

TT No.202: Mike Latham - Sat 19th March 2011: Ayrshire Weekly Press Cup Rd 1: **Muirkirk Juniors** 1-4 Hurlford United; Attendance: 50 (h/c); Admission: £5; Raffle ticket: £1; No programme; FGIF match rating: 4*.

For groundhoppers making the drive north to tick off Scottish Junior grounds, Muirkirk is one of the most easily accessible and rewarding; my visit on a bright, dry afternoon was one of the best days out of the season so far, for many different reasons.

Muirkirk is something of a contradiction, a remote village with a population of less than 2,000 yet reasonably easy to visit by car, just 12 miles or so down the A70 from J12 of the M74. Muirkirk was at one time a hive of industry; it had ironworks, coal mines and railway links, and there remains plenty evidence of the area's industrial past with signposted walks in the surrounding countryside.

In 1957 one of the worst mining disasters in Scottish history occurred here; seventeen men died in an explosion at the Kames Colliery, Muirkirk. The blast, thought to have been caused by a naked flame igniting gases in the atmosphere, also injured 12 of the 169 men who were working on the pit. Kames had been considered a safe mine; it was deemed so safe that smoking underground was allowed.

Muirkirk Juniors FC were formed in 1937 and originally played their home matches at Ladeside Park high on the bleak hills above the village. The remnants of the old ground are clearly visible; the entrance gate, former grandstand and club house all existing in a state of decay while the playing pitch could soon be made playable once more, its touchlines still discernible, the stumps of the goalposts still intact.

In 1986 Muirkirk moved to their current ground at Burnside Park, ironically the same name as their old rivals Glenbuck Cherrypickers, of which more follows. The ground is situated off Furnace Road and is a well-appointed venue to the south side of the village, with considerable thought obviously given to its construction.

Mature trees border the ground to the west and south sides and there is a small cover behind the goalmouth at the west facing side. The ground is neatly railed with several steps of terracing by the entrance on the north-facing side of the ground. Here, a good tea-hut operates dispensing hot drinks and Scotch pies at reasonable prices. The players change in the club house just the other side of the small track leading up to the ground and enter the enclosure by a gate in the perimeter fence.

Muirkirk these days are one of the stalwarts of the Ayrshire District League though they had a notable Scottish Junior Cup success this season over Armadale. Their most famous former player is the former Rangers and Scotland defender and captain Eric Caldow who won 40 caps for his country and played for Rangers for 15

years after his debut in 1952. Ironically, he later managed today's opponents in the Ayrshire Cup, Hurlford United.

Hurlford, a step above Muirkirk in the West Region were expected to progress but had to work hard for their victory in an engrossing match. After an evenly fought first-half the visitors led by a single goal scored by their impressive no10, a sharp striker with a header seven minutes before the break. The same player increased the lead with a second goal but though pressed back for most of the half Muirkirk pulled back a goal with 12 minutes remaining. Hurlford, though, then reasserted control and finished the game with two further goals.

The match had started at 2pm, and was, by the way, expertly controlled by a young referee, William Wilson who gave his decisions clearly and had the advantage of being fitter and more mobile than any of the players. I expect him to go far, remember the name.

There was plenty of time before journeying home to call in at Glenbuck, once a thriving coal mining community and now virtually abandoned. Though the village never had a population of more than 1,200 it had an extraordinary record of producing top class footballers, the most famous of whom was Bill Shankly, who played for Preston North End and Scotland before going on to manage Liverpool. Glenbuck Cherrypickers, the village football team, produced a rich seam of professional footballers but the team folded in 1931 before Shankly was old enough to play for them, although several of his brothers did turn out for the club. The supreme 'world' champion of Quoits, Thomas Bone (born 1866), was also from Glenbuck.

The origins of the Cherrypickers name are thought to derive from either the men from Muirkirk and Glenbuck who served in the 11th Hussars (The "Cherry Pickers") in the Boer War; or, more likely, that almost all of the men associated with the club worked in the local pits. There one of their tasks was to sort the good coal from stones and other material as it passed on a conveyor belt. The lumps of good coal had to be picked out and the workers who performed that task were known as cherry-pickers.

Glenbuck is now a lost community but its name will forever be remembered in football circles. Glenbuck produced over 50 professional footballers, half a dozen of whom played for Scotland. The first player to turn professional from the village was Alex (Sandy) Tait; he won an FA Cup winners' medal with Spurs in 1901 alongside fellow villager Sandy Brown and in the aftermath the famous cup was put on display in a Glenbuck shop window. Bill Shankly was the youngest of five famous footballing brothers brought up in the remote Ayrshire village; his father had been a renowned runner and his uncle, Bob Blyth played for Rangers, Preston North End and Portsmouth.

When news reached the Kop that Glenbuck was to disappear - opencast mining is a heartless business - a group of supporters were determined to erect a lasting memorial to the club's most famous manager. The memorial, funded by Liverpool Away Supporters' Club, Scottish Coal and Network 5 was erected in 1997 on an

island of undisturbed ground in the centre of what was Burnside Park. A small road-sign off the A70 leads a few hundred yards to Glenbuck and the memorial - a 'must visit' site for any football fan.

It goes without saying that a visit to Muirkirk comes with my warmest recommendation.

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