

TT No.81: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 29th October 2011; **Gorleston** v Hadleigh United; Eastern Counties League Prem Division; Venue: Emerald Park, Gorleston; Score: 2-3; Admission: £5.00; Programme: £1.00; Att: 140; Match Rating: 4.

Very reasonably priced train tickets motivated me to venture into deepest East Anglia with a long daytrip to the east coast. In all honesty, there was nothing particularly attractive about the game itself, between two seemingly average teams at county league level, however I have always found that the Eastern Counties League compares very favourably in terms of quality on the pitch as well as the organisation and interest off it to what I am used to at the same level in the south-east corner of England.

Having spent some time in the pleasant town centre and on the seafront of Great Yarmouth, I then made my way south by bus along the coast to Gorleston-on-Sea, a four mile journey taking just under half an hour, with the Emerald Park ground, home of Gorleston, about a five minute walk from James Paget Hospital. For a club that has never played at a higher level than the Eastern Counties League, the ground is remarkably impressive, and would not look out of place at least in the Ryman League Premier Division, although it also has to be said that it is not particularly attractive and has little character. The ground is continuously enclosed with corrugated iron around three sides and has two or three rows of seating. Along the remaining length of the pitch is hard standing, mostly uncovered apart from a small tarpaulin covered area, together with tea bar and various other small buildings. The ground certainly has a neat, uniform look about it, all painted in the club colours of dark green. Indeed, it is not just the stadium that was impressive - there is a friendly feel around, it is clear that there are plenty of persons working pro-actively behind the scenes to give the club a professional feel, and much effort - in a non-imposing way - is made to guide people towards the bar, tea bar or club shop - itself an impressive element for a club at this level of football. The efforts to maximise matchday revenue should be commended. All in all, the club has the strange feel of a club two or three tiers higher in the pyramid, but has not apparently had the ambition on the pitch to get there. Programmes were available on entering the ground, and is one of those that promises much but delivers rather less. It certainly has an attractive cover and layout inside, and all of the essential stats and facts are covered, but it does lack something to make it an interesting read - adverts, it does not lack, though.

Today's match would be between two teams stuck firmly in mid-table. Considering that this is Gorleston's first season back in the top flight of the Eastern Counties League, having won the First Division last season, they have made a very solid start to the season, in seventh place in the 21 team league, and certainly came into this game bang in form, having won their last four matches in a row, and six of their last eight games, a run which included wins against the current top two teams in

the league, Dereham Town and Wroxham. Today's visitors, Hadleigh United, have not started so well, and found themselves in 14th place in the league.

On a bright, sunny late October afternoon, the game had an explosive start, with just over a minute played, Darren Cockrill almost gave Gorleston a dream-start to the game, with a 22-yard pile driver thumping back off the crossbar. This certainly seemed to hand the initiative to the home side though, as they had the better of the opening exchanges, and duly took the lead on 13 minutes, when a quick passing move towards goal culminated in Mitch Forbes slotting home. It only took the visitors seven minutes to get back on level terms though, when a free kick from wide close to the by-line was firmly headed home by Oliver Canfer. Hadleigh United soon followed that up with another goal just three minutes later to take the lead, when a fairly tame cross into the box should have been easily claimed by the keeper Elliot Pride, but he juggled it, allowing Stuart Joplin to head home. On 36 minutes, Gorleston were back on level terms, when Hadleigh failed to clear the lines and allowing Christy Finch to score with a low shot into the corner in a crowded goal area. The 2-2 score-line remained as the referee blew his whistle for half time and was a fair reflection of the game.

After an entertaining, topsy-turvy first half, the second half was something of a disappointment, with not much urgency and few goalscoring opportunities. Although Gorleston attacked with vigour in the first five or so minutes of the second half, as the half wore on, Hadleigh dominated more and more, and on 71 minutes, Hadleigh went back into the lead when a good quick move resulted in a fierce shot by full-back Chris McLaughlin which beat the keeper from a tight angle inside his near post into the top corner from about 12 yards. A deserved lead, which they comfortably held on to, as Gorleston faded badly and never looked likely to mount any further serious attacks.

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