

TT No.77: *Mike Latham* - Sat 2nd October 2010; Emirates Scottish Junior Cup Rd 1: **Ashfield** 6-4 Carluke Rovers; Attendance: 100 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £1 FGIF Match Rating: 5*.

The Scottish Junior Cup has become one of my favourite competitions and the first-round draw was eagerly awaited. With so many to choose from I decided to let the train take the strain for once and visit one of Glasgow's most atmospheric and famous venues. I was not to be disappointed.

The train journey was fast and comfortable and in no time, I was embarking at Glasgow Central where I met up my native tour guide, a man far more versed in Scottish football history than me. A whistle-stop hour-long tour followed, with trips to the sites of the old and new Petershill FC grounds, the amazing Maryhill FC enclosure and Keppoch Park, home of Glasgow Perthshire JFC, just a stone's throw from the main event of the day.

The demographics and appearance of north Glasgow have changed remarkably in the last 30 years or so and this has impacted considerably on the junior football teams. Petershill was once situated in a densely populated part of the city with huge engineering works and railway locomotive sheds providing employment for thousands of skilled and unskilled workers who lived in the distinctive red bricked tenements. Those works have long disappeared, many of the areas have de-populated and much of the support base for one of Scotland's most famous junior clubs has dwindled.

Little remains of the old Petershill ground except for the boundary wall and a forlorn sign above what was the main entrance. The pitch has been covered by soil and rubble from the new development with the new ground, at right angles to the old one now boasting a 3G pitch and a state-of-the-art fitness centre with a small neat main stand built in. Several supporters were waiting to catch their bus to the game at Arthurlie and there was time to look around at the shiny new home, a very impressive venue and definitely one to keep in mind on a rainy or frosty day with postponements elsewhere or threatened.

I had long regretted not visiting Petershill's old ground and before departing the site observed the survival of the old steps that led up the terrace behind one of the goals, now becoming overgrown. At least I was not to make the same mistake and miss out on a trip to Saracen Park.

After a quick call in at Maryhill and the making of a mental note to visit this historic venue soon for a game, it was off to Keppoch Park where Glasgow Perthshire were playing Dunipace in a league game starting at 2pm. Many of the old landmarks from this old ground have disappeared recently with the demolition of the large and distinctive brick bus depot that ran alongside the ground. A handful of club officials were on hand to welcome us and we took the opportunity to watch the first half of a tightly contested game that was scoreless at half-time.

It finished 0-0. While it would be fair to say that the ground has seen better days it was good to observe the club, who entered the juniors in 1890 and won the Junior Cup three times was surviving and playing to a decent standard.

Ashfield JFC is situated further along Hawthorn Street in the Possilpark district of the city and within a few minutes of the half-time whistle at the 'Shire we were anticipating the 3pm kick-off and the start of the Junior Cup for season 2010-11. Ashfield were one of the most pre-eminent of junior clubs, lifting the Scottish Junior Cup on four occasions, the last time in the 1909-10 season. Over the years, they have produced a host of senior players many of whom have gone on to play for Scotland. Between the wars, for example Scotland played England on 20 occasions and on only three of those was a former Ashfield player not in their ranks. It is reckoned 52 former Ashfield players have represented Scotland at amateur, junior or full international level.

Two of the Wembley Wizards, Alex James (Arsenal) and Jimmy Gibson (Partick Thistle) began their careers with Ashfield, so too did Walter Smith who became one of Scottish football's most successful managers. Stevie Chalmers, who scored the goal that won the European Cup for Celtic in 1967 was another Ashfield product.

Closely tied in with the Saracen Foundry the club received a potential death-knell in the early 1930s when they were informed that their original Saracen Park ground was required for housing. They played their last game at the old ground in 1934 (which was situated opposite Keppoch Park) and ground-shared with the 'Shire for three years until New Saracen Park was constructed and ready for action.

What a magnificent old ground it is, one that simply takes the breath away. They don't build them like this anymore, that's for sure. The approach down a narrow alley off the main road gives no clue to the size and magnificence of the ground once a narrow turnstile block is negotiated.

Previously a greyhound stadium and now shared by the Glasgow Tigers speedway side (peculiarly, the hoardings advertising the speedway refer to Ashfield not Saracen Park) the playing area is surrounded by a huge track but the vantage points are that good this scarcely takes away the enjoyment of being a spectator. The feature of the ground is a magnificent main stand with terrace in front, painted in black and white and with immaculate wooden bench seating. This gives a superb view of play and is the perfect cure for one tired of seeing the plethora of new, sanitised, one size fits all stands that are constructed up and down the country. They may tick all the boxes for health and safety and grants but they do little to quicken the pulse of the avid groundhopper or football historian. The Ashfield stand should be a listed building, such is its historical value and importance.

To the left of the main stand is a cavernous covered terrace very similar to that at the old Shawfield ground of Clyde FC. My friend explained that the same building company had built Shawfield, which was also constructed with dual use as a

greyhound stadium, and one that though the football club has long departed still hosts regular greyhound meetings.

On the far side of the ground is a fine open terrace which again gives an excellent vantage point. Though an old ground, the venue had been lovingly maintained. The grass is neatly mown, a fresh lick of paint everywhere and clear signs that the supporters were proud of their club with its rich heritage. The playing pitch looked immaculate but was very narrow, due to the speedway track no doubt. The distance from the edge of the penalty area to the corner flag looked no more than a few yards, and the width was the minimum 50 yards a spectator informed me.

Smartly dressed club officials were at the entrance and a neat, colourful programme was on sale for £1 as well as a history of the club now discounted to a bargain £5 which contained some superbly evocative photographs and plenty of interesting reading. There is no doubt that this is a club that has made a huge contribution to the football history of Scotland, both at junior and senior level but also on the international stage.

Ashfield, smartly attired in black and white hoops were expected to progress against a Carluke side two divisions below them in the West Juniors echelon. All went according to the form book early on as Ashfield capitalised on some decidedly dodgy defending to take a 3-0 lead inside the first 20 minutes. Though the visitors pulled back a goal Ashfield scored again just before and just after half-time and looked as though they could go on and win by a double figure margin.

But Carluke regrouped and began to impose themselves on the game, growing in confidence after pulling back a goal from the penalty spot. Then twice in quick succession they scored again and at 5-4 a thrilling tie was in the melting pot. Carluke had several chances to equalise, thwarted by some last ditch defending and rushed finishing before Ashfield sealed the tie with a sixth goal on the counter-attack.

Despite the 3pm kick-off the game finished promptly at just before ten to five and within an hour of the final whistle I was heading back south on the train. It has been quite a contrast in scenery from my trip to the Borders the previous week but nonetheless equally as enjoyable, not least because we had the same referee, an excellent young official Euan Anderson who controlled both games with an expert touch. Remember the name.

Fast, free-glowing football with the accent on attack made this another memorable tie and the added bonus was visiting at long last one of Glasgow's most important sports stadia. Ged O'Brien's brilliantly researched book *Played in Glasgow* gives more information on New Saracen Park and its predecessor as well as explaining the history of Petershill, Maryhill and Glasgow Perthshire. Having now visited all the venues I made a mental note to re-read the chapter on all the grounds as soon as I got home. When you have visited the site of old grounds it makes it easier to understand their place in history and thanks to my friend The Native Guide, I had a splendid afternoon. Maybe I should re-Christen him The History Man.

