

TT No.177: Andy Gallon - Sat 14th March 2009; **Annan Athletic v Cowdenbeath**; Irn-Bru Scottish League Division 3; Res: 3-1; Att: 629; Admission: £7; Programme: £1.50 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

This was a big day in the short Scottish Football League life of Annan Athletic. The Black & Golds beat the Third Division leaders, courtesy of two late goals to keep alive their promotion bid, and with all the teams above them losing, making the play-offs remains very much a possibility for the club in their debut season at senior level. Promotion would be a fitting reward for the players and backroom staff, all of whom are part-time, after a magnificent effort over the last 12 months. Annan had a mere three weeks to get their charming - if tiny - Galabank ground ready to stage League football having been, surprisingly to many observers, successful in their second application for membership of the elite. Floodlights were erected, turnstiles and toilets put in, access gates built, and hardstanding and terracing laid behind the goals. Against all odds, the work was done, and now the players are doing their bit as Annan look to secure a place in Division Two.

Annan certainly had to graft for three points in this game. With a strong wind blowing straight down the pitch, it wasn't pretty, but the home team fought for everything and deservedly edged a Cowdenbeath side who were slipping to a third defeat in four games. A 1-1 draw looked inevitable until two of Annan's substitutes won it thrillingly at the death. With three minutes to go, Annan man of the match Steve Sloan bent in a perfect free-kick towards the near post, and Jamie Dunbar, with his first touch since coming on, flicked the ball past Blue Brazil keeper David Hay, who got a hand on the ball, but couldn't keep it out. Then, two minutes into stoppage time, Mike Jack got away on the left, found a way past the last defender, and squared for Phil Storey to roll a low shot past Hay and into the bottom corner. Elation on and off the pitch, with only the 30 visiting fans who'd made the trip down from Fife leaving the ground without a smile on their faces. Sometimes, you simply have to believe in fairy-tales.

Annan had taken the lead in the 12th minute. After neat interplay down the right, Sloan got the ball with his back to goal. Turning quickly, he curled a picturesque low drive from 18 yards beyond the diving Hay's right hand and into the bottom corner of the net. It set the tone for an outstanding display from the midfielder, who, with the ball at his feet, seemed capable of keeping his head when all around him were losing theirs. Beefy John Gemmell, a target for the crowd's ire after a couple of clumsy early challenges, shot straight at home keeper Craig Summersgill from outside the box, and Black & Golds striker Graeme Bell brought a superb parry out of Hay with a stinging 18-yard effort. Cowden levelled in the 21st minute with a scrappy goal. Graeme Brown cushioned a Gemmell cross and Danny MacKay dinked a clever finish over the advancing Summersgill. Kay used his right boot to keep out a Bell snapshot from 12 yards before Cowden's Paul McQuade struck the top of the crossbar with a looping header off a Brown cross. Bell wasted a good

chance just before the break when, picked out by a Ryan Adamson pass, he sliced across goal.

Cowden almost took the lead five minutes after the restart when Summersgill juggled a fierce effort from McQuade, and Gemmell volleyed the rebound wide. The game then deteriorated badly. With the wind and a disintegrating pitch making controlled football difficult, neither side could put more than a couple of passes together. Chances were few and far between. Jack's strong burst on the left side of the box ended with an angled drive dealt with well by Hay. In the 83rd minute, Summersgill made a splendid save, diving low to his right to claw away a well-struck volley from Jay Stein, who was found by Mark Ramsay's deep corner. That, more tension and frustration aside, looked to be it - but then Annan came up with their stunning finale. Not a great game, for sure, but an absorbing encounter nonetheless.

