

Ben Swinburne, September, 2007.

Kirkfield United Boys Club and South Lanarkshire Under-age Amateur Football Association.

The Early Years.

The histories of Kirkfield United Boys Club and the South Lanarkshire Under-age AFA are too closely interwoven to be treated separately so in this short history I shall attempt to record the birth of both of them at the same time.

The events outlined in these notes occurred almost forty years ago and, with the passage of time, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge, carrying many of my recollections with it. Nevertheless, I shall do my best to report them as accurately as my faltering memory will allow.

It is fair to say that, without Kirkfield United, the South Lanarkshire Boys Football Leagues and their controlling Association would simply not have come into existence, and many thousands of youngsters over the last four decades would have been denied the opportunity to play football on a regular, well controlled and organised manner.

It is equally true to say that, without the Association and its other member clubs, Kirkfield United Boys Club would certainly not have survived for the forty years since its emergence. The relationship, one to the other, was mutually dependant and mutually beneficial.

Over the years, hundreds of talented and enthusiastic people have given generously of their time and money to ensure the success of individual clubs throughout the South Lanarkshire region. Without such help, neither Kirkfield or the Association could neither have continued or thrived but, due to their sheer numbers, the vast majority of those good people can not even be mentioned in this brief early history.

Their contribution, however, is not forgotten. Thousands of young hopefuls from the past four decades, and today's crop of budding footballers who follow in their footsteps, owe them all a massive vote of thanks.

But let us continue by asking the question, 'how did it all start?' The answer lies in the Clyde Valley village of Kirkfieldbank in the late 1960s. At that time, youth football in Lanarkshire was more or less restricted to the schools, and this was greatly dependant on the number and quality of those staff members who were prepared to give up their time outwith school hours.

It followed that the opportunity for kids to play football, particularly in rural areas, was pretty much a lottery. Ian Proudfoot, a former East Fife player, was headmaster at Kirkfieldbank Primary and had acquired a set of strips for the school. A few games were played but with a decided lack of enthusiasm from *other* schools his initiative pretty much withered on the vine.

As a young father with three football-daft sons of nine, seven and five years of age, it was my routine to take them down to the village football pitch for a couple of hours most Saturday mornings. Word spread very quickly through the grapevine and before long we were joined by a dozen or so of their school pals and a regular Saturday bounce game took place, refereed by yours truly.

I was impressed by the ability of a number of these kids and even more so by their unbounded enthusiasm and how quickly their skills improved. They would have given their back teeth to play competitive football and in the late autumn of 1969 I set out to try to make their dream a reality.

The major problem was that there were insufficient boys of a similar age in Kirkfieldbank to put together a full team at Under-13 level, or at any other age group for that matter. To get over this problem, I thought of putting together a league for teams of an *average* age of 11 years, and an *aggregate* age of 121 years. This allowed boys from 9 to 12 years of age to play in the same team, with every 12-year-old player being offset by a 10-year-old in order to meet the collective ceiling of 121 total years.

This mixed age arrangement was, so far as I am aware, a totally new innovation, but one which I believe has now been adopted in a number of rural areas throughout Scotland.

My first move was to contact Mr Binnie, the secretary of the Lanarkshire Amateur League, hoping for some advice – or at least some encouragement, but I was to be disappointed on both counts. He brusquely informed me that there was no chance of setting up a boys league from scratch, stating there was no interest and that ‘football in Lanarkshire is finished.’ He went on to explain that when he took over as secretary, there were over sixty clubs in his league; now there were barely a third of that number.

Being a polite young man in those days, I refrained from telling the old chap that, having listened to his ‘enthusiastic’ response, I wasn’t in the least bit surprised! But the message was crystal clear. Anyone trying to set up something new was strictly on his own and could expect neither interest or help from established quarters.

Undaunted, I set up a couple of ‘friendlies,’ the first being against Douglas Water Primary, whose janitor, Archie McKellar, could certainly never be accused of a lack of enthusiasm. Archie was a larger-than-life character, a huge man with a voice like a foghorn and an appearance that would have scared the life out of kids anywhere in the world – apart, that is, from Douglas Water and Rigside, where it had long been recognised that his bark was very much worse than his bite.

