

TT No.71: *Mike Latham* - Sat 22 February 2014: Scottish Junior Cup Fifth Round: **Whitletts Victoria** 4-1 Yoker Athletic; Attendance: 400 (est.); Admission: £5; Programme: 30pence; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

The Junior Cup has reached the last 16 stage and with big guns Auchinleck Talbot and Linlithgow Rose already knocked-out some of the underdogs are spying their chance of making history. This tie was an intriguing one on paper, with both sides having been involved in several high-scoring games this season. Whitletts, from the Ayrshire District League were the underdogs against a Yoker side from the level above.

Whitletts play at the Dam Park Stadium in the centre of Ayr. It's an impressive athletics and multi-sports arena, well maintained and clearly well-used by the local community. On one side the impressive buildings of Ayr College and those of West of Scotland University opposite help the ground an enclosed look. Along one side runs the fast-flowing River Ayr, down to the dam in the centre of town that gives the ground its name. The river level has apparently reduced considerably from the previous Saturday, helping the pitch to drain more effectively after another week of heavy rain.

On arriving it was clear that this was a big day in Whitletts' history. They were perhaps happy the game had been put back a week as it previously clashed with the Ayr United-Rangers league game at Somerset Park. Formed in 1944 they played in Whitletts, a former coal-mining area to the north of the town until being forced to leave their Voluntary Park ground on health and safety grounds in 2011. The stadium, which was also used for greyhound racing has since been demolished. The Club has high hopes of returning to their local area in the near future and are in negotiations with the local Council so their stay at Dam Park may not last too long. Either way, it's an impressive venue and the Club officials have turned out in force to ensure the big day runs smoothly.

By kick-off time a crowd of around 400 has assembled, most gathering on the near-side where a smart cantilevered stand, with ten rows of bucket seats offers an excellent vantage point. Underneath here is a terrace and so the good views make one quickly forget the running track between the perimeter and the pitch. The rest of the ground is grass banking and around 20 people choose to watch the game from the banks of the river on the far side, peering through the mesh fence and sadly not contributing to club funds.

A considerable number of Yoker fans have made the trip from Glasgow and there's a good atmosphere as the game kicks-off. The crowd are well fed and watered with a well-stocked bar and tea bar in full flow and a club official on the tannoy helps pass on essential information such as team line-ups and other news. There's also a folded sheet that is sold as a programme for the princely sum of 30 pence.

Dam Park was once used by Ayr United for two league games 40 years ago when Somerset Park was unavailable and was once a regular venue for Ayrshire cup finals. Though I'm not a huge fan of athletics grounds when used for football I really enjoyed my visit here and the friendliness and hard work of the home committee and the good-sized crowd helped make it feel a really important occasion.

On a heavy pitch both sides struggled to recreate their free-flowing style of recent league games but Yoker eventually broke the deadlock with what one of my favourite TV commentators of yesteryear, the estimable Ron Jones, used to describe as a 'goal from nowhere.' The second half was a different story, however, as Whitletts poured forward and swamped the visitors with wave after wave of attacks. They scored four goals in an inspired spell and ran out convincing winners in the end. Now they will be eagerly awaiting the sixth-round draw with high hopes of emulating their predecessors of 1956 who reached the semi-finals of this prestigious competition.

As the only junior club in Ayr, Whitletts have certainly had ups and downs in their 70-year history. These days they look a club on the up and I'll watch their progress with considerable interest. I greatly enjoyed my visit here but then, as I always say, the Junior Cup rarely if never disappoints.

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