

TT No.179: Justin Holmes - Sat 3rd March 2012; **Bournemouth** v West Auckland Town; FA Vase Quarter Final; Venue: Victoria Park, Winton; Score: 0-2 Admission: £6.00; Programme: £1.00; Att: 414; Match Rating: 2.

When I booked a weekend stay in Bournemouth well before Christmas, it was with the intention of watching Charlton's League One visit to Dean Court, home of AFC Bournemouth. However, tickets in the away end were surprisingly sold out very quickly, and my season ticket history at Charlton would have fallen foul of AFC Bournemouth's stringent checks on ticket purchases in the home areas. In any case, I have never found it a pleasant experience to be in "the wrong end" for a Charlton match. It looked like a game in the Wessex League would have to suffice instead, until the other club in Bournemouth, Bournemouth (Poppies) FC, set up an intriguing looking FA Vase quarter final match, arguably the biggest occasion in the club's history at their home ground. The match would also send the most northerly club left in the competition and 5-2 favourites to lift the cup to the home of the most southerly club remaining in the competition, who are stuck firmly in mid-table in their league and are rank outsiders at 25-1 to lift the Vase.

Victoria Park is located in the suburb of Winton and around two and a half miles north of Bournemouth town centre, slightly less from the town's train station. The walk took around 40 minutes, although regular buses are available. The Wessex League has many gems of grounds to visit - Victoria Park is not one of them, indeed, there is precious little reason to recommend a visit to Victoria Park in its own right, with it hard to imagine a ground lacking more in character and charm. There is a stand straddling the half way line, two thirds of which offers wooden bench seating, the remainder housing a rather cramped clubhouse - admittedly, it probably felt more cramped with a much larger than usual attendance today, Around the rest of the ground is just hard standing behind a metal perimeter rail. Behind one length and a goal is housing, and behind the other goal is a busy road which produced a constant backdrop of loud traffic noise. Enormous credit though should be given for an excellent 44-page programme, containing much interesting and relevant information about both clubs and hardly any advertising. It made for a very pleasant change from the over-priced publications that are little more than a local business directory that one finds more and more at this level of football.

A glance at the Wessex League makes it most surprising and augments the feeling of considerable achievement that Bournemouth have managed to reach the last eight of the FA Vase, the last remaining Wessex League club to do so, as they are in eleventh place in the 22-team league. This is also by far the furthest Bournemouth have ever reached in the competition, only getting as far as the Third Round previously, and since setting out on their FA Vase journey back in September, they have dispatched AFC Portchester, Hartley Wintney, Torpoint Athletic, Barnstaple Town, Royston Town and most recently Billingham Synthonia after a replay last weekend. Their recent league form has not been good though,

picking up just one point from their last four games. It is much easier to understand West Auckland Town's presence in the FA Vase Quarter Finals, as they are second placed in the Northern League - one point behind the leaders, Sunderland RCA, but with three games in hand, and are unbeaten in their last nine league games. To reach this stage, they have beaten Cleator Moor Celtic, Marske United, Shildon, Bacup Borough, Askern Villa, Bitton and finally they knocked out the holders, Whitley Bay, previously unbeaten in four years in the competition, away from home. This would also be West Auckland Town's first appearance in the FA Vase Quarter Finals.

On a day of blue skies, bright sunshine but with a strong wind, the game started quite evenly, but with Bournemouth using the wind behind them to do most of the attacking in the early stages. They hardly fashioned out any golden chances and the visitors, supported by an impressive contingent of travelling fans, assumed superiority as the first half wore on and they had the best chances although a bobbly pitch was proving a good leveller, making playing good football - which presumably West Auckland Town would be the more capable of - difficult.

A goalless half time score-line was not surprising, but in the second half, although the game remained something of a stalemate with little to set one's pulse racing, it was West Auckland who looked in control of proceedings, and having several golden chances to score, it looked like it would be just a matter of time before they opened the scoring - the Bournemouth keeper, Max Frampton, was by far Bournemouth's best player with numerous wonderful saves to keep his side in the game. Bournemouth still occasionally threatened, but it was really surprising that the whole club, from the players, coaches, officials, right through to the supporters, did not really seem to be that "up" for one of biggest days the club has had or are ever likely to have, as they put in a solid but uninspiring performance. Bournemouth's task became harder with the daft sending off eight minutes from time of Fawzi Saadi, hero of the last round after scoring the winning goal against Billingham Synthonia, after pushing an opponent to the floor who had prevented a free kick from being taken quickly. As extra time was looking more and more an inevitability, immediately after the fourth official indicated four minutes of added on time, Michael Rae forced yet another fabulous save from Frampton, but the rebound fell back at the feet of Rae, who slotted home to provoke joy unconfined amongst the West Auckland players, who rushed over to their coaches and supporters to celebrate. It was a devastating blow for the home side, but there was still time for another goal in the remaining minutes of added on time. A Bournemouth player lost possession in his own half to Mattie Moffat who strode forward and unleashed a fabulous swerving shot into the top corner beyond the reach of Frampton. The celebrations were just as wild as after the first goal, and it really was game over now, as the favourites deservedly progressed to the semi-finals, whilst Bournemouth have just a Wessex League Cup semi-final in 11 days' time to keep their season interesting.

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