

TT No.234: Mike Latham - Monday 18th May 2009; East of Scotland League First Division: **Gretna FC 2008** 3-3 Stirling University FC; Attendance: 263; Admission: £4; Programme: £2.

There is no finer feeling than re-visiting a ground that you thought had been lost forever and that certainly applied to Gretna's Raydale Park.

The old Gretna FC's meteoric rise through the divisions upon being elected to the Scottish League in 2002 has been well documented and needs no repetition here. Suffice to say that based upon the largesse of the late Brooks Miles Gretna reached the Scottish Cup Final, the SPL and played in Europe before their swift and rapid demise.

'Home' games during their one and only season in the SPL were played out before often desperately small crowds at Motherwell as Raydale did not meet the requirements of the league before Gretna folded last summer. It was a fairy-tale with a sad and tragic end.

From the ashes a supporters' trust was formed and a team entered in the East of Scotland League playing under the name of Gretna 2008 FC.

But with Raydale under lock and key, they played their matches at Everholm, an Athletics track in Annan just down the road from Galabank, the home of Annan Athletic who ironically replaced the old Gretna in the Scottish League.

Everholm was a basic venue to say the least and prone to flooding, so much so that it was February before the new club was able to stage a home league game.

New manager Stuart Rome hastily put together a side based primarily on former Workington FC reserve and youth team players and it was a tribute to his work that Gretna were within two matches of promotion this season.

I had called into have a look at Raydale several times over the season and despaired of ever seeing football there again. I'd first visited during Gretna's time in the Northern League and then the Northern Premier League and had always enjoyed my visits because of the warmth of the welcome from what was then an outpost club in English football.

A lot of that community feeling seemed to have been lost as Gretna rose through the ranks, the car park filled with flash cars and players shipped in from all points east, south, north and west.

To see the Raydale ground in such a derelict, forlorn condition was indeed depressing and it seemed only a matter of time before the site was developed.

But recently there was good news for the band of Gretna fans who have kept the football flag flying in the small border town, known throughout the world for its weddings. A mystery buyer purchased the stadium earlier this year and has struck

a deal with the newly formed club allowing them to play on the ground and even giving them the option to buy it in the future. The deal also allows the social club and on-site Sunday market to be used.

This was Gretna 2008 FC's third match at Raydale, which has been transformed in a few weeks from a derelict, weed-strewn wreck into something approaching what it was like during the old Gretna's Scottish League days.

The ground is little changed apart from the terrace behind the near-side goal having been demolished as the original intention of the old club was to re-site the playing pitch and bring the ground up to SPL standards.

The club rooms had hastily been refurbished, the small main stand was in operation and soon filled to capacity and a tea bar was up and running. There was a buzz and vibrancy about the place with happy, smiling people enjoying being back at Raydale.

The big seated stand behind the far goal, brought in during Gretna's promotion season in the first division was out of bounds but the 'bus shelter' style terracing along the far side was open.

A thrilling game was in prospect. The equation was simple- Gretna needed to win their last two games to secure promotion behind champions Tynecastle; Stirling University, also newcomers to the East of Scotland

League this season, needed to win their last three games to go up.

The inevitable happened- the 3-3 draw gave Civil Service Strollers the second promotion spot alongside Tynecastle.

Gretna made a terrific start going 2-0 up with goals by captain Nicholson (5) and the tricky Carmichael (20). But the students fought back to level through Forbes (26 and 73). In a grandstand finish with both sides going all out for the winner to keep their respective seasons alive the visitors scored through Nicol on the counter-attack in the fourth minute of added on time. Their joy was unconfined.

But Gretna equalised a minute later, a scrambled goal following a free-kick. There was still time for two more Gretna goal attempts, one shot agonisingly just off-target. Sadly, both these impressive sides will be staying in this division next year, but are sure to mount a promotion push again.

There is still much work to be done. The Raydale Community Partnership, the community group formed to help keep football in Gretna are now embarking on a major fund-raising drive to raise over £300,000, the estimated purchase price of the site.

It is to be hoped they succeed. Here was a heart-warming evening of grass roots football and a club and its supporters that refused to give in against seemingly insuperable odds.

It's fair to say that visiting some of the more basic venues in the East of Scotland League has been something of an eye-opener for Gretna fans who were visiting

Parkhead and Ibrox little more than a year ago. But gates for home games have been heartening and at a level the club was attracting in their first days of the Scottish League before Mileson got involved.

Nearly 300 spectators saw what was a great advertisement for the league. Despite the stakes being high there was not a single booking and two young, athletic sides played out a fascinating game that ebbed and flowed.

The playing pitch had been brought up to scratch in a matter of weeks, the floodlights are up and running again and everywhere was evidence of the hard work being done to make Raydale a place of which Gretna can again be proud. A visit here comes highly recommended.

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