

TT No.99: Mike Latham - Sat 19 November 2011: Emirates Scottish Junior Cup Second Round: **Saltcoats Victoria 8-0 Darvel Juniors** (at **DJFC**); Admission: £4; Programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

This time last year, most of Scotland was under frost and snow and the Junior Cup was decimated by postponements; what a pleasure therefore to drive northwards under sunny, bright skies anticipating yet another tie in the second round- my fourth in as many weeks.

Saltcoats had tried manfully to stage this tie three weeks running; but despite relatively dry weather in Ayrshire their temporary home ground at Ardeer was waterlogged. So off to Darvel it was; effectively Saltcoats' home game, their officials manning the gate, even supplying the pies for the tea bar but the game staged at Darvel's Recreation Ground.

Firstly, there were important issues to address. The Café Ariete in Moffat (one mile from J15, M74) is the world's finest café, apart from its obsession with serving breakfast the Scots Way 'not in the afternoon, please.' Arrive two minutes after noon, even after travelling 120 miles and you'll be disappointed- the drawbridge has been taken up. A sausage baguette, or BLT with a cappuccino, no problem, but a breakfast? No chance!

One of the advantages of the Junior Cup is the ever-earlier kick-off times; this one started at 2pm and next week's third round starts at 1-45pm. So, arrival in Moffat before noon becomes ever easier- I made this one with two minutes to spare and the usual fantastic breakfast fortified me for the rest of the day.

So, to Darvel: an unremarkable, straggling small village on the A71 road from J8 of the M74 towards Kilmarnock. It's known as the 'Lang Toon' and is at the eastern end of the Irvine Valley. The River Irvine once powered local mills, there once was a railway connection via Stonehouse and Strathaven towards Kilmarnock and the local landmark, Loudoun Hill, was once the scene of epic battles with the English involving Robert the Bruce in the early 1300s.

Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin was born near Darvel in 1881 and there is a memorial to honour the men and officers of the First Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment who, under the command of Lt Col RB Mayne, were stationed in Darvel during the latter stages of the Second World War.

Darvel Juniors, formed in 1889, play at Recreation Park, located on Irvinebank Road, just off the main road at the eastern end of the village. Their finest hour was reaching the final of the Junior Cup in 1976, losing 3-0 to Bo'ness United at Hampden Park. They also reached the semi-finals in both 1984 and 1985. Ironically, they'll play Bo'ness if they negotiate this second round tie against Saltcoats, but the prospects are not good. The Darvel manager and most of the players left in pre-season and the club has been rebuilding ever since; they're

bottom of the Ayrshire District League and when Saltcoats visited earlier in the season the visitors won 11-2.

The weather is fine but gloomy- this part of Ayrshire is covered under a huge black cloud; while no rain is threatened, it's hardly ideal for photographs. But at least the tie will go ahead, at the fourth time of asking.

Recreation Park is laid out in a classic oval shape, with the ubiquitous heavy roller stationed by the entrance. The main feature of the ground is a small, covered standing enclosure that also houses the dressing rooms. Its protruding roof is painted blue and bears the legend 'Darvel Juniors Formed 1889'. In the valley bottom, with trees still in leaf and glorious sweeping views, the ground has much to commend it, the view into the village towards the distinctive church steeple being particularly noteworthy. A graveyard lies behind the eastern end, beyond which are sweeping views towards the distinctive summit of Loudoun Hill.

Darvel tried hard and created many goal-scoring opportunities, hitting the woodwork three times in all. But they suffered the misfortune of conceding a second-minute penalty and then having their right-back sent off for a rash challenge. By half-time Saltcoats were 4-0 up, by the end it was eight. Around 70 spectators watched a good- humoured and well-contested game and it was Saltcoats who progressed through to the third round.

Incidentally, Saltcoats hope to return to their own ground, I was informed, before the end of the year. That's another to add to the list.

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