

TT No.98: *Mike Latham* - Sat 23 October 2010: Stagecoach Ayrshire District League; **Dalry Thistle** v Irvine Victoria; Result: 5-0; Attendance: 92 (h/c); Admission: £4; Raffle ticket: £1; Programme: £1.

Along with many more groundhoppers I'm sure, I wish I'd discovered the Scottish Juniors a long time before I did. Obsessed with completing the full set of Scottish League clubs to make up the 42, I dread to think of the opportunities I missed on journeys north to visit some of the junior grounds instead.

The term 'junior' does this level of football a disservice in my opinion. Nip in the Crown in Horwich for a pint of Holt's Mild after a trip to Scotland, mention you've been to a junior game in Scotland and the obvious question you get asked is: Why are you watching kids' football? Though junior refers to the fact that the teams are junior members of the Scottish FA rather than the age of the participants, it's hard work explaining that this level of football often attracts spectator numbers and a standard of play that many so-called senior sides can only dream about, though admittedly not on this occasion.

While many clubs in the South of Scotland and East of Scotland Leagues earn automatic entry into the Scottish FA Cup by virtue of historical factors, many junior clubs dwarf them in terms of attendances and playing standards. It was hardly surprising for those that watch this level of football regularly to hear that Bo'Ness defeated Queen's Park and Sunnybank won at Albion Rovers and progressed to the third round of the Scottish Cup on the same day as my trip to Dalry.

On a lovely, sunny afternoon, a huge contrast to the wet and depressing day that most parts of Scotland had suffered on the Friday, I decided to head to a game out of the spotlight. The beauty of watching football at this level is that it gives you the opportunity to visit villages and towns that you would never go to otherwise. The Ayrshire League, by its title covers teams in a tight geographical area in what is a real hotbed of football.

Dalry is a small town with around 6,000 inhabitants situated just off the main 'A' road that links Paisley with the coastal towns of Irvine and Largs. Formerly a centre of textiles and mining, Dalry is situated in the Garnock Valley close to towns like Beith, Kilwinning and Kibirnie, all of which have their own junior team.

Dalry Thistle joined the juniors in 1920 and their Merkworth Park ground is situated just outside the town in a largely residential area. Their 'park' as the local's term it, is prone to flooding and for a time Dalry had to ground-share at Troon until the problems were sorted out.

With an immaculately maintained hedge alongside the main road that backs on to the ground and a smartly painted covered terrace along the far side, bearing the legend 'Dalry Thistle Football Club' this is a ground with several distinctive

characteristics. There's also a fine tea bar, run by a friendly lady with an ever-changing menu. I went for the chicken broth, a bargain at 60pence per cup and, I was assured, 'home-made not out of a packet.'

It was delicious and, returning for a cup of tea later I mentioned the fact. 'Tell your friends,' the lady replied. So, I did: when I got back to the Crown in Horwich I told several people that Dalry Thistle serve a mean chicken broth and also fine-looking pies, (20p extra if served as a 'Pie Floater' which I learned was pie with gravy). They were unimpressed- it seems an awfully long way to go from Horwich to Dalry for a Pie Floater, however good.

It might be a long way but the game, ground and chicken broth was well worth the journey and the home side, 1-0 up at half-time, romped to a convincing win to atone what the manager in his programme column described as a 'very, very poor' display against Blantyre Vics the previous week. For me, it was another very worthwhile journey north of the Border.

07/20