

TT No.215: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 7th April 2012; **Hollands and Blair** v Cray Valley (PM); Kent Senior Trophy S-F; Venue: Star Meadow Sports Ground, Gillingham; Score: 2-0; Admission by prog: £4.00; Att: 105; Match Rating: 2.

For today's fare, I headed up to the Medway towns for a semi-final cup game set up in rather unusual circumstances, giving two teams previously eliminated from the Kent Senior Trophy an unexpected second opportunity in the competition. With the final scheduled for next weekend, at the start of this week the Kent FA had found Erith and Belvedere guilty of fielding an ineligible player in their January tie against Cray Valley - how on earth it has taken this long for this to come to light is anyone's guess, but at least it did before the Final was played - and so both teams that Erith and Belvedere had beaten were reinstated to play off for the right to reach the Cup Final.

The Star Meadow Sports Ground is about a half hour walk from Gillingham train station, and is located adjacent to the busy A2 road. In all honesty, it is a rather charmless, unremarkable ground at the moment, although building works are already in place to improve facilities with the construction of a new changing rooms block and one senses that the ground could be a totally different arena in five or ten years' time if the ambitious noises come to fruition. Currently, one passes by the very spacious clubhouse en route from the entrance to pitch-side, where facilities are limited to hard standing behind one of the goals and along one of the touchlines. The other touchline has just grass standing, and these three sides have railing. The remaining area behind the other goal is not accessible for spectators. There is no cover and no floodlights. The 28-page programme, included with admission, had some interesting information although half of the pages contained just advertising.

Today's game would give an opportunity for a team from the Kent Invicta League to reach the Cup Final - no mean feat indeed. If the facilities at Star Meadow had been sufficient, Hollands and Blair would probably be plying their trade in the Kent League, having won the Kent County League in two of the last three seasons and finishing as runners up in the middle season. They have surprisingly been off of the pace in the newly formed Kent Invicta League this season though, currently in fifth place and fourteen points shy of leaders Bly Spartans. Their recent form has not been good, losing two and drawing the other of their last three games. To reach this stage, they had beaten West Wickham and Beckenham Town, before losing to Erith and Belvedere after extra time in the Quarter Final. Cray Valley were rather surprisingly elected into the Kent League this season, having finished third in the Kent County League last season and with minimal facilities at the time, although they have settled reasonably well into senior football, in eleventh place in the sixteen-team league.

On an overcast and surprisingly cold afternoon with spots of rain in the wind, the game turned out to be a rather poor affair, surprisingly devoid of passion with a

first ever senior cup final at stake for both clubs. After Cray Valley were denied by a wonderful point blank save from a header in the opening couple of minutes, it was Hollands and Blair who showed most of the attacking intent in the first half and they deservedly took the lead on 27 minutes when a free kick from wide of the penalty area was headed home at the far post by Stuart West, a lead which they held at the interval.

For the opening quarter of an hour of the second half, it was surprising how flat Cray Valley's play remained, with misplaced passes and a lack of creativity. The home side opened up a two-goal cushion on 76 minutes, when a corner was headed home at the far post by Stephen Hafner. This finally sparked the visitors into life, and how they did not score was a mystery, with shots going agonisingly wide of the post or players deliberating too much before having a shot on goal. This short period of carving out good chances did not detract from a well-deserved victory for Hollands and Blair, to set up a Final appearance against Sevenoaks Town next weekend. Few would have guessed that final line-up, given the powerhouses in the Kent League, and Hollands and Blair will surely fancy their chances against a team who are in the league above, but are third from bottom.

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