I remember one match on a bitterly cold day in Rigside a year or two later. Archie was bellowing from the touchline like a wounded bull when a pretty little girl of about five years old came up to him and tugged shyly at the hem of his coat.

‘Haw, Erchie,’ she said, sweetly, ‘Ye’ve goat a big snotter hingin’ frae yer nose!’

Archie grinned from ear to ear, (a daunting sight if ever I saw one) and wiped the offending liquid off his proboscis with his coat sleeve. 'So Ah huv, Jennifer,' he agreed, gazing down on the child from his great height. 'Thanks fur tellin' me about it, hen.' He dug into one of his deep pockets. 'Here's a sixpence fur ye.' The wee girl snatched the offering from his huge fingers and skipped away happily.

In Rigside, big Archie terrified no one, least of all the children he was supposed to keep in their place. Indeed, he was a well loved figure at Douglas Water Primary and when he died many years later there was a massive turnout of former pupils at his funeral.

I had bought a set of blue cotton football tops that must have lain for many years in a corner of a Wishaw sports shop. One wash and they were all shapes and sizes, but the youngsters were happy enough with them. All we now needed was a name, and I put it to the boys. My own preference would have been 'Kirkfieldbank Colts' but I left the choice to the kids, who came up with the snappier name of '**Kirkfield United.**'

Tactfully, I put it to them that 'Kirkfield *Colts*' might have an even *better* ring to it. 'A colt's an *animal*, an' we're no' animals,' said one of the boys scornfully, effectively shooting my '*Colts*' suggestion down in flames! So Kirkfield United we became, a name that has survived to the present day.

As the months went by I received welcome offers of help from fellow villagers Willie Smith and Willie McSporran and in no time we had enough parents and friends to form a small committee. Kirkfield United were on the move. Money was raised to buy a full set of new strips in the Arsenal colours of red with white sleeves, white shorts and red socks at a total cost of £20, a significant sum in 1970.

Another match was arranged, this time with Alan Freeland's 2nd **Lanark Scouts**, when both Alan and Archie McKellar, (now ably assisted by Davie Abernethy at **Rigside**.) pledged to take part in an Under-13 league if I could manage to get another few teams interested in time for the 1970/71 season.

An appeal in the *Carluk & Lanark Gazette* drew enquiries from **Carluk Burnwood**, run by Jimmy Stewart and Bill Penman, and **Carstairs West End**, run by Tom Dickson, a warder at the nearby State Hospital.

With five sides committed, the league got under way for season 1970/71, due to end in April 1971. Jimmy Stewart was chairman with myself as secretary/treasurer, my duties including publicity and league expansion.

Within a few weeks **Carluk Kirkton**, run by that super-enthusiast Whitey Moffat, a successful and popular full back with Carluk Rovers, later to be assisted by Robert (Tich) Campbell. **Law Hearts**, with Charlie Dobbie and Angus Hughes in charge, were joined by **Carstairs United**, guided by the incorrigible Willie Dickson (no relation to West End's Tom,) to complete a more healthy eight-club set up.

Midway through the season, Alan Freeland moved to Aberdeen and the scouts team dropped out of the league, to be instantly replaced when Guy Raeside and Thor Black

set up **Lanark Rangers** and took over 2nd Lanark's fixtures for the remainder of the season.

Each week I submitted league tables and Kirkfield match reports to the *Gazette* and (when they would print it) the *Hamilton Advertiser*. This raised sufficient interest to see the league quickly expanding to twelve clubs. Close on forty years have elapsed since these events and my memory of exactly when some of these clubs made application to the league is now rather blurred at the edges.

The original minute books and ledgers were handed down to my successors some 25 years ago and I have no idea what became of them after that. They would certainly provide the answers as, no doubt, could some of our other surviving founder members. It may be worthwhile to ask around.

From memory, the new clubs definitely included **Stonehouse**, run by the ultra-competitive Jimmy Jamieson, **Auchenheath**, (whose manager, Willie Walker, was later to be disqualified for fielding over-age players,) and **Coalburn Colts**, efficiently organised by the very capable Alex Graham.

