

TT No.66: Mike Latham - Saturday 8 February 2014: Lowland League: **Gretna FC** 2008 0-3 Threave Rovers; Attendance: 120 (est.); Admission: £5; Programme: £1.50; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

I've long had a soft spot for the famous Border town of Gretna and have visited Raydale Park many times over the years. I remember their days as a Scottish outpost club in the Northern Premier League and their epic first round FA Cup-tie against Bolton Wanderers at the old Burnden Park in 1983. They were leading 2-1 until seven minutes from time when Owen Coyle salvaged Wanderers' blushes with two late goals at the Embankment End.

Later of course Gretna joined the Scottish Football League in 2002 and I was there when they made their debut, in a 1-1 draw against Morton at Raydale before a crowd of 1,800. A few years later Coyle returned with his Falkirk side who won a vital First Division game 2-0 with Jason Scotland scoring two goals. But Gretna's meteoric rise up the pyramid into the SPL, with a Cup Final appearance thrown in (losing to Hearts on penalties after extra-time at Hampden in 2006) were vivid memories even though, sadly it all ended in tears. After a season in the SPL playing home games at Motherwell Gretna folded when their benefactor Brooks Milesen withdrew funding due to illness and sadly passed away.

But they are resilient folk in these parts and the supporters club abandoned together and formed a new team, playing in the East of Scotland League, initially in exile in Annan at an athletic's ground just down the hill from Galabank. Happily, they were able to return to Raydale, smartening up the ground that had lay derelict and finally getting the floodlights re-commissioned and being involved in the Raydale Community Partnership that secured the ground. And when the Lowland League was formed last summer Gretna were inaugural members. They have also gained full membership of the Scottish FA. Crowds are back to around the hundred-mark, but the supporters are passionate and hard-working and proud that they have kept football alive in the town.

This is the third Lowland League game I've seen this season, all involving different sides, and the standard, in my opinion is considerably below that of the top divisions in East and West Juniors. There were mitigating factors here with the strong run and driving, icy rain making constructive football difficult, but the pitch stood up well to the constant downpour.

Gretna's ground has changed a bit since the league days under the old regime. The standing terrace behind the nearside goal has been demolished leaving a large piece of grass up to the perimeter wall and the cover on the shallow far side has been dismantled. The huge Ewart Engineering stand still stands forlorn behind the far goal, occupied by a few hardy souls, most sheltering in the small main stand with its assorted covers and the sanctuary of the wee bar.

The excellent programme warned that Threave's keeper usually had a good game against Gretna and again he did not disappoint. Despite a lot of possession, the home side struggled to impose their authority on the game and fell behind when the Threave striker capitalised on a defensive mistake. The game turned early in the second half when Gretna saw a penalty saved by the keeper, had a midfield player red carded for retaliation and conceded a second on the breakaway. Gretna threw everything into attack but the Threave 'keeper was truly inspired; he pulled off a string of flying saves. The visitors were eventually good value for their win, confirmed by an injury-time penalty.

A hardy band of supporters had accompanied their favourites on the team bus on the journey along the A76 from Castle Douglas. One of them told me that the bus was not due to depart home until 7pm prompt; they clearly intended making the most of the famed Gretna hospitality.

Motorway driving was hazardous due to the wind and rain and I'm glad I didn't venture further north even though this was a revisit for the umpteenth time. With back-ups on the 3gs at Annan and Queen of the South, a double header on the 3g in the Dumfries League and games at Celtic Nation and Carlisle United all going ahead the Border area was a hive of football activity on a day when many areas went without a single game. Gretna are a friendly club to visit and have a good tea bar and bar and every visitor is made to feel welcome.

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