

TT No.260: Justin Holmes - Mon 25th April 2011; **Egham Town** v Chertsey Town; Combined Counties League Prem Division; Venue: Runnymede Stadium, Egham; Score: 1-2 Admission: £6.00; Prog: £1.00; Att: 150 (estimate); Match Rating: 3.

Bank holiday can only mean one thing for me, a double bill of football action, kicking off with a match in the Combined Counties League, a league which can always be relied on for 11.30 kick-offs on Bank Holiday Mondays. I chose to head for a local derby that is always keenly contested, with no love lost between the two sides to put it mildly, with the added spice that the visiting team still had a chance of claiming the title.

Runnymede Stadium, home of Egham Town, is about a 20-minute walk from the town's train station, passing over the M25 en route. The stadium looks exactly what it is - the home venue of Isthmian League football up to a few years ago, the legacy of which is facilities superior to most grounds that one encounters in the Combined Counties League, but are looking somewhat unloved and have a "had better days" appearance. Stands are available along all four sides of the pitch. As one enters the ground behind one of the goals, there is covered stand with a couple of steps of terracing, behind the other goal is a much narrower stand also covering a couple of terrace steps, along one length of the pitch are three stands covering hard standing, and along the other length is a small, old-fashioned all-seater stand. The 16-page programme had an attractive card cover and served its purpose with providing basic facts and stats, but with little to retain one's interest for more than a couple of minutes. Credit though for only containing three pages of advertising.

Today's visitors went into this game still with a chance of claiming the Combined Counties League title, although in reality they appear to have "blown it", having challenged Guildford City for top spot in recent months, but two goalless draws away at mid-table Raynes Park Vale and then Cove have meant that destiny is no longer in their hands. Level on points but with an inferior goal difference with Guildford City, they would need to win today's game, their last of the season, and hope that Guildford could gain no more than two points from their remaining two games, both away, but against lowly Ash United and rock bottom Bookham. Egham Town found themselves down in eleventh place in the 21-team league and have a truly awful end to the season, having claimed just two points from their last eight games. When the two teams met earlier in the season, Chertsey won 3-1.

On another beautifully sunny day but slightly cooler than of late due to a fresh breeze, the first half of this game was pretty much as one would have expected of a local derby between two clubs out of form, one with much to play for. Dull, with precious few chances, although Egham certainly matched Chertsey, and if anything, possibly had the better of proceedings. The score-line at half-time was goalless, and with news coming through that Guildford City were losing at Ash United, there was much motivation for Chertsey to push on to find a winner. They

had a wonderful opportunity four minutes into the second half when they were awarded a penalty for a daft challenge by Nathan Blanks on Dean Papali when the Chertsey player was running towards the corner flag. Papali took the penalty himself and struck it well, low to the keeper's right, but the keeper Justin Gray pulled off a tremendous save to keep the score-line goalless, to add to a wonderful point blank save he had made in the first half from a powerful header. A few minutes later and Chertsey were made to pay for missing the penalty as a well worked move ended with Matt Grave placing a shot under the keeper from 15 yards out to give Egham the lead. Given Chertsey's recent poor goalscoring record and their sporadic at best attacking moves in this match so far, one feared that the title race could be over, but they did manage to get back on level terms on 70 minutes when a corner was headed towards goal by Trevor Charlery and Phil Page tapped in at the far post. Just a minute later and Chertsey were suddenly in front, but what a gift it was, when a back-pass by Blanks was completely missed by the Egham goalkeeper and the ball rolled into the back of the net. An inexplicable mistake, under no real pressure and no bobble was apparent. From now on, Chertsey were in total ascendancy and several chances came and went, varying from the presentable to the "how on earth did he miss that?!" and tempers boiled over a couple of times - a mass brawl went completely unpunished, before another one a couple of minutes later resulted in Egham's Chris Robinson and Chertsey's Miles Smith being sent off. Apparently, Egham should have equalised with a few minutes remaining when a firm header crossed the line before being saved, but Chertsey it was who claimed the derby double. Chertsey's fans had been in fine voice all afternoon, and full credit to them for staying long after the match to applaud their players for a season's hard work as the players spread the champagne. This would not be to celebrate winning the title, as news came through that Guildford had overturned their half time deficit to triumph 3-2, and unless they lose by eleven goals at Bookham next week, the title will be Guildford's. But Chertsey seem to be very confident of gaining promotion after coming close for several years, confidence that may be misplaced as Guildford City have appealed against the decision not to allow them promotion due to their ground, and promotion of runners ups to the Isthmian (and parallel) leagues tends to be something of a lottery.

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