

**TT No.38: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 19th September 2009; **Camelon Juniors** v Kelty Hearts; East Region Super League; Res: 1-1; Att: 170 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*\*.

Some years ago, I used to work with an Ayrshire lad who supported Auchinleck Talbot, a giant of Scotland's apparently vibrant non-league 'junior football' scene. He spoke enthusiastically about large crowds, committed teams, exciting games and characterful grounds amid what, for me, was an entirely unexplored and mysterious sporting landscape. Now, having watched my first junior match, I am eager to see more because this was football as it should be - as salty as a trawler-caught North Sea herring and as raw as a gale whipping through the exposed fishing villages of the Fife coast.

Camelon (according to a local, pronounced "Kremlin without the r") is effectively a suburb of Falkirk. It's not the sort of location Kirsty Allsopp and Phil Spencer would ever consider visiting in search of property, and the football ground, which looks alarmingly scruffy from the outside, is hidden deep within a rather intimidating council estate. My girlfriend had been somewhat unnerved by a peculiar pre-match incident near the village's high street. Eager for an alternative view on the previous weekend's game at East Stirlingshire, I'd ducked out briefly to buy a copy of the weekly 'Falkirk Herald'. As she waited alone in the car, a youngish lad had opened the passenger side door before walking on without explanation. First impressions not good, then. But, I'm happy to relate, they proved completely misleading.

What can I say? Warm, friendly people, fabulous little ground and a physical, end-to-end contest with drama right to the last kick. Carmuir Park, charmingly old fashioned and delightfully frayed round the edges, is the perfect antidote to the blandness of modern stadia. The solitary turnstile block, finished in the grim, dark grey pebbledash seen so frequently across Scotland, is adjacent to the equally gloomy social club on Fairlie Drive. It deposits the spectator close to the north-east corner. Now the fun begins! To the right is a rickety, corrugated metal cover over terracing. This is positioned between the two 18-yard lines, has 15 roof columns, is painted in the Mariners' vivid scarlet colours and has the club's crest (a galleon with sails unfurled) in the centre of its ample fascia. The near (east) end consists of uncovered elliptical terracing, with a strip of grass leading to a boundary wall which, on its outer side, depicts local settings in graffiti art. These include the stunning Falkirk Wheel, a masterpiece of ingenuity and design, just up the road. There is limited parking on waste land to the rear of the east end terrace.

The main stand, about 30 yards long, straddles the halfway line on the south side. A deep cover over steeply raked terracing, complete with slim, red crush barriers, was attached in the 1990s to a grey pavilion, which has a felt, pitched roof and houses the dressing rooms, toilets and a kitchen serving the usual refreshments.

The players emerge from a central door and descend steps to reach the pitch, which slopes slightly towards the Fairlie Drive side. Brick dugouts, neat in red and white, either side of the 'tunnel' are set back far enough to benefit from the shelter of the overhanging roof. A red flag listing Camelon's numerous triumphs ripples in the breeze at the east end of the stand. An adjacent portable building, displaying various mementoes, turns out to be the boardroom and hospitality area. There is uncovered terracing either side of the stand.

The far end is unterraced and uncovered, with a broad area of grass rising to a stand of pines and firs, which encloses the ground to the west and south. White concrete posts and red railings provide a colourful pitch surround. There aren't any floodlights. High-rise flats to the south-east overlook a venue hemmed in by houses on all but the south side, along which runs the Forth & Clyde Canal on its journey between Falkirk and Glasgow. The canal explains landlocked Camelon's 'Mariners' nickname. The village used to be an important port on the once-mighty watercourse. Camelon own the ground, having been given the land by a farmer called George Strang several years after their formation in 1920. Strang, it seems, was impressed by the fact that all but two of the squad at the time were former servicemen. The club's previous nomadic existence was at an end.

The match, played at a frantic pace, was compelling. Central Fife-based visitors Kelty, who hail from what used to be coal mining country, squandered several good chances before Camelon, second in this league in 2008-09, went ahead in the 37th minute with their first league goal of the season. Sean McKenna drilled over a low cross from the right corner, and Mark Stevenson clipped it past keeper Allan Fleming from eight yards. A crisp finish. Stevenson, 20 the Saturday before, had caught our attention already by listing "sex" as his 'other interest' in the match programme player profile. The Jambos were level a minute before the break. Neil McCabe picked up a throw from Fleming and was allowed to drift past four Mariners players before slipping a pass through to Craig Morrison, who raced clear to shoot low and hard past the advancing J C Hutchison.

There was no let-up in the second half. Camelon's Sean Kilgannon cleared a miscued Iain Mauchlen effort off his own goal-line and Fleming parried brilliantly to deny substitute Jamie Shirra's 15-yard drive. A draw looked inevitable - and fair - when, three minutes into stoppage time, Kelty were awarded a dubious penalty for what the referee deemed to be a trip on Thomas McGeorge by Stevie Graham. The wronged Jambos sub insisted on taking the spot-kick, but it was too close to Hutchison, who dived to his right to clinch Camelon's first point of the campaign. Kelty's players, so close to their maiden league victory, looked as distraught as a mugging victim as they left the field.

I gather obtaining programmes in junior football is a hit-and-miss occupation. Camelon's issue is basic but well produced and informative. Copies are available via the excellent club website at [www.cjfc.co.uk](http://www.cjfc.co.uk). A half-time chat with the programme editor, Derek, revealed he had been up at 6.30 that morning putting the thing together. He explained some of the costings involved, and we departed impressed with his dedication and that of others at a club battling with Scottish

League counter attractions at nearby Falkirk, Stenhousemuir and East Stirlingshire for the hearts and minds of potential spectators. It can't be easy, but Camelon clearly have a sizeable band of regulars who will support the club through thick and thin. Together, they'll keep that red flag flying high. A hopping 'must', I'd suggest.

06/20