

TT No.196: Mike Latham - Sat 24 March 2012: Stagecoach West of Scotland League Super League Premier Division: **Cumnock Juniors** 2-3 Petershill; Att: 350 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £1; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 5*.

It was a glorious day in Scotland with temperatures touching 18 degrees and for once there were no worries about postponements. I decided to head for Cumnock, one of the easiest of the West Juniors grounds to visit by car for those heading from the south. Located about 20 miles from J12 of the M74 after passing through Douglas, Muirkirk and Lugar, Cumnock's Townhead Park ground is close to the town centre and has ample parking and a good social club.

Cumnock is a sizeable town in East Ayrshire, with a population of around 13,000. The town's industrial past was based around the local coal-mines and the ironworks in neighbouring Lugar and Cumnock also served as the market town for the other, smaller towns in the immediate area. There is a strong socialist heritage in Cumnock and the father of the Labour Party, James Keir Hardie, once lived here.

Cumnock Juniors are traditionally one of the biggest of the Junior clubs and their meeting with league leaders Petershill was eagerly anticipated. Petershill went into the game with 38 points from 19 games, with just three games to play. Irvine Meadow XI were their only realistic challengers for the title but had seven games in hand with 14 points to catch-up. Petershill's artificial surface enables them to play home games in the depth of winter when clubs elsewhere suffer postponements. The downside is that they often have a fragmented end to the campaign and finish the bulk of their games before rival clubs.

Cumnock still needed points to ward off the threat of relegation though they had shown improved form lately. Their local rivalry with neighbouring Auchinleck Talbot is the stuff of legend, but with Petershill bringing along a good number of supporters there was no shortage of atmosphere as a crowd of around 350 basked in the sunshine.

Archives show that football has been played in Cumnock since 1875; the original team played at New Station Field which has now become a cemetery. The present Cumnock Juniors were formed in 1912 and have played at Townhead Park since 1934.

Entry to the ground is via an imposing entrance with friendly club officials dispensing the obligatory raffle tickets and a high-class, well-printed programme. There is a large paved area with bench seating behind the near-side goal and the pavilion houses the dressing rooms, pie-hut and committee rooms. The players enter the arena in rather dramatic fashion down a series of steps which adds to the sense of occasion. A large covered terrace dominates the ground with another covered area behind the far goal. The far, uncovered side backs onto an old people's home and a supermarket car park and has several terraced steps.

Immaculately painted in the club's colours of black and white, the ground is lovingly maintained. The playing area looked immaculate in the sunshine and there was not a spot of litter to be seen on the terraces which were swept and maintained to a high order. Clearly there is a lot of local pride in the club with the good impression furthered by the excellent programme.

At half-past one the ground was virtually deserted save for the players doing their warm-up routines and committee-men busying about. But by the 2pm kick-off a sizeable crowd had gathered, all keenly partisan and anticipating a terrific game.

For large parts of the game, I thought Cumnock were the better side. For a team that plays half its games on an artificial surface I expected Petershill to be a better passing side with good technique but too often they relied upon the long ball which fell into the trap of the sturdy Cumnock defenders. The game was played at a high tempo with chances few and far between. Against the run of play Petershill opened the scoring, a deflected shot beating the 'keeper at his near post, but Cumnock went in level at the break with a firm header from a right-wing free-kick. It was no less than they deserved when the home side took the lead within six minutes of the resumption.

Petershill threw on a couple of substitutes and that helped change the game; their no14 looked very skilful playing wide out on the right but was fortunate to escape with only a yellow card for a clumsy late tackle. Gradually Petershill clawed their way back into the game, and after stunning the home fans with an equaliser, momentarily silenced them with what proved to be the winner.

Always a keenly-fought contest with an edge the game boiled over in the closing stages; a home defender sent-off for an apparent head-butt then a player from each side dismissed, including our friend no14 after a massed brawl. Petershill hung on for a valuable three points which they and their supporters celebrated with great relief. For large portions of the game Cumnock looked the better side but they left with nothing.

As usual on these occasions the final whistle acted as a signal of the end of hostilities and supporters from both sides drifted away to either drown their sorrows or celebrate an important win. The Petershill followers were quickly on their bus to head back to Glasgow while the Cumnock supporters' club was doing brisk business with supporters eager to slake their thirsts after what passes for tropical weather in these parts.

This was one of my best visits to a Juniors game in Scotland; some passionate supporters, great atmosphere and a game that crackled, ebbed and flowed with a twist in the tale. Simply outstanding value for a fiver, I'd recommend a trip to Townhead Park unreservedly.

07/20