

TT No.229: Justin Holmes - Saturday 21st April 2012; **Bristol City** v Barnsley; Football League Championship; Venue: Ashton Gate, Bristol; Score: 2-0; Admn: £10.00; Programme: £3.00; Attendance: 18,562; Match Rating: 3.

When I booked my £2 return Megabus trip to Bristol months ago, it was with the intention of paying a visit to Bath City's Twerton Park ground. However, their miserable season which has seen them long since relegated made a visit there less attractive. I then turned my attention to one of the several Bristol based grounds in the Western League. However, in the last week I learnt that Bristol City were offering tickets for their crucial Championship game for just £10, and as Ashton Gate has long since been a ground I have wanted to visit, renowned as a good old-fashioned ground with a passionate support, my decision was made.

Ashton Gate is about a 45-minute walk south-west from the city centre, and the stadium, which is living on borrowed time with the club actively planning to relocate to a new stadium once all the legal hurdles have been overcome, is a pleasing combination of old and new. I selected a seat in the largest and most modern stand, the Dolman Stand, which is single tiered although with upper and lower sections. It has excellent unobstructed views throughout, although the lower tier is exposed to the elements as it is not really protected by the roof. Behind one of the goals is another modern, single tiered stand, which also houses the changing rooms and is where the players enter the field from. Along the other touchline is an old-fashioned stand, with supporting pillars, and towards the corner on this side is a small area of uncovered seating, in front of the club shop. Behind the remaining goal is another old-fashioned stand, which appeared to not offer the best of views, with supporting pillars and a low roof, although the latter ensures a good atmosphere is easily generated by those inside. The 84-page programme was very readable, although it was disappointing to read the manager's notes were written for the previous midweek game against West Ham rather than today's match.

Realising that today could be a crucial day in determining whether the club stays in the Championship next season, full credit to the club for slashing ticket prices to ensure a packed house for the game to inspire the players. Having spent most of the season hovering dangerously in or just above the relegation zone, now survival is very much in their own hands, having carved out a six-match unbeaten run going into today's game, although only two wins came from this sequence. Four points clear of the relegation zone with just two games remaining, they would ensure survival if they could win today. Barnsley spent much of the season in mid table, even with hopes of pushing for a play-off place around Christmas. However, they have been on a shocking run of form since the turn of the year, picking up just one point from their last five games, and one win and two draws from their last twelve games, which threatened to suck them into a relegation dogfight. However, their

safety was confirmed in midweek thanks to results elsewhere. When the two teams met in South Yorkshire back in October, Bristol City won 2-1.

The match started off with an ominous sign, with referee Darren Deadman feeling it necessary to brandish a yellow card to Barnsley's David Perkins with less than two minutes on the clock for taking a free kick too quickly. The game then settled with Barnsley playing the more controlled football, however, with eleven minutes played, it was Bristol City who took the lead with an excellent incisive move, culminating in the ball being played to Cole Skuse in acres of space just outside the box, who hit a low shot across the keeper and into the corner of the net. Surprisingly, this did not seem to inspire the home team to drive home their advantage, as they allowed Barnsley too much freedom to play football and too readily gave away possession. An equaliser always looked a possibility, but at half time Bristol City retained their narrow one goal lead.

Within six minutes of the restart, Bristol City were given the opportunity to give themselves real breathing space when they were awarded a penalty after Barnsley captain Jim McNulty pulled the shirt of Ryan McGivern. After quite a delay, Jon Stead powered the penalty into the bottom left corner just out of the reach of the keeper's hands. This goal certainly did settle Bristol City down, and they went on to control the game and really should have scored two or three more, as Barnsley struggled to play the decent football, they managed in the first half and barely offered a threat on goal. In the end, Bristol City claimed the victory that ensured they remain in the Championship next season, although as it turned out, what happened today at Ashton Gate did not matter, as both Coventry and Portsmouth lost to consign themselves to the two remaining relegation spots. The game was not the best of spectacles, as was to be expected with much potentially riding on the outcome, although the relief of the home fans was obvious as they invaded the pitch in celebration on the final whistle.

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