

TT No.61: Mike Latham - Sat 25 January 2014: King Cup Round 1; **Gala Fairydean Rovers** 5-1 Hawick Royal Albert; Attendance: 200 (h/c); Admission: £5; Programme: £2; Raffle ticket: £1; Coffee and cheese macaroni pie: £3; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

I follow the weather forecast fairly closely and even listen to updates on BBC5live on the journey north; nothing I researched or listened to prepared me for the deluge that fell upon Scotland on Saturday. With games falling left, right and centre again I got to Moffat and it was decision time. Stupidly I followed my heart rather my instincts which pointed me to the safe haven of Port Glasgow on their 3g pitch that I had never visited. Instead I followed the route to the Scottish Junior Cup and Dunbar's replayed tie against Shotts Bon Accord. Dunbar's park, I have been reliably informed is rarely off, but today it was, the referee making his decision- entirely right from what I saw- just as I arrived.

Options were few and far between; one possibility a Border Amateurs game at Chirnside near Berwick, but their website has no contact numbers. They did in fact play, a 3-3 draw as well. Ah well. With everything else virtually off- just two games in the West Juniors survived, including the game at Port Glasgow (it finished 3-4) and a mere handful in the East it was either Spartans o Gala on the 3g. Having been to both in the past I opted for Gala as it was nearer home.

So, it was to Galashiels, with the rain still pouring from leaden skies. Fortunately, just as the town was reached along the A7, one of the worst A roads I have had the displeasure to travel due to slow-moving traffic and selfish drivers it's virtually impossible to over-take, the skies lightened and the rain stopped. Galashiels seems dominated by two huge supermarkets on the north side which add to the congestion on a Saturday afternoon. There was also an important rugby union match taking place at the adjoining Netherdale ground, between Galashiels and Melrose, so the traffic was heavy indeed.

Finally, the town centre was negotiated, the A7 south towards Carlisle taken and the road down to Netherdale off to the left; despite the crowds of people attending mostly the rugby game there was plenty of parking around the smart campus of the Heriot-Watt University buildings that house the Textiles & Design department.

I'd got history with this ground, having once made a fruitless midweek journey on the say-so of the secretary only to find the game postponed due to frost. I finally ticked it a year or so later and had also visited the adjoining rugby ground for one of the last games played by the ill-fated Border Reivers franchise. Since my last visit Gala Fairydean have merged with Border Amateur neighbours Rovers to form Gala Fairydean Rovers and have entered the newly-formed Lowland League. Moreover, their Netherdale ground, with its distinctive and category A listed cantilevered main stand, originally built in the 1960s has been considerably

smartened up and over last summer had the splendid 3G pitch laid down which makes it a huge community asset.

With both football and rugby games kicking-off at 3pm, the traffic was fairly heavy but I got there in time for the start. The home side produce an excellent, full colour programme and it was noticeable that the main stand has really undergone a facelift with the help of the sponsorship of a local tyre company. There's also an excellent tea bar by the side of the main stand from where a cheese macaroni pie and coffee really hit the mark. At the other end of the main stand is a more substantial cafe which is presumably open throughout the week. It has tables and chairs and a Sky Sports feed.

I was wary of this game because even though it was a local derby in an important cup competition, I'd had the misfortune to see Hawick Royal Albert on several occasions in the past. In an area dominated by the oval ball it must be hard to field competitive soccer sides but when I had seen them, they seemed particularly clueless. Not for nothing are they known as one of the serially- underperforming senior sides in Scottish football and they began this game rooted to the bottom of the East of Scotland League second tier.

The home side were faring little better, near the bottom of the Lowland League and it was easy to see why. For any club installing a 3g pitch my advice would be simple: organise a bus, go to Oswestry and watch how The New Saints play on their artificial surface at Park Hall. They're an object lesson in how to play on the surface. Gala seem still to be under the impression that you can lump long balls forward and play 60 yard cross-field balls and prosper on the surface; they were decidedly unimpressive. But the visitors were worse, they really are a pitiful side to watch and moreover, perhaps born out of frustration at their poor results they have a lot of players who seemingly like to have a good moan, not only at their own teammates but the officials. Their knowledge of the intricacies of the offside trap seem particularly limited, especially as one of the linesmen was the Reverend Frank, well known in these parts and in the Northern League and a superb, eagle-eyed official.

By half-time Gala were 3-1 up, but it was dire stuff. Hawick actually got back to 2-1 but spoiled their hard work when immediately afterwards their goalkeeper inexplicably went walkabout and was nowhere his goal when an unmarked home striker netted. It finished 5-1, with a home player receiving a straight red for an act of violent conduct. Over the fence the rugby match, watched by considerably more spectators than the 200 or so mostly huddled in the main stand, trundled along. By standing on the top of the grassed bank behind the goal it was possible to peer over the wooden fence and keep a wary eye on what appeared to be a never-ending succession of scrums, mauls and kicks to touch. I'm no fan of rugby union, and was glad I had opted to pay what was an admittedly a football match pretty much down the food chain than that dire stuff.

I got into conversation with a spectator on the other side of the fence. He lived in Lauder and regularly travelled to the Edinburgh area to watch Junior football, he

told me. He'd opted for the rugby today because of the weather and the importance of the game, but admitted he regretted it. 'An awful spectacle' was how he described the game. We kept up the dialogue with score updates throughout the afternoon.

As darkness fell Melrose ground out a narrow victory by 15-13 while the Gala football team beat their hapless opponents 5-1. There's no relegation in the Lowland League this year but unless they improve quickly, I would predict that they will struggle to maintain their standing, sad as their location makes them an important strategic element of the league. There's no relegation, as far I'm aware in the East of Scotland League, otherwise Royal Albert would have disappeared through the trap door long ago. I go to lots of games in the Juniors, mostly controlled by a referee and two committee-men who judge on ins and outs. It all goes off perfectly. What a shame though that what to me appears to be a far worse standard of football gets three officials allocated. The referee and two blokes armed with a flag in one hand, a can of Irn Bru in the other, standing on the half-way line and signalling ins and outs would have easily sufficed.

A tortuous journey back to Carlisle along the A7 followed. Not the best day out I've ever had watching football but at least I saw a game. And my advice to Gala, get that coach trip to Oswestry booked pretty darn sharpish.

04/20