

TT No.4: *Justin Holmes* - Saturday 23rd June 2011; **Northampton Town v Reading**; Pre-season Friendly; Venue: Sixfields Stadium, Northampton; Score: 0-3; Admn: £10.00; Prog: £3.00; Att: 1554; Match Rating: 3.

A bargain offer from the London Midland train company, currently offering half price tickets, plus the opportunity to watch football at a Football League stadium I had not previously visited at virtually half price, inspired me to make the trip to the south-east Midlands for an otherwise not outstandingly attractive friendly game with Reading, of the Championship, paying a visit to League 2 side Northampton Town.

Sixfields Stadium is located about a half hour walk westwards from Northampton train station, passing Franklin's Gardens, home of Northampton Saints Rugby Club along the way - whilst it is not a particularly pleasant walk, through industrial estates for the most part, it is flat almost all of the way. The all-seater ground consists of four separate stands, three small ones and a larger main stand. Being built in the mid-nineties, it is certainly one of the dullest stadia I can remember, lacking any character, although on the positive side, it is very neat and tidy and views are flawless from anywhere in the ground, with the stands close to the pitch and no obstructions of view. Another nice feature of the main (West) Stand is the first-floor conservatory style concourse behind the stand. The stadium is set at the bottom of a large hill behind one of the goals, and the low stand behind that goal as well as the unfilled corners make it possible to watch the action from there - and plenty of people do just that, even though one of the goal areas is out of view. Programmes are always hit-and-miss affairs for pre-season friendlies, but full credit to Northampton Town for producing an interesting and informative publication which would appear to be the same style and size as they produce in the regular season, although this edition covers all three of their home friendlies.

This game was between two clubs who finished at opposite ends of the Football League last season, with Reading narrowly missing out on promotion to the Premier League, losing in the Championship play-off final, and Northampton Town only narrowly escaping relegation from the Football League after a sustained shockingly poor run of form in the second half of the season, the first half of which saw one of their greatest results of all time, defeating Liverpool at Anfield in the League Cup, having previously knocked out Reading on penalties at the Madejski Stadium.

On an overcast and relatively cool day for July, this was a surprisingly entertaining game for a friendly, hardly played at full-tilt, but it was an open game with regular chances at either end. The hosts had the better of the first half, and credit to them for always looking to play passing football along the ground, although they rarely looked like scoring. The visitors looked much more threatening as half-time approached, and right on the stroke of half time, they opened the scoring when Hal Robson-Kanu perfectly dinked the ball into the box and Shane Long - surely Premiership bound before the end of this transfer window - just beat the keeper to

nod the ball home. A slightly harsh score-line on the home side, who had acquitted themselves well.

The second half was a completely different affair though, as Reading completely dominated proceedings. On 49 minutes they were awarded a penalty for a clumsy foul by captain John Johnson on Mikele Ligertwood, and Long sent the keeper the wrong way for his second of the game. Reading stretched their lead to three on the hour, when Robson-Kanu did well in holding off a couple of defenders before rifling low past the keeper. Immediately after this goal, Reading changed eight of their players in one go, although this didn't appear to break up their momentum as they continued to carve out some good chances. It was damage limitation for Northampton, although they should have scored with quarter of an hour remaining, when a Northampton forward took too long to get a shot in, and lost possession as he tried to find room for himself. In the end, it was a comfortable 0-3 away win, a score-line which flattered Reading, who were rewarded for their clinical approach, although Northampton could certainly take positives too from their first half showing.

07/20