

**TT No.114: *Justin Holmes*** - Sat 10th December 2011; **Walsall** v Charlton Athletic; Football League 1; Venue: Bescot Stadium, Walsall; Score: 1-1; Admission: £18.50; Programme: £3.00; Att: 4,537; Match Rating: 2.

Today was fourth time lucky to pay a visit to the Bescot Stadium - previous attempts to visit in recent years were thwarted by the weather or a holiday - for what would finally be my first Charlton awayday of the season.

However, one chooses, to get to the Bescot Stadium, there will be few easier grounds to reach, situated as it is immediately adjacent to both the M6 motorway and Bescot Stadium railway station. The immediate vicinity of the stadium is therefore unsurprisingly industrial and noisy, with little to delay entry to the ground. Once inside, it is a rather typical modern lower league football ground that is fully enclosed and all-seater. Three sides of the stadium appear almost identical, single tier with about 15 rows of seating, and with plenty of obstructing pillars along the front of the stands. Away supporters are housed behind one of the goals, and behind the other is a relatively huge two-tier stand that dwarfs the other stands. The stadium has little in aesthetic appeal, but is well suited to the level of support, has an intimate feel and is presumably conducive to generating a good atmosphere - although sadly, the home fans were incredibly quiet at all times today. The 68-page programme, at the apparently standard Football League price of £3.00, was rather disappointing, with little interesting to read for a Football League programme.

It would surely not just be with my partisan Charlton hat on that I was full of confidence of witnessing an away win today. Charlton, who completely overhauled their squad over the summer after a bitterly disappointing mid-table finish last season, have set the division on fire this time around under Chris Powell, leading the table by seven points, and had won their last eight games straight (including two in the FA Cup) since their solitary defeat so far at Stevenage in mid-October. It would be fair to say that this season has been fantasy football for a Charlton fan after several poor seasons. The season has been much more of a struggle for Walsall, who went into this match occupying a relegation place in seventeenth place in the 24 team league and have not won in eight league games, picking up three points in that period, although they have been unbeaten in their last four league and cup games.

On a bright but bitterly cold afternoon only just hovering above freezing point, it soon became clear that this would be no one-sided affair. Unsurprisingly, Charlton always looked to play the better football on a poor, in places bare pitch that soon cut up, but the game was surprisingly even as Walsall, whilst always looking much more limited in quality, more than contained their high-flying opponents. On 36 minutes, they did better than that, as they won a corner, which was played to Mat Sadler just outside the box. He unleashed a shot which cannoned off both a Charlton and a Walsall player before landing at the feet of an unmarked Jon

Macken, who had the easy task of turning the ball home from 10 yards. As the game entered injury time at the end of the first half, Charlton were back on level terms, when on-loan Hogan Ephraim drove in from deep before sending in a perfect cross for Frenchman Yann Kermorgant to power in a far post header.

In truth, the first half had not been particularly entertaining, but the second half was played at a much faster pace, Charlton always looking the more threatening and playing the more measured football, although Walsall held their own and also looked capable of scoring, most notably midway through the half when a shot was blocked by the keeper and the follow up shot was cleared off the line by an excellent diving header by Darel Russell. In the closing stages of the match, Charlton applied increasing pressure on the Walsall goal, culminating in a penalty being denied for a clear handball, and from the resulting corner, the ball was headed onto the post, which proved to be the final meaningful action of the match. So, a point apiece, which both clubs would surely be satisfied with on reflection.

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