

**TT No.36: *Justin Holmes*** - Sat 10th September 2011; **Merthyr Town** v Brislington; FA Vase 1st Qualifying Round; Penydarren Park, Merthyr Tydfil; Score: 1-0; Admission: £7.00; Programme: £1.50; Att: 261; Match Rating: 2.

For my second trip into Wales within a fortnight, I fully had the intention of choosing one of the Welsh League Cup ties around the Rhondda Valley, even during my journey down to Cardiff in the morning. However, a last-minute change of heart, which appears to be a feature of my groundhopping in recent weeks, saw me choose to head north to Merthyr Tydfil to watch Merthyr Town, in what is only their second season in existence after the town's previous club, Merthyr Tydfil, were liquidated. To the best of my knowledge, this match would be the first for many years that an FA Vase cup tie would be played outside England.

After playing their home games at Taff's Well FC last season, Merthyr Town FC were given the green light to use Penydarren Park, Merthyr Tydfil's former home, this season, and what a relief that was. Situated about a ten-minute walk from the town centre and railway station, Penydarren Park can simply best be described as a proper, old fashioned football ground and one of a dying-breed - even in non-league football that most of us mourn. It is a large non-league ground with traditional features and a minimum of bland identikit stands that is something of a hark back to "the good old days" of football grounds with character and uniqueness. Describing the ground as "old-fashioned" is not to say the ground is crumbling or in a state of disrepair, far from it, the ground has clearly had a complete facelift in recent times, resulting in a very neat and tidy stadium. There is an old-fashioned all-seater stand, although this does not provide an ideal vantage point, set some way back from the pitch and with floodlight and media gantry pylons obscuring the view. Behind one of the goals is a small and more modern stand, offering both seating and standing. Opposite the main stand is a large bank of terracing, the large central part of which is covered and contains the tea bar, and uncovered terracing extends either side to the corner flags, and also behind the other goal. Characteristically for a ground in the Welsh Valleys, colourful rolling hills make for a fairly scenic (if not spectacular by Welsh standards) backdrop. Whilst the programme was on the expensive side at £1.50, it did contain all of the important as well as some trivial information, and a minimum of advertising and so was probably just about worth the money in football programme terms.

Merthyr Town currently play in the (English) Western League Premier Division, having won the First Division last season by a clear 14 points in their inaugural season, and they have made a solid start to this season, gaining seven points from their opening three games, as well as progressing through two FA Cup rounds to reach the First Qualifying Round. Bristol based Brislington play in the same league as Merthyr, and have gained eight points from their five games played so far.

Merthyr Town and Brislington have already met at Penydarren Park in the league this season, less than a fortnight ago, with the home side triumphing 2-1.

The weather forecast for today was not good, and soon after kick-off, the heavens opened, with the rain barely stopping throughout the first half, which made for slippery conditions and a disjointed, error-strewn opening to the match. Merthyr always seemed to have the slight edge though, and they took the lead on 28 minutes when a corner was headed in by a diving Gary Shephard from close range. Neither side really looked like scoring for the remainder of the half, and so it was little surprise that it was Merthyr who went into the half time interval with a slender advantage.

The dreary rain happily gave way to sunshine for the second half, and a pattern clearly emerged of Merthyr Town playing the better, more creative football, whilst Brislington increasingly huffed and puffed as the game wore on, but rarely really looked like scoring, and some of their players seemed to be in danger of losing their discipline with rash tackles and petulant behaviour. Happily, though, stern talking's-to and/or yellow cards were sufficient in the eyes of the referee, who had a very good game it must be said. In the end, Merthyr held on to their 1-0 victory to progress to the next round, where they will travel to Slimbridge, of the Hellenic League.

07/20