

TT No.40: *Mike Latham* - Sat 7 Oct 2006: Tennents Scottish Qualifying Cup 2nd Rd Replay: **Dalbeattie Star** 1-2 Preston Athletic. Attendance: 250 (estimate); Admission: £5; Folded A4 team-sheet: free; FGIF Match rating: 3*.

Getting through to the last four of this competition guarantees entry into the first round of the Scottish Cup so the stakes were high in this replay, one of the handful of club games being played in Scotland due to the international against France kicking off at 5pm.

Dalbeattie is a small town with a population of around 4,000 people, situated about 13 miles south west of Dumfries amidst some breath-taking scenery and with distinctive granite stone buildings. The club was founded in 1905, folded in 1948 and re-formed in 1976. They play at Islecroft Stadium, a neat and enclosed ground in the middle of a public park.

Having seen several atmospheric photographs of the grand-stand in Stuart Clarke's superb books a visit to watch Dalbeattie had always been on my list of grounds to do and the 300-mile round-trip from Lancashire was relatively easy. The added bonus is the M&S food shop at Southwaite services just south of Carlisle which gives travellers a chance to stock up on decent sandwiches and fresh fruit while the coffee at Tebay services and the Morrisons supermarket in Dumfries are other good places to replenish.

Dalbeattie run teams in both the East of Scotland League and South of Scotland League - a fine effort for a small-town club. Having been relegated from the Premier Division of the former, more senior league, they are having a good season in the First Division with high hopes of retaining their place in the elite. Near-by rivals Annan Athletic, with their splendid facilities, also field teams in both leagues.

Though information on both leagues has traditionally been somewhat hard to find that situation has been rectified with two excellent websites. The East of Scotland League has a clear and concise website, regularly updated with fixtures and results, though as fixtures tend not to be arranged more than a month or so in advance it is best not to plan too far ahead. Solway Press Services also have a very good football section on their website with a preview of the forthcoming games in the South and East leagues and a good review of the previous week's action.

Entering the town along the A711 travellers were alerted to a sign directing 'football traffic' and the use of a large car-park by the side of the park. After a couple of minutes-walk through the park later and the main stand of the Islecroft Stadium loomed into view.

Admission was £5 and a folded A4 team-sheet with some basic information was handed out free. Though ordinary league games usually attract gates of around 40-60 spectators it was clear from the buzz around the place that this was an

important game and a headcount during the first half came to around the 250-mark.

Clarke describes the stand as perhaps the most vandalised in Scotland and a cursory inspection reveals a similar impression. A distinctive green-painted structure that straddles the halfway line, also housing a small social club and the dressing rooms, it is covered in graffiti, most of it obscene, a reminder that even seemingly quiet and idyllic places such as this have their social problems. The few rows of bench seating are filthy, covered in layers of bird droppings.

A few hardy spectators took refuge from the autumnal chill in the stand but most stood in front of the seated area behind a neat post and rail fence. A small stall dispensed hot drinks and chocolate and hot pies were available from the social club. The PA system was used only once as the announcer gave out the team line-ups at breakneck speed in barely intelligible form, another test that my shorthand skills failed miserably at.

The dug-outs are located on the opposite side of the ground where a shallow banking backs onto a bubbling small river and there is a substantial grass banking behind the goals to the right with an excellent view of the game. The pitch at both ends has an oval shape. Behind the perimeter wall at this end lies an extension to the park, a primary school and a church. There are no floodlights but the ground is pleasant and tree-lined and the playing area very flat, well maintained and well grassed and regarded as one of the best in the league.

Dalbeattie, pleased to have forced a 1-1 draw at Prestonpans a week earlier, took an early lead but gradually the visitors came more into the game. A glancing header just before the hour and a well-placed shot from just outside the area 15 minutes later confirmed Preston's semi-final place and with it that coveted place in the Scottish Cup draw. Incidentally, this will be the first season since 1992/93 that the Qualifying Cup South will be won by a team other than Whitehill Welfare or Spartans as Preston joined Edinburgh City, Annan and Edinburgh University in the last four.

The standard of football was decent and competitive, roughly equal to a level 6 game in England in my opinion. Despite threatening rain clouds the afternoon stayed mercifully dry and the 2.30pm kick-off (being brought forward half-an-hour, as Solway Press Services' website informed) allowed the spectators time to make their arrangements to watch the Scotland international.

This was an authentic football venue off the beaten track where the heartbeat of the game is strong and a visit to Dalbeattie Star comes highly recommended.

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