

TT No. 120: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 24th December 2011; **Roffey** v Barnham; Sussex County League Division 3; Venue: Bartholomew Way, Horsham; Score: 0-1; Admn: None; Prog: £2.00; Att: 200 (estimate); Match Rating: 3.

With only a handful of games across the country taking place today, it was to my good fortune that almost all of these were taking place in my local league, the Sussex County League. And even more fortunate that the nearest ground I had not yet visited would be playing at home. It is fair to say the decision to play games on Christmas Eve was not universally popular amongst players and officials, as all clubs with floodlights moved today's fixture to another date. One really has to pity the Roffey players, who were faced with games on Christmas Eve and Boxing Day, which really does border on the ridiculous!

Roffey's Bartholomew Way ground is located on the northern outskirts of Horsham, and is about a 15-minute walk from Littlehaven rail station, at the end of a very middle-class housing estate. As Bartholomew Way ends, a large car parks stretches out, at the end of which is the clubhouse and bar, and to the right of which is the football pitch, neatly nestled with trees closely surrounding all four sides. Unsurprisingly for a club in their first season in the Sussex County League, facilities are minimal, with the pitch railed off but with no hard standing nor other spectator facilities apart from a tea bar hut located in one corner. The setting would surely be more attractive in early Autumn, when the trees would be laden with colourful leaves, and the constant roar from the adjacent busy dual carriageway also detracts from the pleasantness of the setting. With attendances hovering around the 50 mark this season - which is very decent in this league - today's attendance four times that figure certainly came as a surprise to the home team, swelled by a very large number of groundhoppers attracted by the opportunity to tick off a new ground with so few other games being played. The hosts coped very well with the unexpected turnout, with the tea bar doing a roaring trade throughout and the programmes originally produced being gobbled up half hour ahead of kick off. However, fresh copies were printed throughout the match to ensure that everyone who wanted a copy would not be disappointed. The club deserves enormous credit for that, and indeed, the overall impression of the club was very positive, of a very friendly, well-run club.

Clubs promoted to the Sussex County League tend to do well - today's visitors, Barnham, finished in third place last season in their debut season, and are in the top half of the table this season, in sixth place. Roffey have proved an exception to the rule of thumb though, as they have only won two of their opening sixteen games, losing all of the others, and prop up the table. They have shipped at least six goals on four occasions - including an 1-8 loss last time out at TD Shipley, and 7-1 at Barnham last month.

The game started off surprisingly evenly, with little to tell between the two sides, although Barnham perhaps shaded the amount of attacking intent. They took the

lead on the half hour in rather bizarre circumstances, when a fine strike from outside the area cannoned off the crossbar, and the keeper seemed to completely lose concentration as he wandered around, talking to one of his defenders, and Ashley Harper took his time to stroke the ball into an unnecessarily empty net. Quite what the reasons were for the keeper to stop playing is an absolute mystery. The rest of the half continued in an even manner, and the score-line remained one goal in Barnham's favour at half time.

Roffey began the second half on the front foot, mounting several attacks, the best of which came on 50 minutes when a low cross was met by a shot which stuck the post and bounced clear. The game remained in the balance throughout the second half, but there were few real golden chances to score until five minutes from time when Barnham really should have doubled their lead, when the ball was played back from the touchline to an unmarked forward but he shot wide of the goal from about 12 yards out. A couple of minutes later and Barnham came very close to scoring again, when the forward spotted the keeper slightly off his line, but the ball was tipped over the bar.

In the end, it was Barnham who predictably claimed the three points to move up one place in the league, however they were run very close by a Roffey side who, on the evidence of today, do not look a bottom of the table side who have lost 14 out of 16 games this season, and with only one team potentially being relegated and with only up to a four points behind the three clubs immediately above them, they still appear to have a good chance of escaping the drop. One hopes they do, as certainly off the pitch, the club is a credit to the Sussex County League.

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