple of chances, but never really looked like scoring and so a very valuable three points for Chelmsford, which gives them a great chance of making the play-offs now. The defeat does not really change much for Ebbsfleet, as even if they had won, they now could not overhaul Braintree who won today, but victories for Dover as well as Chelmsford means that Ebbsfleet still require two points from their remaining two games to book their play-off place. Credit should go to the Chelmsford fans who, as has been the case every team I have seen their team in action, provided excellent vocal support.

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