

TT No.99: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 23rd October 2010; **Carlisle United** v Charlton Athletic; Football League One; Venue: Brunton Park, Carlisle; Score 3-4; Admission: £19.00; Programme: £1.00; Attendance: 5,624; Match Rating: 5.

It has long been a desire of mine to visit Brunton Park, the most northerly Football League stadium in England, and just two weeks after visiting the southern and westernmost stadium at Plymouth Argyle, today I made it a reality. And as a Charlton fan following my team on the long trip north...I couldn't have chosen a better day to make the long trip north!

Once again taking advantage of cheap train tickets by booking almost three months in advance, I was whisked from London Euston to Carlisle in three and a quarter hours, and as I usually like to do, I arrived several hours ahead of kick-off, allowing me ample time to visit Carlisle Castle and Cathedral, as well as the pleasant city centre, before embarking on the 20 minute walk to Brunton Park.

The stadium is certainly of the old-fashioned variety, which is becoming an every, more pleasing experience in times of an ever-increasing number of soulless identikit stadia in the Football League. Away fans are housed in a small end section of the one modern stand which has been constructed and which runs along one length of the pitch, which certainly offers excellent, unobstructed views and good legroom. A quirk of this stand is that it is not in sync with the pitch, with a fair part of the stand situated beyond the touchline - caused by an aborted plan to relocate the pitch in years gone by. Behind one of the goals is a shallow open terrace which also caters for visiting supporters when there is a large following - that's rarely likely to happen when Charlton visit, nor most other southern clubs. Behind the other goal is a covered terrace with a rather unusual roof, containing three triangles. Along the remaining length of the pitch is a fairly small main, old-fashioned seated stand, with additional stands attached either side, and with terracing beneath these three stands running the length of the pitch. A further unusual aspect of the ground are the floodlights, with individual scattered lights attached to the frame of pylons.

The programme produced was an interesting concept. This season, Carlisle United have decided to produce a much-slimmed down version at 20 pages, printed to a lower quality than is expected at Football League clubs, however only £1 is charged for it. The programme still contains all the essential information for the matchday in question, but without information that all but the committed home fans would be interested in, such as news of the other club's teams or community work. It will be very interesting to hear how successful this innovation is, whether fans respond positively to paying less for their much slimmed-down programme and whether other clubs follow Carlisle's lead.

Both teams had lost the previous weekend, Carlisle at Exeter, whereas Charlton were somewhat humiliated in being beaten 0-4 at home against league leaders

Brighton, falling down to 14th in the process, although only three points away from the final play-off spot, which was occupied by Carlisle.

Inside the first minute, Carlisle really should have taken the lead, when Rob Elliott could only pat out a fairly tame long-distance shot, but Craig Curran could only blaze over the bar. Carlisle continued to slightly shade an even opening to the game, although what struck me was how remarkably quiet the Carlisle support was, which came as a major surprise. Charlton opened the scoring on 22 minutes, when Johnnie Jackson slid in at the far post after an excellent low cross by Scott Wagstaff. Charlton extended their lead to two on 38 minutes through Joe Anyinsah, on his return to Carlisle having left Brunton Park in the summer, with a good flicked finish following a corner. Carlisle looked a very average team in the first half, but would surely come out a revitalised team after the break, and Charlton fans are somewhat accustomed to throwing away games from good positions, particularly on their travels to the north of the country.

The away fans were sent in fantasy land two minutes into the second half though, when Paul Benson was given all the time in the world to pick his spot in the bottom corner. Three points were surely Charlton's now, and Carlisle did little to suggest they would get back into the game, until they got a goal back on 58 minutes through Mike Grella with a simple far-post finish, and just three minutes later, Craig Curran pulled another goal back with a header from close range. The game had completely turned on its head by now, with wave after wave of Carlisle attacks with increasingly desperate defending from Charlton. It was only a matter of time before Carlisle completed a remarkable comeback, which they duly did on 77 minutes when a deflected cross hit the post and the rebound was bundled in by Gary Madine. Both sides seemed to settle the point after this, as Carlisle's pressure relented. However, deep into added on time, Charlton won a corner in an extremely rare second-half attack, and Paul Benson amazingly thundered home Simon Francis' corner for his second of the game and to ensure all three points would be heading back down the M6 to London. An incredible finish to a thrilling game to spare Charlton the ignominy of surrendering a three-goal lead.

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