

TT No.203: Mike Latham - Wed 4 April 2007: South of Scotland League; **Crichton** 0-2 Threave Rovers. Attendance: 100 (h/c); Admission: free; No programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

The South of Scotland League, important geographically in the overall picture of football in the country as it is, is nevertheless something of a bizarre collection of clubs stretching over a large distance of south-west Scotland.

And it's relatively untapped by travellers, certainly from the experiences I've had in ringing up club secretaries to ascertain whether games are being played. Many seem to be amazed someone from south of the Border is taking an interest in their competition but after their initial scepticism are very helpful in providing information.

Standards of grounds vary from those that would not look out of place in the English pyramid system like Annan Athletic to those that are little more than roped-off park pitches- and outsiders find it amazing that senior football can be played in such Spartan conditions. Crichton's ground falls into the latter category but there are many compensations and a visit there is definitely a rewarding one.

Crichton, founded as Auldgarth FC in 1972 and later changing their name to Blackwood Dynamos before assuming their current name a few years ago, have been members of the league since 1992. They play in the splendid grounds of the Crichton Hospital, founded in 1839 on the south side of Dumfries. Taking the Glenchapel road out of town, the entrance to the grounds is on the left-hand side just after Castledykes public park on the right.

The hospital is a collection of red sandstone buildings with a magnificent church towering above the site in the distance. The grounds are simply magnificent with rolling lawns and mature trees and with magnificent views across to distant hills.

Keeping right on entering the grounds, the football ground is situated in a dip to the right-hand side. The pitch is roped-off along both touchlines and there is a distinctive, though rather sad-looking changing pavilion in the far corner. Many of the supporters gather along the steep, two-tiered nearside banking where excellent vantage points can be gained. Others gather on the far side behind the ropes while a few hardy souls stand directly behind the goals within touching distance of the game.

There are no programmes, no admission money is taken and no-one even comes around with a raffle. There are no facilities for even a pie or the staple of Scottish football, a cup of Bovril. So, it's rudimentary to say the least but the highly unusual setting and the wonderful scenery, especially on a glorious sunlit Spring evening, more than compensate.

The game kicks-off at the appointed time of 6-30pm and ends in virtual darkness, the gathering gloom making viewing difficult for the last ten minutes of a highly competitive encounter.

Threave, still chasing the title despite a huge fixture congestion, are one of the best supported sides in the league and at least three score of their fans have made the journey from Castle Douglas. They are rewarded with a hard-fought 2-0 victory, confirmed by a last-minute strike to add to a header late in the first half.

The absence of programmes and facilities will deter many travellers but for those less bothered by such things a visit here must come high on the list of collectors of unusual locations to watch a football match. It is highly recommended, though with reservations and good weather is preferred.

The ever-reliable Solway Press Services website, the only internet coverage of this league to my knowledge, already had a small report of the game later that evening- what a splendid service. Baty and Donnelly got the goals for the visitors.

06/20