

**TT No.33: *Mike Latham*** - Saturday 29 September 2012 **Kilbirnie Ladeside 3-3**  
Ardrossan Winton Rovers; West Juniors Stagecoach West Premier League;  
Admission: £5; Raffle ticket: £1; No programme; Att: 240 (h/c).

The cricket season finally consigned to the pages of Wisden for another year I ventured north in search of my first Saturday football of the season; where better than North Ayrshire, long a real hotbed of the game and to a club I had long intended to visit.

Kilbirnie Ladeside play in the second tier of the highly competitive West Juniors and their local derby against Ardrossan Winton Rovers looked as good a place as any to get my campaign under way; and for once, I chose the right game.

Kilbirnie is a small town with a rich industrial and manufacturing past though nowadays many of its inhabitants travel considerable distances to find work. Once the home of iron and steel-works and flax and weaving mills, it also has a rich footballing heritage, the original Kilbirnie FC being formed back in 1874 and playing at senior level before folding in the late 19th century.

The present club was formed in 1901, filling the void left by the demise of the original one. The name Ladeside derives from the old Scots word Lade, which means small river or burn; the club's original ground on Mill Road was adjacent to the Garnock River. They developed a successful side, most notably in the 1930s when several trophies were won and an inside-forward, George Stevenson went to play for Motherwell and win international honours for Scotland.

During the Second World War Ladeside closed down and they lost their ground which had been used by the army. They eventually re-formed, moving to the south of the town and taking over their present ground, Valefield which had formerly been the home ground of Glengarnock Vale who had become defunct.

In 1952 Kilbirnie lifted the Scottish Junior Cup for the first time, when a crowd of nearly 70,000 at Hampden Park saw them defeat Camelon Juniors in the final. They repeated the feat in 1977 defeating Rob Roy at Hampden, though the crowd this time was considerably fewer, less than 12,000. The team have had their ups and downs along the years but have always maintained a reputation for playing good football and having a vociferous and knowledgeable support.

Valefield is an impressive junior ground located opposite the cemetery. Its main features are two covered enclosures on the nearside adjoining the main road. I got talking to a friendly local supporter who told me the two structures were made in the 1950s from materials from the local steelworks and with their cantilevered roof supports were among the first designs of this kind; all stands then had several supports which obscured the view for supporters. On the far side of the ground the dressing rooms, committee room and tea hut are to be found. With terracing on all four sides, the far end, nearest the town backing onto a banked, wooded area

which formerly was the location for a branch railway line, the ground is well-appointed and looked after and Kilbirnie clearly have a loyal following.

Though neighbours Beith are their main rivals, my new friend informed me of a long rivalry going back to the 1970s and further with today's opponents from Ardrossan who had brought with them a sizeable and passionate support.

Showers just before kick-off gave way to a sunny and bright afternoon and, on a fine playing surface, Kilbirnie gradually took control, establishing a 2-0 interval lead. The second half, however, saw a complete transformation as Rovers fought back well, pulling level and then scoring what appeared to the winner with two minutes remaining. Despite being reduced to ten men after their goalkeeper was red-carded for dissent after disputing the second goal rather too vigorously, Kilbirnie showed great character to equalise in injury-time and enough time remained in a hectic, frenetic game for them to be denied what would have been the winner by the woodwork.

Up and running again for another season, the journey homeward was completed just before darkness fell as I reflected on another rewarding visit to the Scottish Juniors, my favourite football competition.

04/20