

TT No.3: *Mike Latham* - Sat 17 August 2013: South of Scotland League: **Lochar Thistle** 0-1 Wigtown & Bladnoch; Attendance: 30 (h/c); Admission: by bucket collection; No programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Lochar Thistle are newcomers to the South League this year, ending their 44-year affiliation to the Dumfries & District Football League which is now down to seven clubs. At its height in the late 1990s the league had 29 Saturday teams playing in two divisions. How times change in a generation.

Thistle had won the DADFL twice in the last few years and obviously decided it was time to try their luck at a higher standard. The South League has lost two of its prominent members with Threave Rovers and Dalbeattie Star becoming inaugural members of the Lowland League. It now operates with eleven teams and the venues vary from school fields, fields within athletics tracks, park venues to small enclosed grounds.

In the last year or so the league has also had its own standalone website for the first time which greatly increases its profile. Previously it was very difficult to get information on fixtures and results in the league, the main source of information being from the excellent Solway Press Services website run by Bob and Drew Geddes.

Thistle's home ground is one of the more basic venues in the league, a roped-off playing field in the grounds of Maxwelltown High School, located in the middle of a housing scheme just off the A76 Glasgow Road to the north of the Dumfries by-pass. There are no dug-outs, stands, covers or programmes so it's not for the faint-hearted.

The visitors arrived in a confident-mood, being top-of-the-table having won all four of their opening games. They just about edged this one, the only goal coming after 14 minutes. I've seen a lot of football in this league over the last few years and I reckon that groundhoppers who decry the standard (and I've met a few) are doing it an injustice. This game, for example, was far better in quality than the Welsh Alliance game I saw on Tuesday and the Cheshire League game I saw on Wednesday.

Furthermore, Scottish referees and linesmen, in my opinion are far better than their counterparts across the border. The three officials on duty here were excellent. One linesman came up with a classic comment when the home manager queried the award of a free-kick for a 'soft foul.' The linesman replied: 'A boiled egg is a boiled egg.' The players were just interested in playing football and there was none of the cynicism and niggles that often accompanies games at a comparable level in England.

The ground was all a bit rudimentary on a showery day but I enjoyed it. The views of distant hills, even though they were shrouded in cloud provided an atmospheric

backdrop. An added bonus was that a football festival for junior players was taking place on adjoining fields so a very good refreshment van was in situ, which is not usually the case.

I popped in at Jock's Loaning beforehand where Maxwelltown Thistle were playing in the Dumfries League against Lochmaben (2pm). A basic venue but it looked decent- I hope to return to tick that off one day. Sadly, the weather put paid to hopes of combing this trip with some cricket at Nunholm, home of Dumfries CC. Driving rain accompanied me southwards way past Preston, it certainly didn't feel like the middle of August.

04/20