

TT No.173: Mike Latham - Sun 28 February 2010: Radnorshire Cup S-Final: **Knighton Town** 1-2 Presteigne St Andrews; Admission: £2; Attendance: 140 (h/c); FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

I have been to several intense local derbies over the years: Celtic v Rangers, Bolton Wanderers v Manchester United, Swansea City v Cardiff City, Bangor City v Rhyl, Bury v Rochdale, Horwich RMI v Chorley, Atherton LR v Atherton Collieries, so when the chance came up to visit another it was not to be ignored.

Knighton and Presteigne are just six miles apart in border country and this Radnorshire Cup semi-final, postponed from the previous Sunday due to a frozen pitch was eagerly awaited by the locals.

For once the journey was stress-free and the traffic relatively light as I wended my way down the A483 past Wrexham and Oswestry before turning off just south of Welshpool towards Church Stoke. The scenery was simply stunning as I went through picture postcard villages and towns, Clun particularly noteworthy and I even passed through a small hamlet called New Invention.

Knighton Town competed in level two of the Welsh pyramid for several seasons in the 1990s, earning fourth place in the Cymru Alliance in the 1997-98 campaign before withdrawing during the following campaign due to insufficient funds for players and travelling.

They are one of the oldest clubs in Wales, formed in 1881 and are affectionately (though not in Presteigne I was assured) known as the Radnor Robins. After competing in the Mid-Wales League, they earned promotion to the Cymru Alliance in 1993 after finishing as champions of the league for the first time in their history.

Their ground doubles up as the showground in the town and is known as Bryn-Y-Castell, situated on the Ludlow Road. A well-appointed cricket club adjoins the ground and the two playing areas are separated by a small driveway. The complex also hosts the town's hockey club. With stunning views along the wooded valley towards England there can be few better places to watch football.

An early morning check call to the ground had been worthwhile- the groundsman interrupting his pitch preparations to assure me all was well. Sure enough, he was there at the gate to welcome me as I arrived, and to prove he was a man of some versatility quickly opened up a tea bar in the classically built main stand and started dispensing hot drinks, some served in impressive Knighton Town mugs.

Just to be on the safe side I also called the Presteigne secretary Diane Hammersley upon reaching Wrexham and she was also happy to confirm the game was on, though expressed some concern as to which kit the team would be playing in after their exertions on Saturday. Presteigne strike me as a club very much on the up, as confirmed by their excellently administered website (<http://www.presteignestandrewsfc.co.uk/>) and these days compete at level

three of the Welsh pyramid in the Mid Wales League with ambitions to move up to the Cymru Alliance one day. Knighton, meanwhile have regrouped and are in Mid Wales South, or level four.

With half an hour to go before the 2pm kick-off it was a great sight to arrive at the ground and see the players from both sides warming-up. The weather has been so bad these last few months I have taken nothing for granted. A decent crowd had already assembled with officials from both sides smartly dressed in club tracksuits and lots of witty and good-natured banter being traded. The Presteigne officials were all really friendly and having met Diane (who recognised my Bolton accent immediately) I promised to make a visit to their club at the earliest opportunity.

The gateman, who had magnificent sideburns and a ruddy complexion told me that Knighton had suffered a 4-1 home defeat the previous day and he was not optimistic about the tie. At least it was on, though the pitch was heavy and undulating in parts. 'It was just a bit frozen on the far side last week and the ref didn't like it, but I'd have played,' he told me. 'But then I'm old school.' Knighton don't issue programmes these days but, like a magician producing a rabbit out of a hat, he triumphantly brandished a Knighton v Barry Town Welsh Cup programme from 1998 which was a superb souvenir of my visit. The groundsman, meanwhile, having satiated the immediate demand for hot drinks, then came around with superb metal club badges.

Though separated by just a few miles the rivalry between the two clubs' set of players and supporters seemed lacking in any nastiness (in fact quite the opposite) and a good-sized crowd built up by kick-off time on a dry, chilly but bright afternoon.

Sure enough, Presteigne justified their higher status and built a 2-0 half-time lead before effectively settling the tie with a third goal in the second half. But Knighton never gave up and not only pulled back a goal but came close on several occasions to taking the tie into extra-time.

The ground has seen several high-profile cup-ties in the past, Cardiff City once winning a Welsh Cup-tie here 16-0 in 1961 while the visit of Hereford United in the same competition in 1981 attracted a ground record gate of 2,211. An Under-18s international between Wales and Eire was held here in 1992.

With a distinctive main stand, a railed-off pitch, dug-outs, floodlights, a tea bar and small club house the ground ticks most of the boxes for an elevation up the Welsh pyramid in the future. For friendliness, enthusiasm and a warm welcome they rate very highly indeed.

Knighton is a small, relatively remote town with a population of around 4,000 straddling the English border with the Offa's Dyke Path (one I walked many years ago) passing straight through. It's a lovely place to while away a few hours and a visit here comes highly recommended.

