

TT No. 158: Mike Latham - Sat 13 February 2010: Emirates Airlines Scottish Junior Cup Fourth Round: **Hill of Beath Hawthorn** 4-1 Arthurlie; Att: 350 (h/c); Admission: £5; Prog: n/a; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

Another Saturday, another Junior Cup-tie and another late change of plan. Though the weather is dry and relatively mild and the car thermometer reads a constant five degrees on the journey northwards the overnight frost has again wreaked havoc with the junior fixtures. One by one the games in the West Region are called off though the east of the country appears to have fared much better.

My original intention had been to attend the local derby between Cambuslang and Rutherglen but that tie was an early victim of the morning inspections. Instead a re-route to Fife was in order, the attractive-looking tie between Hill of Beath and Arthurlie having been given the green light.

Hill of Beath is a small former colliery village close to Cowdenbeath and Crossgates, with a population of just over one thousand inhabitants. The village lies in the constituency of the Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who has been MP of Dumfermline East since 1983. Brown once wrote a biography of Keir Hardie, a former mine-worker and trade union official who is recognised as the founder of the Labour Party and though no-one I speak to during the afternoon can confirm the fact, surely that's why Hill of Beath's immaculately maintained ground is named Keir's Park. The local team are known as Hawthorn, continuing a tradition of many Scottish teams being named after flowers- their nickname is the 'Haws.'

The ravages of winter have hit hard in Scottish football and the home side, consistently one of the top sides in the East Juniors, are playing only their second game since mid-November. They go into the tie on the back of an eight-match winning run but their games have been that few and far between it's like starting the season again. Their opponents, Arthurlie, from the top echelons of the West have been similarly frustrated by Mother Nature's icy grip- they are playing only their third game since the beginning of December. But they did win their last match 7-0.

Former mining communities can sometimes be depressing places to visit but Hill of Beath is anything but. The houses are well maintained, there is a smart-looking primary school on the main street and hordes of local football followers are wending their way to Keir's Park, many having called in the club's headquarters at the Ex-Service Memorial Club for a pre-match snifter. The sun is shining, there's no hint of frost and at long last spring appears to be in the air- no wonder people look happy, not least with a prospect of an intriguing cup-tie in this rare meeting of east and west. On their way to the ground most pass a statue that was erected in 2003 to the village's most famous footballing son Jim Baxter, reckoned by some to be Scotland's most outstanding football player. Born in Hill of Beath in 1939, former Rangers and Sunderland midfielder Baxter died in 2001 and Gordon Brown

spoke at his funeral service. A prominent current-day player, Celtic's Scott Brown was brought up in the village, born just across the road from the Baxter statue.

The Keir's Park ground is simply outstanding for this level, reminiscent in many ways of a well-kept non-league club from England. There is not a thing out of place, the turnstiles (that once saw service at Stirling Albion's old ground) tick along merrily and once inside there's the chance to admire a well-manicured hedge not dissimilar to that at Glebe Park, Brechin. There are two covered enclosures and neat two-stepped terracing around the pitch and a smart pavilion housing the dressing rooms behind one goal, together with an outstanding tea hut. The compact playing area is apparently prone to flooding though the club have worked hard to improve drainage and, unusually, there are floodlights here- used for training purposes and the occasional midweek match.

Towering above the ground is the Hill of Beath, an isolated volcanic rock with a distinctive peak at 786 feet above sea level. The views are mostly rural apart from the surrounding houses, re-built from the original miners' cottages that were constructed in the late 19th century when the Fife Coal Company was the major employer in the area.

Football has been played in the village for over one hundred years though the original junior club, Hearts of Beath, folded during world war two. The current club was formed as late as 1975 and only joined the junior ranks in 1982. Remarkably they won the Junior Cup in 1990, a feat commemorated by a smart stone display behind one enclosure. Manager Jock Finlayson has presided here for over 30 years and locals tell me his enthusiasm and influence remains as strong as ever.

A decent-sized crowd has assembled for the 2-15pm kick-off and the warm sunshine is welcomed by all. It's a lovely venue to watch football, no wonder Hill of Beath's crowds can sometimes exceed those at nearby league clubs.

The action is fast, committed and fiercely fought. Arthurlie, physically the stronger side, dominate the first half and go in at half-time one goal to the good, courtesy of a third-minute header from a corner. But the second half sees a dramatic transformation after the home side equalise just before the hour-mark. They go on to dominate the closing stages and win with something to spare, scoring three more goals including two from the penalty-mark. The visitors' frustrations intensify when one of their forwards is red-carded for an off-the-ball incident in the closing stages of a game that has long since slipped from their grasp.

As the sun dips in the distance and the temperature drops the locals wend their way homewards, some calling in at the club to celebrate a hard-earned victory. Many of the visitors depart the village quickly on a hired coach - they will have to wait another year to try to earn their third success in this prestigious competition. It's been a memorable afternoon and a deserved win for the 'Haws'. It goes without saying that a visit to Hill of Beath comes highly recommended.

