

TT No. 125: Mike Latham - Sunday 25 November 2007: **Alex Jack Cup Final.**
Lothian Thistle 3-0 Peebles. Venue: **Vale of Leithen FC**; Attendance: 170 (h/c);
Admission: £4; No programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

The Alex Jack Cup is contested for by teams in the East of Scotland League who are not full members of the Scottish FA and the final tie in the competition was staged at Vale of Leithen's Victoria Park ground on the last Sunday in November, the kick-off set at 1-30pm to allow for possible extra time and penalties.

Victoria Park, home to the Vale of Leithen FC since 1922, is set amidst glorious scenery in the beautiful small Borders town of Innerleithen, which is located roughly six miles east of Peebles and 12 miles west of Galashiels. Though the area is dominated sports-wise by rugby union, association football has flourished here since the club was formed in 1891.

Situated at the junction of the River Tweed and Leithen Water, Innerleithen has a population of around 2,500. There are two surviving woollen mills, producing high quality knitwear and cashmere products and the area's other main sources of income are forestry and tourism but with Edinburgh 30 miles away to the north the town is also increasingly home to commuters.

It's a bumper weekend for non-league Scottish football enthusiasts, gorging on seeing Berwick Rangers Reserves in action in the East League Division One on Friday evening and now with the opportunity of a rare Sunday afternoon game to add to their usual Saturday afternoon. A decent-sized crowd, with a head count of 170, lines the well-kept ground including some of the most well-known travellers on the circuit. Sadly, there are no programmes- unusual for this event- and a loss of income given the attendance.

The main feature of the ground is a covered terrace with concreted steps which provides more than enough cover for the gatherings at Vale of Leithen games. Behind here the dressing rooms are located and the players enter the field by a tunnel. The rest of the ground is open standing with the far side, a tree-lined grass bank backing onto one of the remaining woollen mills. Set in the town's park there is a feeling of space and tranquillity and the magnificent towering hills around, the north side dominated by the summit of Lee Pen (502m) add to the ambience.

Peebles, enjoying something of a renaissance this season and fighting for promotion into the Premier League, are given the tag of favourites and justify that with an impressive start in a well-contested and interesting game. But gradually Lothian, a well-established Premier League side, begin to look the more physically stronger side with more know-how. Once they open the scoring after 33 minutes and add another seven minutes later the issue is never really in doubt and a late third confirms their obvious superiority.

Victoria Park is an idyllic place to watch football, especially on a dry and mostly sunny afternoon like this though the gathering chill made the spectators glad there was no extra-time. With a delightful town centre to explore and lots of local tourist attractions nearby the area is well worth visiting and is not as isolated as might be imagined, just 65 miles or so mostly along the A7 from Carlisle (about an hour-and-a half's journey) or 30 miles from Moffat (J15 of the M74). Highly recommended.

06/20