

TT No.22: Justin Holmes - Sat 27th August 2011; **Ton Pentre** v Pontardawe Town; Welsh League Division 1; Venue: Ynys Park, Ton Pentre; Score: 0-0; Admission: £4.00; Programme: £1.00; Attendance: 50 (estimate); Match Rating: 3.

My first venture over the Severn Crossing of the season today, with the usual plethora of scenic and charming venues in the Welsh League to choose from. In the end I chose to head north up the Rhondda Valley to visit the home of former League of Wales club, Ton Pentre.

Having arrived in Cardiff thanks to yet another bargain coach ticket of £2 return from London, I swiftly caught the train bound for Treherbert, and after a 50-minute journey I had arrived in Ton Pentre. Ynys Park is not the easiest of grounds to find, with no signs and the entrance a small and rather dingy lane appearing to head into an industrial yard with only logic and sense of direction urging me to follow that route, but it is only a couple of minutes' walk from the train station. Ynys Park certainly ranks as one of the better grounds in the Welsh League, mostly thanks to their League of Wales days in the 90's, although it is clear that recent improvements and facelifts have occurred since then. As one enters the ground, there is a small stand straddling the half way line which has had seating installed within the last year, and between this stand and the corner flag is a large building which houses the clubhouse and changing rooms - players have to come down quite a tall flight of metallic stairs to enter the pitch. Behind one of the goals is a covered terrace stretching between the corner flags and with a tea bar built in, and around the rest of the ground is grass standing. It's a well-maintained ground, and typically for the Welsh League, the setting is peaceful and glorious, with a background of colourful steep hills all around. Again, typically for the Welsh League, the programme was of a good standard and was good value for money, with a glossy cover and plenty to read inside about both teams and the league.

Ton Pentre are back in the top flight of the Welsh League this season, having run away with the Division 2 title last season, remaining unbeaten throughout and finishing 13 points clear. Their unbeaten record this season only lasted two games though, winning their first two games before losing at home to Haverfordwest County, newly relegated from the Welsh Premier. Bizarrely, of their four league fixtures played so far this season, Ton Pentre have already played both the home and away league matches against neighbours AFC Porth - there cannot be too many occasions when a club has played both games against a club before the end of August! With seven points from their opening four games, it has been a solid start to the season for Ton Pentre. Today's visitors from the outskirts of Swansea, Pontardawe Town, finished in fourth place in Division 1 last season and have started this season with two defeats, but won their last game at Aberaman Athletic. The last time these two clubs met, on the final day of the 2009-2010 season, Ton Pentre needed a point to stay in Division 1, but lost 2-3, consigning them to relegation, the first in the club's history disregarding their voluntarily

dropping out of the League of Wales in the late nineties, not the first club in Wales to find playing matches across Wales and in European competition an excessive and unsustainable financial burden.

On an overcast day with occasional sunny periods but also occasional light rain showers, this was very much a game of two halves. The visitors were in the ascendancy for most of the first half as they played down a slight slope and certainly had the better chances, as the home side looked rather ragged and disjointed, playing too many stray passes, although they had the occasional presentable chances to open the scoring. Some rather heavy tackles, particularly from the visitors, provoked a flurry of yellow cards from the referee, and on 41 minutes, what had seemed increasingly inevitable occurred, with a red card shown to Arwel Rees, although it was one of the more bizarre sending's-off one would see. Having received physio attention off of the pitch, as an attacking free-kick was taken, Rees raced onto the pitch to join the attack, apparently believing he had been waved onto the pitch. It turned out that the referee had merely held his hand aloft to indicate an indirect free-kick, and to general amazement, the referee showed Rees a second yellow card and then a red. A little benefit of the doubt would not have gone amiss here and it appeared to be a very, very harsh booking prompting the sending off, and Rees certainly had the look of a man who felt hard done by as he kicked and punched almost anything non-human as he made his way to the dressing room.

With Pontardawe looking the better team up to this point, it would be interesting to see how the balance of play would pan out in the second half. Ton Pentre came out for the second half with a much more purposeful look about them, and went on to dominate the second half, although they had the air of a team lacking the guile and cohesion to find their way to goal. However, in the final 20 minutes of the match, they bombarded Pontardawe's goal, and how on earth they did not score is anyone's guess as several shots drifted inches wide of the goal, the woodwork was struck and in the dying minutes, virtually a free header from 8 yards out somehow did not find the back of the net. Pontardawe occasionally looked very dangerous on the break, on each occasion the defence snuffed out the danger well, but in the last five minutes they were denied what looked like a stone-wall penalty as Tom Blackburn drove into the box and was unceremoniously bundled over. In the end, the match finished goalless. No doubt Pontardawe will be far the happier with a point, having played 49 minutes with ten men and survived a barrage of shots in the closing stages, and the goalless score-line was not really an accurate reflection of what was an entertaining game full of endeavour if not skill.

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