

TT No.108: Mike Latham - Sat 6 November 2010: South of Scotland League - Crichton 3-2 Wigtown & Bladnoch; Attendance: 80 (h/c); Admission: by donation; No programmes; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

A prominent refereeing friend of mine once said, half-jokingly, that he saw his role as to spoil everyone's fun on a Saturday afternoon. I thought of him as I arrived at Heston Rovers FC in Dumfries on a gloriously sunny afternoon with a nip in the air - a perfect day for football.

Heston have moved to a new ground in Dumfries this season after playing at Glencapel and a check 'phone call in the morning to a club official had confirmed the game was scheduled to go ahead despite lots of rain in midweek.

Unfortunately, though both teams were ready to play the appointed referee for the match saw things differently and after a pitch inspection decided to postpone the game, just in time for my arrival. The home club officials were very apologetic and with time running out before the 2pm start suggested I re-route to the Crichton game which was only a few minutes' drive away, kindly giving excellent directions.

I'd already visited this unusual ground back in April 2007 (*see TT67203*) and though not keen to spend precious Saturday afternoons on re-visits had no other option. At least there are far worse grounds to re-visit than this most scenic location.

The football pitch is located within the grounds of the former Crichton Hospital, set up by Elizabeth Crichton in 1839. These days the huge site has been transformed into various uses and is a fine facility for the people of Dumfries and surrounding areas. A Crichton Development Company was set up in 1995 to regenerate the site and find a use for the redundant hospital buildings, several of which are listed, and what a splendid job has been done.

The site is landscaped on several levels with mature trees and beautiful sandstone buildings of the original hospital and a striking memorial church. On the site some of the buildings form part of the Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary and there is a Crichton University campus which also includes Dumfries and Galloway College with a combined roll of 4,000 students. There is a business park, a well-appointed hotel and conference centre and a neighbouring golf course. The new buildings that have been constructed have been done so as to blend in sympathetically with the surroundings and there seems barely to be a thing out of place. Located just out of Dumfries on the road to Glencapel, there are stunning views towards distant hills, including the distinctive peak of Criffel, Dumfries' highest peak at 1,800 feet.

As football grounds go in this varied league this ranks as one of the most basic but there are plenty of good vantage points and the tranquil surroundings and well-maintained grounds make this a most interesting place to spend a couple of hours especially on such a lovely afternoon.

Originally known as Auldgirth FC after their formation in 1972 and later as Blackwood Dynamos, the present name of Crichton was adopted in 1999. Members of the league since 1992, Crichton were champions in 2007-08.

The football pitch is located on a lower level to most of the Crichton site and one benefit of this is that spectators can park on the access road that adjoins the pitch and watch from the comfort of their vehicles if they so desire. Several had taken advantage of this, many of them elderly supporters while others lined the touchlines at either side of the field. By kick-off time around 80 spectators had gathered as the two teams made their way out from the distinctive pavilion in the far corner. Importantly this building also houses an excellent tea hut with hot drinks and tasty pies dispensed at cheerful prices. Club officials were friendly and welcoming and one walked around the ground during the first-half, collecting donations in a bucket.

The playing area was flat and well-grassed and despite the week of heavy rain in good order. One penalty area was littered with hundreds of leaves that had dropped from surrounding trees, a reminder that the winter is fast approaching.

I do enjoy this league which may not always produce the most aesthetically pleasing football always seems to provide well contested and interesting games played in a good spirit. This was no different and the visitors were quickly into the stride, taking a second-minute lead and adding a second goal from the penalty mark. But gradually Crichton recovered from their sluggish start, pulling back a goal before half-time and equalising from the penalty mark in the second half. Their comeback was complete with four minutes remaining when a counter-attack produced an excellently-worked winning goal.

Some would sneer at spending an afternoon at a ground little more than a roped-off public park with few spectator facilities or comforts and no programme. But I thoroughly enjoyed my re-visit here and would recommend both this club and the league as one to explore. Many of the grounds are set in idyllic locations and this was another example.

Bob Geddes's Solway Press Services organisation does a splendid job of publicising the league and the great man was to be seen on the touch-line, taking photographs for his website.

I will look forward to visiting Heston Rovers FC again in the near future where I can be confident of another friendly welcome and if the referee deems the pitch playable, I am confident of another good game of football.

07/20