

TT No.88: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 5th November 2011; **Guernsey** v Ash United; Combined Counties League Cup 2nd Rd; Venue: Footes Lane, St Peter Port; Score: 4-1; Admn: £4.00; Prog: £1.50; Att: 1065; Match Rating: 4.

Always one to be attracted by unusual games with something of a novelty factor, I headed off to the Channel Islands today to watch Guernsey play in their first season in the English pyramid system - indeed, the first ever team from the Channel Islands to. A visit would always be top of my hitlist once their application to join the Combined Counties League was confirmed earlier this year, and I decided to visit sooner rather than later given the risks involved in making such a journey in the winter months, together with the cynic inside me wondering how sustainable the whole "project" will be in the long term.

With suitably timed and reasonably priced flights with Flybe, together with an early 1pm kick off time, making a daytrip to the island for this game possible, I touched down at Guernsey Airport and embarked on the four mile walk across the island to St Peter Port to enjoy this very charming coastal town, before later walking twenty minutes inland to Footes Lane. Tickets can be bought online for Guernsey matches, although I chose to buy mine from the back of a minibus with doubled up as the ticket office just outside the ground. Buses are also available. Once inside, the ground, which is part of a large sports complex, is nothing to write home about sadly. It is modern, quite open to the elements, has no character and, worst of all, also has a running track around the outside meaning spectators are distant from the action, although they are allowed close behind both goals. There is one modern all-seater stand, with just hard standing around the rest of the ground. Programmes are available just outside the ground, although I had to really look hard for the seller, and such shyness was misplaced, as the programme was a superb effort, one which would not look out of place as high as the Conference National. It is 24 pages printed in all colour on glossy paper and has a really attractive design and plenty of interesting articles as well as stats to digest.

Perhaps unsurprisingly at the lowest level of senior football, Guernsey have made a very strong start to their inaugural campaign, accumulating 43 points from their 16 games so far, losing just once, when they were understrength due to commitments of many of their players with their island clubs. They have been invincible at home, winning all five of their games so far without conceding a goal - their "worst" result being a 3-0 win, and they are fourteen points clear of second placed Bedfont Sports, although they have had played four games more. They seem certainties for promotion to the Premier Division, and therefore today would be a good barometer of the quality they may face next season, with Premier Division Ash United the visitors today. However, they came to the island in a poor run of form, as they have lost their last four games and picked up just two points from

their last eight games following a reasonable start to the season. They found themselves in 18th place in the Premier Division.

On an overcast and chilly autumnal afternoon, it was Guernsey who got off to a dream start, when Ryan Zico Black fired home a wonderful free-kick into the top right-hand corner from 22 yards. It could have been two for Guernsey five minutes later, as Ross Allen had a shot cannon off the crossbar following a quick counter attack. It was all Guernsey during the first ten minutes, as it looked like the Ash United players allowed the occasion to get to them, but then suddenly on 12 minutes they had the opportunity to halve the deficit when they were awarded a very soft looking penalty - it looked like a dive to everyone apart from the referee. Perhaps justice was done when a woefully soft penalty was comfortably saved low to the keeper's left. This did, however seem to wake Ash up as they had the better chances to score as the first half progressed, and could probably count themselves slightly unfortunate not to be on level terms at the interval.

The game seemed very much in the balance at half time, but Guernsey gave themselves breathing space four minutes into the second half when Ross Allen slotted home after the ball ran free from a bit of a scramble in the box. Seven minutes later and it looked like game over with a real horror moment for the Ash goalkeeper, who let a fairly tame shot straight at him squirm through his hands and into the net for Kieran Mahon to score. Ash did give themselves hope just before the hour mark though, when a free kick from wide was glanced into the top corner by Lee O'Donnell. Surprisingly, the game became rather sterile after this, with Ash's sporadic attacks breaking down before a shot on goal could be unleashed whilst Guernsey seemed to be happy with what they had. Indeed, there was no further addition to the score-line until five minutes into added on time at the end of the match, when Guernsey added a fourth. It was another error by the keeper, when he allowed a cross shot to beat him when it looked like he had it covered. And so, in the end it was Guernsey who progress to the next round with a visit to Egham Town, with a flattering score-line. Whilst Guernsey certainly played much the better football, they gave the ball away far too often, and were possibly lucky to come against a team often resorting to rather agricultural tactics.

Guernsey certainly deserve a lot of credit for what they are trying to do, and their ambition, professionalism, support and organisation are a real breath of fresh air in the Combined Counties League, a league that is characterised (with exceptions) by very low crowds, poor grounds and general disinterest. I imagine that somewhere in the Isthmian/Southern League will be their natural level if they stick to their policy of selecting players from the island, but it will be interesting to see how sustainable the project is though once the novelty wears off for players and sponsors - the huge commitment from whom Guernsey FC is totally dependent upon, not to mention from the fans.

07/20