

TT No.34: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 29th September 2012; **Dalbeattie Star** v Stirling Albion; Scottish Cup round two; Res: 0-5; Att: 220; Admission: £8; Programme: £2 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

If this looks like a drubbing for the reigning South of Scotland League champions, for all but the opening 23 minutes it was. The tie turned on the unfortunate dismissal of Star full-back Curtiss Wilson, ironically a student at the University of Stirling. He handled a goal-bound Jordan White header, and referee Nick Walsh couldn't get the red card out fast enough. Up to that point, Dalbeattie had been the better side, with Stirling exuding all the confidence and composure you'd expect from a team propping up the Scottish Football League Third Division after a run of five straight defeats. But, as Steven Reid's powerfully-struck penalty rippled the roof of Graham Wright's net, a collective groan emanated from the home fans. When, seven minutes later, an unmarked Reid made it 2-0, the old timers next to me were audibly regretting their decision to leave the pub.

Not much positive to say for what followed. The sun came out on a permanent basis. That's it! Stirling, whose small band of supporters included (improbably) a guy with an acoustic guitar, dominated the rest of the match. It was exhibition stuff at times. Where there's no suspense, for the neutral at least, there ain't much interest. Beanpole White, a Peter Crouch lookalike, added a couple more for the Beans after the break and player-manager Greig McDonald bundled home a fifth just before the end after keeper Wright dropped a cross. Mind you, if it hadn't been for Wright's earlier heroics, Dalbeattie would have been seriously embarrassed. Star went close to scoring just once, Scott Milligan striking the underside of the crossbar with a 20-yard free-kick in the 72nd minute.

Not the spectacle I'd hoped for, as you can imagine. With Dalbeattie having lifted seven trophies last season, going through their league fixtures unbeaten in the process, and starting 2012-13 with seven successive victories, I'd marked this tie down as a possible upset. Sadly, I'll never know how things might have turned out had Star kept a full team on the pitch for 90 minutes.

Bit of a shame, really, because the day had begun extremely well. A polite (and not overly optimistic) enquiry at Palmerston Park, 14 miles away in Dumfries, had resulted in getting the green light to wander at will over Queen of the South's midden. The friendly Doonhamers ground-staff even allowed me to take pictures in the home dressing room, laid out with neatly-folded strips and trays of oranges in preparation for the league match against Alloa Athletic.

Dalbeattie ('valley of birch') is a pleasant town, the largest in the Stewartry, a defunct administrative district still referred to by locals. With a population of 6,500, it's twice the size of neighbouring Castle Douglas (home to Threave Rovers) and Kirkcudbright (represented by St Cuthbert Wanderers). The quarrying of granite was Dalbeattie's key industry from the nineteenth century, and most of its

buildings are fashioned from Scotland's other version of the hard stuff. There used to be six quarries in the area, along with a couple of mills producing bobbins for the Lancashire textile industry. Today, all this, along with its rail link to the outside world, has vanished, leaving Dalbeattie very much a sleepy backwater. It doubles as a Dumfries commuter town and the gateway for tourists seeking out the delights of the scenic Solway Coast.

Owing to 2012 marking the centenary of the RMS Titanic's unhappy maiden voyage collision with a mid-Atlantic iceberg, the town is celebrating with considerable gusto the life (and heroic death) of its most famous son, William Murdoch, first officer on the ill-fated liner. A memorial to Murdoch can be found on the exterior wall of the town hall, a stylish granite edifice. There wasn't, I have to say, any sign of Scottish Cup fever in Dalbeattie. The place seemed immune to the virus. No shops with red and black window displays, no posters - no nothing.

The Islecroft Stadium (a misnomer, if ever there was one) is a three-minute walk along bungalow-lined Mill Street from the uninspiring main drag. The ground is next to Colliston Park (lovely: even has a proper bandstand) and located inside a 90-degree bend described by the Dalbeattie Burn. This lively stream used to flood regularly (photos in the town's excellent free museum are vivid proof of calamitous inundations) until proper defences were sorted out. Gateposts by the ground's turnstiles are inscribed 1950. With an oval shape, and steep banking at the far end, the Islecroft Stadium has a bowl-like feel. It's a spacious site: indeed, there are yards of redundant turf between the touchlines and the pitch barrier.

Pride of place belongs to a venerable stand on the Mill Street side. Boasting bench seats for 300 (apparently - I reckon that would be a real squeeze), it is a delightfully old-fashioned structure of wood and corrugated iron. Clearly, the club's budget didn't run to granite. A newer building - far less appealing - tacked on to its rear houses the offices and dressing rooms. There is a cosy bar upstairs, accessed from outside by an uncovered staircase. Beyond the last hurrah of Mill Street, rather oddly, is a campsite. Its shower and toilet block is next to the stand. A school (granite, naturally) stands guard over the Islecroft Stadium from a lofty perch at the demise of Mill Street. Its pleasing lines include an impressive spire. There are modern dug-outs opposite the stand. No floodlights, though. Beyond this touchline can be found a footpath and the burn, both overhung by mature trees. From this part of the ground, evergreen-topped hills, the Urr Valley's upper slopes, are visible. Dumfries and Galloway, so often bypassed by users of the M74 going pell-mell for Scotland's central belt, is a beautiful part of Britain.

Dalbeattie issue programmes only for home games against SFL clubs in the Scottish Cup. They're rare, in other words! For a one-off, the programme was an excellent effort. Having a journalist (Bob Geddes, Solway Press Services) as secretary doubtless helps! Captain Stuart MacPherson, when asked in a protracted question-and-answer feature who was the slowest player at the club, responded: Struan Parker, both mentally and physically. Bet that went down well! The programme also detailed Star's complete Scottish Cup record against SFL clubs - prior to kick-off, it read 11 ties, 11 defeats. The last occasion was in 2000, when habitual

underachievers Albion Rovers trimmed them 5-1 in an Islecroft Stadium replay after a goalless draw at Coatbridge. Heavy defeats seem commonplace. I stand to be corrected, but I've always had the South of Scotland League down as the weakest of the premier non-league competitions north of the border. Nothing I saw on this trip suggested I'm mistaken. Not sure, though, about the official attendance of 220. Looked at least 300 there to me.

At the final whistle, I headed back along the A711 to Dumfries for an ice hockey match between hosts Solway Sharks and Billingham Stars. The visitors won 5-0 in this, too, and brought about a quarter of the 250-strong crowd. Dumfries Ice Bowl has a football connection. It is behind the relatively new cantilever east stand at Palmerston Park, and was built on Queen of the South's former training ground. Which, if nothing else, brought my long-distance outing full circle.

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