

TT No.54: *Mike Latham* - Sat 3 November 2012: **Linlithgow Rose** v Kelty Hearts; East Juniors Superleague; Result: 1-1; Attendance: 450 (est.); Admission: £5; Raffle tickle: £1; No programme; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

The rain poured down from leaden skies as I headed north on Saturday morning, turning to sleet showers over Shap and I feared that many games in the Juniors would be called off. My intended destination was Livingston United's replay in the Junior Cup but that was an early victim of the weather.

But as I crossed the border the skies lightened and so did my mood- Linlithgow's top-of-the-table game in the East Superleague against Kelty (switched from Kelty) was definitely on, without so much the need for an inspection. Without further ado I headed to Prestonfield, a ground I'd often intended visiting in the past but one I'd decided to save for a rainy day- that day had come.

Most of the junior clubs make excellent use of modern-day communications these days. The Pie and Bovril Juniors forum has a wealth of information and Twitter is an increasingly invaluable source, especially for travellers. Linlithgow have long been established as one of the most successful and progressive junior clubs and they have an excellent website, which also contains edited match highlights and a Twitter feed- clearly a labour of love by the supporters who contribute to such a valued resource.

Linlithgow is a town rich in historical importance and its main street is considerably different in character than many I've visited over the past few years while following junior football. Most have a preponderance of fast food shops, charity shops, pound shops, sunbed shops, the omnipresent barbers and the like- Linlithgow by contrast seems dominated by estate agents, banks, solicitors and high-class delicatessens and cafes- it gives the impression of being a prosperous place and half-an-hour spent strolling down the high street confirmed that view. It's got a palace, a canal and the loch near the centre must be a nice place to stroll around; but kick-off time was approaching and I had to hurry on, passing several ancient inns, one of which, The Black Bitch is reputed to be one of Scotland's oldest pubs.

Linlithgow was formerly the principal town of West Lothian, which was also known as Linlithgowshire, and is situated 20 miles west of Edinburgh along the main railway route to Glasgow. James V and Mary Queen of Scots were born here but perhaps of more importance to the modern generation Susan Boyle, singing sensation of Britain's Got Talent performed at Linlithgow Rose Social Club before her rise to stardom. Susan hails from nearby Blackburn and her audition for the programme, viewed over 100m times on You Tube is one of the most inspirational things I've watched: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxPZh4AnWyk>

Linlithgow Rose are one of the largest and best supported clubs in the juniors and won the Junior Cup three times between 2002-2010. Between the wars Linlithgow

Rose played at Mains Park in the town; they have played at Prestonfield since 1949. They have a string of honours in the league and regional cups and have steadily built upon their success, developing a ground that is not only the envy of nearly every other club in the Juniors but some in the Scottish League, too.

The ground is immaculately maintained, dominated by a smart seated stand built above the original pavilion in 2001 along one side and with a neat, covered terrace along the opposite side. Under here is located a marvellous tea bar which purveys steak pies, bridies and the most satisfying lentil soup among other delicacies. The social club dominates the end nearest the town, its white-painted exterior walls reflecting the bright sunshine. The other end is a grassed bank where local schoolboys carried on a never-ending game of football throughout the afternoon.

The experience of watching Linlithgow is not complete without experiencing 'The Manager', a die-hard middle-aged fan who dresses in a manager's coat and positions himself on the left-back position just outside his side's penalty area. Throughout the game he shouts and barks out a never-ending series of instructions to players, engages in good natured banter with opposing fans and players warming-up along the side of the pitch and works himself up into a real state. At the game's end he shakes the hand of everyone in sight and gives his own incisive analysis of the game as he walks away- he's fantastic value. I'd seen him at several Linlithgow away games but to watch him in his own habitat was something else. Maybe after Susan Boyle he could be the next famous person to emerge from the area- certainly I enjoyed listening to his views far more than many of the inanities issued by so-called experts on television and radio programmes.

The game itself, played on what was a chilly but dry and bright afternoon was a marvellous exhibition of the best in Junior football. Both teams favoured an inventive, short passing game and had skilful players, happy in possession. Kelty looked the more dangerous side in a tight game; they spurned two good chances in the first-half and eventually taking the lead with six minutes remaining. But Linlithgow are not league leaders for nothing and in the third minute of injury time they equalised from a corner with virtually their last chance. Marvellous entertainment, just like watching Susan Boyle.

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