

TT No.45: *Mike Latham* - Sat 7 December 2013: Scottish Junior Cup Round 3 Replay; **Hurlford United** v Forth Wanderers; Result: 4-0; Attendance: 220 (est.); Admission: £5; Raffle ticket: £1; Programme: £1; Killie Pie: £1.60; Lentil soup: £1.

After a three-week break it was wonderful to resume watching Scottish Junior football, especially in my favourite competition. The weather Gods had relented to allow this game to take place after a week of storms damage and frosts and the Blair Park playing area, on which the club have invested heavily in recent years, looked immaculate.

Hurlford is a small village east of Kilmarnock, easily reached from J8 of the M74 motorway. There's a long tradition of football here and the crowd are knowledgeable and passionate football folk. I loved visiting here, it was one of my best ever trips to the Juniors for so many reasons, not least because there is just about the best pie hut, I've ever had the pleasure to encounter.

The present Hurlford club was founded in 1938 though the history of football here stretches back much further. Indeed, though the programme claims the roots of the original club were established in 1912 my local team, Bolton Wanderers, signed several players from Hurlford several years earlier including inside-forward Jack Picken who joined Wanderers in 1899. More recently, former Kilmarnock and Preston North End player Ian Bryson, who I hear regularly on the airwaves of BBC Radio Lancashire also played for Hurlford United.

The 'Ford' as they are known in these parts are on the up, currently in the top division of the West Juniors after two recent promotions; not long ago they were languishing in the Ayrshire District League. They give the impression of a club with a good foundation as the Blair Park ground is undergoing improvements, the perennial drainage problems seem to have been fixed by hard work and investment and the ground is neat and tidy.

Although the iron and steel industry on which Hurlford developed has long gone there has obviously been a big attempt to attract sponsors and the pitch is surrounded by many advertising boards. There's also a modest club house in which supporters and sponsors mingle before and during the game. As the teams warm up before the game on a relatively mild afternoon there's an air of expectancy and a clear sense that the home team, who have never won the Junior Cup, mean business especially as hot favourites Auchinleck Talbot and Linlithgow Rose have already been knocked-out.

The teams drew 1-1 at Forth seven days earlier in what was, by all accounts, a rip-roaring game. I'd seen Forth in an earlier round and knew that they played good football and had several excellent players, including a young player-manager who not long ago was playing in the SPL for Dunfermline. I'd also engaged in some Twitter chat with their excellent goalkeeper, JC Hutchison and the brilliant Scottish Sun reporter Scott Campbell whose articles bring the Junior game to life.

Hurlford looked impressive in the warm-up, smart, composed, purposeful and initial impressions confirmed expectations are high at Blair Park. The black-shirted visitors started the better and when a home defender launched a long ball into touch he was roundly condemned by his own players and the home supporters, the gist of the comments being to play football.

Gradually Hurlford exerted their authority against a team several levels below them in the pyramid, showing why the bookies made them 14/1 on to win this tie. They scored an excellently-worked goal midway through the first-half and added another just before half-time.

Forth never gave up playing creative football and had a great spell early in the second half when they hit the post and went close on two more occasions. Despite the impressive Hutchison Hurlford coasted into the fourth round with two more goals though the intensity of the crowd and the players never let-up. I love the way players at this level continue playing to the end; there are no thoughts of consolidating a hard-earned lead or playing negatively and not an utterance of the dreaded word 'squeeze' which is so often heard at football in England.

The Blair Park ground is a modest one, a small shelter providing the only cover from the elements. Thankfully the rain held off despite the glowering skies. The Pie Hut was something else, dispensing the famous Killie Pie from local bakers Brownings which recently won an award as the best football pie in the Kingdom, deservedly so in my opinion. The home-made helping of bacon and lentil soup was also top-class. I'd recommend a visit to Hurlford unreservedly, it was fantastic.

04/20