

**TT No.35: Mike Latham** - Sat 2 November 2013: Scottish Junior Cup Second Round Replay- **Wishaw Juniors** 2-3 Darvel; Attendance: 80 (h/c); Admission: £4; Programme: £1; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match rating: 4\*.

Another marvellous Saturday afternoon watching what in my opinion is the best football cup competition of all, the Scottish Junior Cup. Again, the weather was forecast to turn for the worse with heavy bands of rain spreading from the west. Where the rain fell at its heaviest was something of a lottery, games at St Mirren and Carnoustie were abandoned having started, several more were called off just before kick-off time. Happily, when I arrived at Wishaw an hour before the start the sun was doing its best to peek behind dark, glowering clouds and the referee Kylie McMullan gave the park the go-ahead, just reward for all the hard work done by club officials in the week to ensure that this cup-tie replay would be fulfilled.

Wishaw is a small town in North Lanarkshire, dwarfed by its neighbour Motherwell, and easily reached from J8 of the M74 motorway. The locals are friendly, welcoming a stranger from a foreign land with one swapping tales of former Motherwell and Bury legend Jimmy McIlwraith, a particular favourite of mine in the 1970s. A slight, jinking inside-forward with audacious ball skills, McIlwraith played along Motherwell icon Willie Pettigrew, of whom I found a well-written article here: <http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/football/pettigrew-if-i-scored-i-made-people-happy-but-i-couldnt-keep-my-mouth-shut.22343031> .

McIlwraith played initially on loan at Gigg Lane and then returned in a full-time transfer after the Bury fans sang 'Jimmy Mack, when are you coming back?' from the hit song by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. He wouldn't have looked out of place in this game. Scottish Junior football players are divided between Big Men and Wee Men- usually that is. This tie seemed to be contested almost exclusively by wee men, the tallest player being about 5ft 10. That's the difference between this level of the game north of the Border and its English counterpart. In England, most of these players wouldn't have got a look-in in the earthy surrounds of the North West Counties League and the Northern Premier League where physicality rules. In Scotland skill still counts and the attitude of junior teams towards playing the game is refreshing, with the focus on attacking play and goals.

The teams had drawn 2-2 in the first meeting in Ayrshire and a keenly fought game was in prospect. Wishaw Juniors, founded sometime in the 1880s (more of that anon) were once a senior club; these days they compete at junior level on a new ground they are developing called The Belthane. Adjoining Wishaw Sports Centre and the local indoor bowling club, it's a rapidly changing venue, after beginning as just a fenced-off part of the recreation ground. The club has fenced two sides and put up blue sheeting to give the ground an enclosed feel. Dug-outs, neat pitch railings and lots of advertising boards help give the place an identity. The dressing rooms, tea bar and committee room are housed in temporary buildings at the moment and in the past week or so a small cover has been erected by club

supporters. Wishaw produce an excellent programme (the 'Bethane Blather') with all the necessary information included; its pages include a potted history of the club which explains that the formation date is still being investigated. The lack of Scottish Junior Cup records back beyond 50 years is excused as 'our records are far from complete (thanks to the mythical fire at the old Recreation Park!'

The game starts off in weak autumnal sunshine but the threatening skies begin to dominate and the second half is played in pouring rain, the pitch holding up well to the deluge. Both sides played good, skilful football with considered build-up play and judicious use of wingers. It's a compelling game to watch with a nice energy and feel and the referee compliments the action perfectly.

Wishaw eventually take the lead but the visitors enjoy a purple patch late in the first-half, drawing level, then taking the lead with a memorable strike from distance. The tea bar is outstanding, manned by friendly folk, the Bovril and pepper much needed on an increasingly raw day. Within minutes the re-start the home side draw level after a disputed penalty.

As this is a replay the tie will go straight to free-kicks from the penalty mark if the scores remain deadlocked. But there's no hint of negativity as both sides go for the winner in a pulsating game. Ten minutes or so from the end the visitors from Ayrshire take the lead after a corner, a header from a defender taking a ricochet and finding its way into the net. Most English teams in such a position would try to shut up shop and play the percentages in the closing stages; not so Darvel who press for another goal and at one time have seven forwards pressing down on the home goalkeeper.

Wishaw fight back, stage a grandstand finish but the Darvel defenders stand firm. 3-2 to Darvel it finishes amidst the gathering gloom, a victory celebrated with gusto by the jubilant Ayrshire side. Despite the weather we've seen a great cup-tie, played in a great spirit and I've visited a friendly and progressive club, clearly eager to ensure that football in the town will continue to thrive. Again, the journey home is accompanied by cloudbursts and terrible driving conditions, but it had all been worth the effort- another lasting memory from a competition that never disappoints.

04/20