Annan Athletic, founded as a youth team in 1942, have played at Galabank since 1953 after a previous stint at Mafeking Park. They took over as the town's senior club on the 1947 demise of Solway Star, and progressed to the Scottish Football League via Dumfriesshire local football, the Carlisle & District League, the South of Scotland League and - latterly - the East of Scotland League. Galabank is reached by taking Lady Street off the High Street. En route, you pass, on the left, the grandiosely titled Everholm Stadium. The pitch, within a six-lane Athletics-track and surrounded by grassy banking, is being used this season by the newly formed Gretna 2008 club, who are playing in the East of Scotland League and hope, one day, to return to their home town. From here, there are particularly fine views of the flood plain which covers the floor of the shallow valley through which runs the majestic River Annan, here mature and two miles from its Solway Firth estuary. Galabank, a good deal higher than Everholm Stadium, is 200 yards further up the road. There is a caravan/camp site on the left, adjacent to a short access track. This runs alongside a scout hut, which the Black & Golds use on matchdays for hospitality. Peek inside, and you'll see trestle tables laid out with plates of food, and ground security officers, curious as to why you're peeking. Players and officials proceed straight ahead through metal gates bearing the club crest to reach the dressing rooms on the left. Spectators bear left past the social club and then right through identical gates to find a large turnstile block with four entrances.

You come out at the west end of the ground. The breeze block building round to the left houses toilets and a refreshment hatch dishing up, among other treats with a local flavour, tattie and haggis pies, stacked in a high, but steadily diminishing, pile. A broad, flat strip of hardstanding comprises the spectator accommodation in this part of a neat, appealing enclosure. You will notice the unusual pitch immediately. This slopes in several directions from a central crown. Annan have been told by the Scottish Football League they must level and widen the playing surface, which is clearly very narrow. Adding three metres to the width is going to be difficult. The north side of the site is dominated by a splendid all-seater cantilever stand, which is an immovable object. The south touchline is very cramped, with room for just a couple of steps of uncovered terracing between the

centrally positioned dug-outs and the whitewashed boundary wall. Beyond is a sliver of grass, the road and some desirable detached homes with large gardens. Annan hope to gain access to - "pinch" was the word I heard used - the precious grass by the road because the pitch widening will eat into their narrow strip of terracing. There may be trouble ahead...

The main - and only - stand dominates Galabank, and is positioned between the two penalty areas. It contains five rows of gold plastic tip-up seats, with black versions used to pick out the words Annan Athletic. Clad in grey metal sheeting, it has clear Perspex screen ends and a row of benches for the media in the middle of the back row. The club's name is spelled out on the fascia in black letters on a gold background, and their attractive badge also features. It's a personal touch which really lifts an otherwise utilitarian stand. From these seats, the town centre is over to the right. The steeple of the Annan Old Parish Church marks the spot. Behind the stand, the land drops away steeply through woods to the River Annan, which has meandered round from the end of the High Street, at which point it is crossed by a stately arched bridge fashioned from the attractive local red sandstone. Nearby is a building which used to be Annan Academy, where Victorian essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle was both a pupil and a teacher.

There is flat tarmac either side of the stand. The narrow east end, given over to away fans, has a couple of steps of terracing, and is entered from another - smaller - turnstile block in the south-eastern corner. To the rear of this far end is an artificial pitch, fenced off and floodlit. Annan's pitch is enclosed by a metal post and rail fence, and judging by the number of advertising hoardings, the community is firmly behind the club. There are four floodlight masts, located close to the corners. Each mast is topped with eight lamps. Though Galabank is a cramped, confined site, everything here is lovingly tended and maintained. The sponsors of this match turned out to be the construction company responsible for much of the work.

Gretna (and its horribly over-commercialised neighbour Gretna Green) is just nine miles away via an arrow straight B-road which goes right past Raydale Park, until the end of last season the home (albeit in the loosest sense of the word) of a Scottish Premier League club. We paused to have a look on the way home. The ground, now in the hands of those handling the affairs of the Gretna club in the wake of its financial implosion, is intact, but locked, bolted and starting to look shabby. Gretna 2008 would like to play there, but I fear the site will be sold to a developer to pay off the debts of the defunct Borderers. The lesson seems to be don't take on too much, too soon. Build slowly from a solid base. It's what Annan Athletic appear to be doing. Good luck to this friendly little club.