

TT No.118: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 17th December 2011; **Crewe Alexandra** v **Crawley Town**; Football League 2; Venue: Gresty Road, Crewe; Score: 1-1; Admission: £19.50; Programme: £3.00; Attendance: 3,635; Match Rating: 3.

With a weekend stay in Crewe booked months ago taking advantage of Travelodge's bargain £10 a night offer, it is fair to say my heart sunk when arriving in Crewe on Friday afternoon, with a fair covering of snow on the ground and freezing temperatures forecast for the night ahead. Prospects did not look any brighter in the morning with intermittent heavy rain and sleet showers, and when I visited the stadium mid-morning, the pitch was still covered in snow with the groundsman and helpers working hard at removing the snow from the pitch. Only at 1.30 was the game confirmed as definitely on.

Gresty Road - how the ground should surely continue to be known as rather than the bland official name of the Alexandra Stadium adopted at the turn of the century - is conveniently located just a few minutes' walk from Crewe rail station - indeed, one sees it up close as the train approaches the station from the south. The main stand is a large and impressive single tier affair that would not look out of place in the Premiership, containing around two thirds of the total capacity of the stadium, and towers over the remaining much lower and unconnected three stands, all very similar in design and with identical heights. Views appear to be excellent wherever one sits, with just a couple of obstructing pillars in the away stand. All stands are all-seater, all seats are priced the same throughout the ground, and away supporters are allocated the stand opposite the main stand. It is one of the nicer stadia in the lower leagues, managing to combine a compact, intimate feeling in the smaller stands with facilities the equal of anywhere in the main stand. The 68-page programme did not look promising at first glance, with a design more akin to a fanzine and not even a glossy, hardened cover, but it actually turned out to be one of the better programmes I have encountered, with much interesting to read even for a neutral supporter.

Today's match would be a tough assignment for the home side, who found themselves down in sixteenth place, although they have taken seven points from their last three league games since Steve Davis took over from Dario Gradi. Where Crawley find themselves today is quite remarkable, considering they were an average Southern League team less than ten years ago. Newly promoted to the Football League, they look odds on to earn a second successive promotion and went into this game top of the table by three points, were eight points clear of the play-off places and were unbeaten in their last fourteen games.

It was the home side who started the game very much on the foot front, and had a few half chances to open the scoring, before they did so on nine minutes, when Wes Fletcher, on loan from Burnley, headed home powerfully following an excellent cross by Byron Moore. Crewe's lead was well deserved - they also had a shot cleared off the line - as Crawley surprisingly struggled to get a foothold in the

game, but suddenly came a potential changing point in the match. Today's referee, Stuart Attwell, is one of those referees who, when you learn he will be the man in the middle for a game, you just know that, for whatever reason, controversies aplenty will follow and the chances are that at the end of the match, he will feature prominently in most person's reflections of the game - the cardinal sin for a referee. On 15 minutes he sent off Crewe's Shaun Miller who went in to the tackle hard and slightly high, but then so did the player he tackled, Sergio Torres. The home side understandably opted for a much more defensive formation, and unsurprisingly Crawley came much more into the match, dominating possession but were guilty of playing too many sloppy passes. However, on 31 minutes, Crawley were back on level terms, when Andy Drury, on loan from Ipswich, sent in a cross which was met by Matt Tubbs who guided the ball just inside the post. Crawley then continued to dominate proceedings, with ever more intense waves of attack, and it only seemed a matter of time before they would take the lead. The score-line remained level as the half time whistle blew, with Attwell being greeted with deafening boos from the home fans as he approached the tunnel, and it was hard not to have sympathy for the home supporters, as Attwell's performance could at best be described as erratic, turning a blind eye to some blatant pulls and pushes and late tackles. The chant from Crawley's fans "Can we have you every week" showed they agreed their team was getting the better of the decisions.

The second half saw Crawley continuing to take advantage of having an extra man to dominate proceedings, but they could not fashion any real gilt-edged chances, and full credit to Crewe for occasionally looking threatening on the break, and they had a further two good penalty shouts turned down - one when a free kick was given millimetres outside of the box when the contact did appear to be inside, the other when a clear handball was ignored. In the end the points were shared, with yet more loud boos greeting Attwell as he headed for the tunnel, which was a shame as this deflected from the enormous credit that the home team should be given for playing admirably for 75 minutes with ten men against such high flying opponents to deservedly hold out for a point. Crawley will probably return south happy with a point and extending their unbeaten run to 15 games on a day when they just did not seem to click.

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