

TT No.157: Justin Holmes - Saturday 4 February 2012; **West Bromwich Albion v Swansea City**; Premier League; Venue: The Hawthorns, West Bromwich; Score: 1-2; Admn: £25.00; Programme: £3.00; Att: 24, 274; Match Rating: 3.

On a day when the belated big freeze put paid to the vast majority of local non-league football - and even many games in the lower divisions of the Football League, it was rather fortunate that I had already planned to make a rare visit to a Premier League ground, where under-soil heating would mean that freezing weather would be little threat to the game unless the surrounding roads would be too treacherous. Today would also be the first opportunity for me to see with my own eyes the remarkable transformation in Swansea City's fortunes, having spent many an afternoon watching Swansea in the nineties as they struggled in the lower leagues in the ramshackle (but, for me, much missed) Vetch Field.

The Hawthorns, which has the surprising distinction of being the highest ground above sea level in the English Premier and Football Leagues, is located a few minutes' walk from the railway station of the same name. Having been completely rebuilt since the early nineties, it is now a stadium that, while is small by Premier League standard, has been very well designed, fully enclosed, offers excellent, unobstructed views throughout and does not suffer from the identikit look. The East Stand, the most recent major development of the ground, is the tallest stand and the only stand to consist of two tiers. Set slightly lower is the "home" end, and lower still and of equal height are the West Stand (where I was sat today) and the stand behind the other goal, half of which houses the away fans. A nice touch is the placement of a large thistle, retained from the pre-development stand, on the wall above seating in one corner of the ground. The programme was truly superb, one of the best I have encountered at any level, and excellent value at £3.00. Imaginatively designed, a minimum of adverts and plenty of interesting reading material, it certainly helped while away the time on the long journey back down south after the game.

A glance at the Premier League table pointed to a game between two evenly matched teams, with Swansea just one place and one point better off than West Bromwich Albion, in fourteenth place. West Brom's recent form has not been good, picking up just one win from their last six games. The Hawthorns is also proving to be something of a bogey ground for the home side, having picked up just one point from their last five league games at home, stretching back to mid-November. Not unusually for a promoted side, Swansea have been very strong at home this season - losing just once (to Manchester United) in twelve games - but have struggled on their travels. They had only won one and drawn three of their eleven games away from home - that win coming in January, on their most recent visit to the West Midlands, at Aston Villa. When the two sides met at the Liberty Stadium back in September, Swansea coasted to a 3-0 win.

On a bitterly cold afternoon with heavy sleet showers, the first half was quite a dull affair. Swansea displayed the brand of football they have become known for - lots of short passes, keeping possession and very, very rarely going for a long punt upfield, not even from goal kicks, but it was West Brom who could consider themselves the most unlucky not to open the scoring in the first half. They were denied a penalty when Swansea's Ashley Williams' apparent handball was not punished, and they had two shots cleared off the line in quick succession just before half time.

As half-time arrived, the increasingly heavy snowfall was beginning to lay on the pitch, requiring brushing away from the critical areas during the interval. On 54 minutes, against the run of play it must be said, it was the home side who took the lead when a Graham Dorrans corner was flicked on by Jonas Olsson, landing at the feet of Marc Antoine Fortune at the corner of the 6 yard box, and he took a moment to compose himself before firing into the net. The home fans celebrations did not last long. Appropriately on such a snowy, wintry afternoon, it was a case of the Iceman cometh, as the game soon turned on its head. Within a minute of going behind, the Icelander Gylfi Sigurdsson levelled the scores when he passed the ball into the net following a low cross by Neil Taylor after a fine run down the flank. Just four minutes later and Swansea were suddenly in the lead, when Sigurdsson surged forward before whipping in a cross, which top scorer Danny Graham coolly poked home. After that sudden burst of activity, the game settled back into its previous pattern, with Swansea playing some impressive football while yet again it was West Brom who fashioned the best chances, none better than when Peter Odemwingie blazed high and wide when unmarked just eight yards out. In the closing minutes, West Brom threw everything at Swansea, including keeper Ben Foster, and although an equaliser looked a possibility during this frantic period, Swansea held on for a deserved victory, lifting them ten points clear of the relegation zone.

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