

TT No.258: Justin Holmes - Saturday 23rd April 2011; **Bristol Rovers** v Charlton Athletic; Football League One; Venue: The Memorial Stadium, Bristol; Score: 2-2; Admn: £18.50; Prog: £3.00; Attendance: 6,586; Match Rating: 4.

My second game of the Easter weekend was a match that I had pencilled in as a Charlton awayday at the start of the season but which, in truth, had I not purchased my coach tickets a couple of months ago when Charlton were challenging for a play-off berth, I would probably would have given this game a miss, given the total implosion of Charlton's season. However, a first visit to a Football League stadium, on yet another gloriously sunny and warm day, meant I still headed down the M4 in optimistic mood for a good day out, regardless of how my team would fare.

After a very pleasant couple of hours wandering around the interesting city of Bristol and taking in the impressive structure of the Clifton Suspension Bridge, I then embarked on a 45 minute, almost three mile walk north from the city centre to the Memorial Stadium. Regular buses also ply the route for those less inclined to take on the long walk. The Memorial Stadium has a very unique feel to it as a football stadium, which is perhaps not surprising, as it was designed as a home for rugby, not football. A peculiar feature of the ground is that each of the stands would seem more at home at venues of different sports. A relatively narrow stand on one length of the pitch has the look of a traditional rugby stand, with seating perched high up and with terracing beneath it and stretching either side along the length of the pitch, one third of which is sometimes made available to away supporters, although not today. Their home was behind one of the goals, in a couple of temporary marquee-looking stands with tarpaulin cover, stands that would look more at home at a show-jumping event than a football match. Along the other length is a building that looks more akin to a modern cricket pavilion, a pleasantly designed structure with corporate boxes along the top, five rows of seating in the middle and terracing along the bottom, To one side of the stand is another temporary stand almost identical to the ones housing the away supporters - bizarrely, the family enclosure is located in this stand, adjacent to the away fans. On the other side of the main stand is a more permanent looking structure with terracing, and behind the other goal is the only structure that looks like a football stand, a fairly small bank of covered terracing. It's worth buying tickets in advance where possible for a match at the Memorial Stadium, as ticket prices rise by £2.00 on the day of the game.

The 64-page programme was a really good effort, one of the best I have encountered this season at any level, although quite bizarrely the front cover has a landscape design. Contained inside is an abundance of information of interest whatever one's allegiance or passion, and helpfully even includes up to date pen-pics of the home players for the benefit of the away support. Even the quantity of advertisements is kept to a tolerable level.

It's fair to say there was much more at stake for Bristol Rovers than Charlton Athletic today. Having occupied a relegation position for most of the season, Rovers found themselves in 22nd place after back to back defeats, but were only one and two points adrift of the two teams immediately above the relegation zone. After starting the season with promise and expectation to rise out of the third tier of football, a slight dip in form around the turn of the year was consolidated into a complete freefall when former manager Phil Parkinson was sacked, to be replaced by club legend, but rookie manager, Chris Powell. Initially, four straight victories made this look a masterstroke, however since then, Charlton had won just once in fifteen matches, during which was a run taking just one point from eight games, to transform Charlton from a team that was sniffing around the play-offs to one stuck in mid-table obscurity and consigned to another season in the third tier of English football. When the two teams met in south-east London earlier in the season, the points were shared in a 1-1 draw.

So, despite the league placings, the neutral would have fancied Bristol Rovers to claim a vital three points, and although they made the early running, it was the visitors who took the lead on 7 minutes when a completely unmarked Paul Benson powerfully headed home after a perfectly judged cross by Nathan Eccleston, on loan from Liverpool. Both sides carved out reasonable chances during the rest of the first half, and Bristol Rovers had a goal ruled out for offside, but it was Charlton who took a slender lead into the half-time break. A home defeat would be disastrous for Bristol Rovers in their perilous position, but Charlton doubled their lead within a minute of the restart thanks to a superb goal by Kyel Reid, with a direct run towards goal before unleashing a vicious, swerving shot which gave the keeper no chance. So, Charlton were unexpectedly cruising towards a comfortable away victory, but just as it looked like the home team were running short of ideas, several referee decisions tipped the match in their favour, Goal scorer Reid, was dismissed for a second yellow card, although in truth, it could easily have been a straight red with a late tackle which caused the Rovers player James Tunnicliffe to be stretchered off and taken to hospital, and just a few minutes after that, Jose Semedo followed Reid down the tunnel, also for a second yellow card. With over half an hour to play, it would be a tall order for Charlton to hold on to their lead, and indeed, suddenly Bristol Rovers were full of energy and appetite that seemed to be lacking previously. On 67 minutes, the home side halved the deficit when Wayne Brown slotted home after the ball ran to him following a blocked shot. It really was becoming a back to the walls effort for Charlton now, hoofing the ball clear at every opportunity as Bristol Rovers tried to break them down, missing some fantastic chances, although Eccleston almost claimed a third for the visitors on the break when a long run from the half way line was thwarted as he tried to cut inside 10 yards out. Five minutes from time and Bristol Rovers finally equalised, when Gavin Williams controlled the ball with his arm before rifling home. How the officials did not see as clear a handball as they come is a mystery, and Charlton's manager Chris Powell was sent to the stands for pointing this out too vociferously. Rovers really should have claimed all three points with some bad misses in the closing minutes, but 2-2 was the final score. It is difficult to know

who would be happier with this result - Bristol Rovers, getting a point after being two goals down, or Charlton, for claiming a point after playing for more than half an hour with just nine men. In reality though, Rovers really needed to win this game and the cost of not claiming all three points will become clear in a fortnight's time, whereas results are somewhat irrelevant for Charlton now.

07/20