

TT No.184: Mike Latham - Sat 13 March 2010: Emirates Airlines Scottish Junior Cup Quarter-Final: **Bathgate Thistle** 1-1 Linlithgow Rose; Attendance: 1,700 (est.); Admission: £5; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

This enthralling competition has now reached the quarter-final stage though some remaining ties in the previous round are still being played on a beautifully sunny and fairly warm afternoon in Scotland.

The meeting of two close rivals, both members of the East Super League and both winners of the competition within the last three years attracts a large crowd to Creamery Park.

This part of West Lothian is real football territory. Bathgate lies about five miles west of Livingston and within easy reach are rival teams such as Whitburn, Fauldhouse, Armadale, Blackburn, Stoneyburn and today's opponents. The journey is an easy one from the M8 motorway but with time to kill I elected to spend some time exploring the area and, leaving the M74 at junction 13 passed the junior grounds of Forth Wanderers and Harthill Royal, both preparing for home games en route to the game. After such a stressful winter it makes a pleasant change not to have any fears about a postponement.

Football in Bathgate dates back to the 19th century as Ian Anderson outlined in his model club history published in 1993. The first reported match was in April 1879 and various teams existed in the town before a Bathgate FC was established in 1893. This club produced Barney Battles who later played for Hearts, Celtic, Liverpool and Dundee and represented Scotland.

The club played at Mill Park in the centre of town and after the first world war was invited to join the newly formed Scottish Second Division. Neighbours Armadale, Bo'ness and Broxburn were also League clubs in what were halcyon days for football in West Lothian. Anderson states that the prosperity of the football clubs was linked to the shale oil industry which thrived in the 1920s, but the ebb of that industry coupled with the miners' strike in 1926 sounded the death knell for many clubs.

Bathgate withdrew from the league in March 1929 and after playing in the East of Scotland League disbanded in 1932. Broxburn, Armadale and Bo'ness had all left the Scottish League by the end of that year. The Mill Park ground was built over.

The roots of the current club date back to 1936 when the constitution of a new club, Bathgate Thistle was drawn up. A new ground was developed on former marshland next to the Co-operative dairy on Hardhill Road to the west of the town, hence the name Creamery Park. The ground remains the home of Thistle today and to the huge credit of the committee and supporters it looks a picture in the sunshine.

Bathgate's ground is only a short distance to the railway station close to the centre of town. Bathgate has an industrial past based on traditional industries in brickworks, steelworks, collieries and quarries and more recently a truck and tractor plant that closed in the late 1980s. In the 1990s a mobile phone manufacturing plant operated here; the site now occupied by HM Revenue & Customs.

The ground is well-kept and atmospheric, bordering a cemetery behind one goal. Club official's man two gates and dispense programmes and raffle tickets as well as admission for the ridiculously cheap price of £5. The playing area looks a picture, flat, well-grassed and rolled- you could play cricket on it never mind football. The officials who drained the piece of land once known as Little Boghead and transformed it into a football ground would be proud to see the site today nearly 80 years later.

The main feature of the ground is at the entrance side- a distinctive covered terrace made out of what appears to be an old aircraft shelter. The rest of the ground is open grassed banking. There's a well-appointed clubhouse that houses the dressing rooms but this isn't open to the general public. They have to make do with a refreshment kiosk manned by two pleasant ladies that serve hot drinks, pies, burgers and square-shaped sausage rolls. Such is the demand the pies run long before kick-off.

It's clear from the build-up that here is a match of great importance. The teams conduct their pre-match routines earnestly and the spectators gather around the grassy slopes and talk earnestly about the prospects. The visitors' support is by far bigger than that of the home team, as many as five-to-one perhaps and despite the short distance between the neighbouring towns Rose team and officials arrive on a posh-looking coach that is parked outside the main entrance. Anderson refers many times to the apathy for the local football club among the local population compared to neighbouring towns and villages but the ones who follow the Thistle are as passionate and dedicated as any. And the attendance today- hard to estimate but I don't think 1,700 will be far out- is higher than many games in the Scottish League.

The game was tense, fiercely fought and tight with some flowing football, near misses, some excellent goalkeeping and played before a respectful and enthralled crowd. The standard of refereeing was again very high with the young official Don Robertson keeping a tight rein on tense moments yet allowing the game to flow. With just seven minutes remaining the home side broke the deadlock when their main striker Lister, who looked a classy player escaped the attentions of the visiting defenders to drill home a superb goal. With the game in the second minute of injury-time Rose grabbed an equaliser, a superbly taken volley by McLennan in a crowded penalty area; the scorer was then yellow carded for removing his jersey in the jubilant after-match celebrations.

Great stuff and another reminder of what entertainment an excellent competition provides throughout the winter months. The replay next week will be eagerly

awaited but with other games at Clydebank and Tayport it will take a week of agonising which match to attend. Not to mention Irvine Meadow who knocked-out my tip Rutherglen Glencairn and so ended my hopes of scooping rich rewards from a £10 investment at odds of 33/1. But then I wasn't going to mention that- no need to spoil a near perfect day.

06/20