

TT No.184: Mike Latham - Saturday 10 March 2012: West Juniors Super League Division One: **Thorniewood United** v Glenafton Athletic; Result: 1-1; Attendance: 190 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £1; 'Goal-den Goal' ticket: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*; Post code: G71 6HQ.

With Saturday dawning fair and bright it made sense to head north- several games looked enticing but none more so than this vital promotion match in the ultra-competitive Division One of the West Juniors. The draw left no fewer than eight teams still in contention for the two automatic promotion places and one play-off spot. That's what you call competition.

Thorniewood United play at Robertson Park in Viewpark, just north of Uddingston, close to J4 of the M74 motorway. The club was founded in 1924 and moved to their present ground in 1957 from Thorn Park in nearby Tannochside. They won four Lanarkshire League titles between 1951 and 1964, so Ian Anderson's invaluable guide 'Caledonia Dreaming: A Guide to Scottish Non-league football' informs, but then entered a period of decline. They were also briefly known as Tannochside Recreation. Viewpark saw a rapid boom in housing in the post-war period to house workers in the near-by mines and employees of the giant Caterpillar Tractor Company.

Thorniewood are often described as being 'Uddingston-based' but this is a little misleading. Viewpark, Tannochside and Uddingston form an amorphous conglomeration between the M74 and the M8 and it's hard to discern where one district ends and another begin. Uddingston is also home to the Tunnock's factory, famed for its caramel wafers and teacakes and has a high-class cricket ground known as Bothwell Castle where the West Indies once played Scotland. I called in here on my way home after Gretna's appearance in the Scottish FA Cup Final a few years ago and spent an enjoyable couple of hours. Scotland are due to play Glamorgan and Hampshire here during May 2012 in the Pro40 - further date(s) for my diary.

Thorniewood United's ground, known as Robertson Park, is not the easiest to find on Old Edinburgh Road; it's tucked in behind a huge red-bricked care home but there is a large sign that advertises the club's large social club.

I'm told that the ground has benefitted from plenty 'TLC' in recent years with several previously overgrown areas spruced up and lots of remedial work having been undertaken. On entering the ground from the main road, the immediate impression is one of an atmospheric and well-maintained venue. The main features are a large covered enclosure on the far side, some concrete terracing behind the nearside goal backing on to the care home and a pyramid-shaped pavilion also housing a tea hut and the dressing rooms on the half-way line.

Thorniewood produced an excellent, colour-printed programme, the tea hut was top-class and the locals were friendly- it was a great afternoon spent watching an enthralling game of competitive football.

Glenafton brought with them a good following of supporters who located themselves under the shelter on the far side. They were passionate, partisan and vocal but also good humoured. By half-time they were also frustrated- their side had the better of a fiercely competitive game but wasted several good opportunities.

The second half saw Glenafton continue to dominate and they eventually took the lead with a superb goal on three-quarter time (that reminds me- I never did check my 'Goalden Goal' ticket bought at the entrance). It was a goal out of nothing, as the famous BBC Wales commentator Ron Jones was wont to say. The silver-haired no9, Armstrong, let fly from fully 30 yards- his angled shot flew like an arrow and finally defeated the excellent home custodian, who I recall playing for Rutherglen on a past visit to these parts. The joy of the visiting players and supporters was unrestrained.

Connolly in the home goal then kept his side in the game with a string of excellent saves- he has a real presence in the six-yard area and fine agility and bravery. A real character he also, I am told, gives his views of games on the excellent Pie and Bovril forum- essential internet fare for supporters of the Junior game in Scotland.

But the home side also played some excellent football at times and they never looked out of the contest. However, their chances diminished when they were reduced to ten men when one of their players picked up a second yellow card. The referee, aided by two experienced linesmen had a fine match; he had a real feel for the game and he dealt with great wisdom and pragmatism when confronted by several potentially explosive incidents. Scottish referees, in my experience are streets ahead of their English counterparts, Mark Halsey excepted. In the dying embers of the game the ref booked a home defender after a bad foul, then wrestled away a Glenafton player who looked keen on retribution before booking him as well, superb refereeing that was appreciated by the supporters on the terraces.

With just three minutes remaining Thorniewood fashioned an equaliser; a corner from the left forced over the line by one of the home subs at the far post. In the third minute of added-on time Glenafton's goalkeeper made a stunning flying save to deny the home side a winner. Play had been hard and competitive, every exchange fiercely fought but the moment the final whistle sounded all hostilities ceased.

As usual in my experience of the Juniors, the game ended with warm handshakes and embraces between the players and officials as they left the field and supporters of both sides decamped to the social club to compare notes. It was a shame I couldn't join them; I had to contemplate a long journey south but another one undertaken with the joy of having seen football at its best. It goes without

saying that a visit to Thorniewood United comes with my warmest recommendation.

07/20