

**TT No.233: *Mike Latham*** - Saturday 9 April 2011: South of Scotland League, **Newton Stewart** 2-5 Threave Rovers; Attendance: 120 (h/c); Admission: £2; No programme; FGIF Match Rating: 4\*.

Another glorious Saturday dawned and I decided to virtually re-trace my steps from the previous week and in so doing complete the grounds in the South of Scotland League. With Threave Rovers in a three-way battle for the title alongside St Cuthbert Wanderers and Dalbeattie Star their game at Newton Stewart had plenty riding on it and I was keen to visit Blairmount Park in good weather, as it has no cover.

First though, I passed by Creetown and Newton Stewart further along the A75 towards Stranraer before branching off for the small village of Kirkcowan. Tarff Rovers FC, who folded in 2003 were one of Scotland's oldest clubs, formed around 1874 and I was keen visit Balgreen Park.

Kirkcowan was reputed to be the smallest village in Scotland to have a senior football club; despite numbering only around 400 inhabitants Rovers often managed to attract gates of one thousand or over during their heyday. They played at several different grounds around the village, Ring Park, Barlennan Park, Barhoise Park and Dickson's Park before finally moving to Balgreen Park around 1923. In the 1960-61 season they lost 9-0 at Tynecastle against Hearts.

Tarff Rovers' finest achievement was beating Alloa Athletic 1-0 in the Scottish Cup in 1967 and they lifted the South of Scotland League championship on several occasions, the last in 2002. Their ground isn't the easiest to find, but I managed it after enquiring of a friendly local resident. Take a right hand turn at the bottom of the main street almost at the end of the village after passing the Craiglawn Arms on your left, follow the track and then take a right hand turn with the river to your left. Balgreen Park then comes into view on the right-hand side.

The ground still looks well maintained, the grass is cut and the stand swept. There are two dug-outs on the near-side. In a peaceful rural location, it's hard to imagine the days of great excitement such as when Partick Thistle came to the village to play a cup-tie. At the far end of the tiny stand, a sign bearing the legend 'Tarff Rovers' leans forlornly against the wall. These days the ground is still used for Sunday football by Kirkcowan Wanderers in the Stranraer & District Amateur Football League.

Then it was back to Newton Stewart where a decent crowd was gathering in the sunshine. Newton Stewart FC were formed in 1884 and play in a relatively remote location some distance from the main part of the town at Blairmount Park on Corsbie Road, a few hundred yards after passing Douglas Ewart High School.

After driving in through the park gate the two sides could be seen warming-up on a pitch which was a level above the one used for first-team games. Cars park on a

bank overlooking the pitch with a white changing pavilion behind the goals to the left-hand side. This building also houses a tea bar. The rest of the ground is open standing, the far two sides of the ground having trees as the backdrop.

The pitch is surrounded by white posts which help distinguish the touchlines and there are two dug-outs on the far side. Apparently there used to be a stand built into the banking but that is long gone; on such a lovely day as this the lack of cover did not matter but this must be a bleak spot to watch a game in mid-winter, that is if the pitch has survived water-logging or frost.

Newton Stewart is a burgh town in the County of Wigtonshire and lies on the River Cree. The club's nickname is the Creesiders. The town was founded in the mid-17th Century by William Stewart, youngest son of the Second Earl of Galloway. It has a population of around 3,500.

Threave Rovers had brought along a good following from Castle Douglas, maybe two-thirds of the crowd which I made to be around 120 after doing a headcount, a task made difficult by several spectators electing to watch from their vehicles. Most of the spectators lounged on the grass bank and watched a thoroughly fascinating game unfold. Midway through the first half a young supporter came around with a bucket collection for the 'gate' asking £2 per supporter. Programmes are issued for Scottish Cup-ties, I was told, but not for league games.

The visitors had things far from their own way in a fast and fluid first-half, played on a lovely green pitch with just the right amount of 'give' in its surface to encourage a quick-passing game.

The home side scored after only 36 seconds, Stewart Taylor converting a left-wing cross. Threave equalised through their impressive striker Andrew Donnelly; but two minutes later defender Jason Gallacher put the home side back in front with a header. At half-time the visitors were perhaps a little fortunate to be back on level terms after a home player sliced a left-wing corner into his own net after trying to defend his near post.

In the second half, though, Threave began to dominate and after James Baty converted a penalty just after the hour-mark the issue was never in doubt. Donnelly and Danny Dunlinson added further goals as they maintained their championship challenge. The referee was Craig Young who officiated in a calm yet authoritative manner despite only having two club officials on the line to signal 'ins and out.' His display confirmed my long-held belief that Scottish referees are streets ahead of many of their English counterparts.

Sure enough, as reliable as they come, Bob Geddes's invaluable Solway Press Services website had the latest tables worked out by the time I had got home.

I felt I had achieved something as I drove back along the A75 towards Dumfries, a clean-sweep of the South of Scotland League. I will definitely return as it's a league I have grown fond of over the past few years and seen some good games in stunning locations. It was just a pity I never saw Tarff Rovers play, but then you can't have everything and at least I had fulfilled another long-held ambition and

visited their ground. Oh, and I discovered that Creetown, my destination last Saturday for a game they won 1-0, had won 5-4 this Saturday. As I said, you can't win them all.

07/20