

TT No.72: Mike Latham - Saturday 31 October 2009: Emirates Airlines Scottish Junior Cup Second Round: **Lesmahagow Juniors** 2-3 Rutherglen Glencairn; Attendance: 140 (h/c); Admission: £4; Raffle ticket: £1; No programme.

The Scottish Junior Cup rounds, particularly at the early stage, throw up many opportunities for groundhoppers to visit scenic grounds and witness exciting, incident packed, passionate games with a real edge.

There were many intriguing cup-ties to choose from on Halloween with the day again dawning mild, dry and bright after heavy rain on Friday in lowland Scotland. This match-up between two West of Scotland sides seemed a cup-tie with plenty riding on it, the visitors looking to justify their superior league status going into the game as favourites at a ground I had long vowed to visit.

Lesmahagow is an old mining village with a population of around eight thousand, close to Lanark and, on the edge of moorland, easily reached from J10 of the M74 motorway. 'Gow' as the locals call them, play at Craighead Park, Milton to the north and east of the village, just off the dual carriageway that was, until the extension of the M74 motorway, the main route into Glasgow from England.

The ground is reached via a sloping, narrow track off the main road where a friendly club official is waiting to take your admission money and sell you a raffle ticket. The setting is simply stunning, the narrow and undulating football pitch at the bottom of the embankment surrounded on three sides by sloping hillsides. It's a unique setting and one that sets the pulse racing, a real amphitheatre for football.

The ground is superbly maintained, the surrounds neatly mown and maintained, the pitch well grassed and marked the terraces free from any litter. Though the Gow struggle for support with their small catchment area they are clearly a proud club with a willing band of committee men and supporters to keep the football flag flying. Pride in the club and the area shine through and on a beautiful sunny afternoon the ground looks a picture.

The main feature of the ground is a covered terrace on the far side where Gow's most vociferous supporters gather. There is a smart white-painted club house behind the nearside goal incorporating a tea bar and several excellent vantage points around the other sides of the ground. Behind the far goal a grass bank slopes up to what appears to be a forest.

It's hard to do the ground justice with descriptions so soon I am snapping away with the camera, with no end of fabulous photo opportunities around the ground. To think I spent the best part of five years ticking off the Scottish League grounds, an increasing number of them sanitised and featureless locations while there were grounds like this waiting to be discovered. Ah well, it makes me appreciate grounds like this one all the more for the experience.

Drainage is a big problem here, no wonder with the water cascading down the slopes and a blocked-up burn at the far corner adding to the problems. After some heavy rainfall the game was apparently in doubt but the referee conducted a 9am inspection and pronounced he was happy with the conditions, a decision that was amply justified.

The club officials were friendly and welcoming and a couple showed me some photographs taken in the late 1940s when a crowd of over 10,000 packed into the ground for a cup-tie against Irvine Meadow. These days the support is a fraction of that but the spectators that do turn up are no less committed.

The game is everything I have come to enjoy about the Scottish Junior Cup- fast, free-flowing, full of passion and incident but with no nastiness carried over after the final whistle is blown. The visitors look the better side in the early stages but Gow fight back and show themselves capable of some eye-catching attacking moves.

After being locked 1-1 at half-time, the visitors looked to have sealed their progress with two early second half goals but as the light fades Gow pressed hard and were unlucky not to force a replay from a terrific game.

This was another simply outstanding day in the Junior Cup and it goes without saying that a visit to Lesmahagow comes with my strongest recommendation.

06/20