Rigside finished worthy first season champions, with Kirkfield runners-up. In the course of the season I asked Motherwell FC to donate a cup to the league and they came up with a quite unique solid silver trophy that had been won by them during their tour of South Africa as Scottish League Champions in 1932. This trophy was won by Jimmy Jamieson's Stonehouse who beat Rigside at Loch Park, Carluke, on the final day of a memorable 1970/71 season.

At the end-of-season meeting, Jimmy Stewart successfully argued that the Under-13s should play Summer football in future, with the new season to run from April to September 1971. This allowed us to introduce a mixed age Under-15 league for teams with an aggregate age of 149 years for the winter season 1970/71.

This not only accommodated those players who were now too old for the Under-13 league, but also led to the establishment of the **South Lanarkshire Under-age Amateur Football Association** which would become the governing body for both Under-13 and Under-15 leagues.

At club level, Kirkfield United continued to grow apace. Their Under-13s, inspired by the exceptional Lee Barr, were 1971 league champions and completed the double when they lifted the Motherwell FC trophy in a nail-biting 4-3 victory over Carluke Burnwood at Lanark United's Moor Park.

Such was the degree of local interest, the game attracted a crowd of five hundred enthusiastic spectators, this being one of the best turnouts at Moor Park that year. The victorious team drove through Kirkfieldbank, displaying the cup from the back of an open truck, and completed a memorable day by going to the Regal picture house in Lanark to see 'Where Eagles Dare.' Our treasurer, Willie McSporrán, was the most unpopular man in the cinema when, to the disgust of the long queue behind him, he presented the usherette at the interval with his order for twenty-two ice creams and twenty-two drinks! Happy days, good memories.

1971/72 season saw the introduction of our very useful Under-15 side, playing under the watchful eye of Willie Smith's eldest son, Jim. Peter Foley, whose son, Ian, was our Under-13 right back, became the highly capable chairman of our increasingly large and hard working committee and former Rangers and Scotland captain George Young was elected Honorary President. It was remarkable how far we had come in such a short space of time, but without the support of parents and committee members it would have been impossible.

The 1971 Under-13 summer season had continued right through from the 1970/71 winter season and this proved to be immediately attractive, with enough new clubs applying and being accepted for membership to enable us to start the season with two strong divisions at this age group.

Lanark St Mary's, with ex Blackburn Rovers player Jimmy Bond and Frank Mackie in charge, **Carluk** EU, run by the indefatigable (if highly disorganised!) Martin Penman, assisted by Andy Ruthven, and **Smyllum Park Rovers**, (guided by Charlie Forsyth) may also have been involved in the latter stages of our first season, but I think they probably all arrived in the course of either the 1971 or 1972 Under-13 seasons.

So too did **Whitehill** from Carluk run by Phil Haverstock, **Forth Royals**, managed by Duncan Waye, **Meadowhill United** from Larkhall run by David Campbell with the assistance of John McStay (the father of Celtic's future captain, Paul, who played his first football at Under-13 level with Meadowhill in 1975) and **Lesmahagow**, who eventually suffered the same fate as Auchenheth and were expelled from the league.

Around the same time we saw the emergence of Larkhall sides **Avonbank**, managed by Jimmy Cringan, **Hareleeshill**, run by the very popular Larkhall Thistle legend, Martin Mulholland, and **Swinhill**, organised by the management team of Eddie Love and Alan Campbell. Some years later Alan branched out on his own to take his local village team in **Ashgill**.

Balmore, a Carluk side taken by Dick Morrow with the assistance of Dick Haddow, entered the league in 1972, as did Under-15 outfit **Carstairs Primrose**, with Joe O'Connell in charge. A year later, George Greirson and Jim Tattersal came in at Under-13 level with **Carluk Hornets**, while another Carluk side, **St Athenasius**, run by Tommy Duddy, made their first appearance a year or two later.

In order to keep costs at a minimum during the setting up period at Under-13 level, clubs were allowed to use unqualified referees (unpaid) to officiate at their matches, a situation that, generally speaking, went reasonably well. Nevertheless, it was only a stopgap measure and in the winter of 1973 the league organised a referees' course under the auspices of the Scottish Football Referees Association.

The course lasted a number of months and a dozen or so club officials, including Peter Foley, Jimmy Bond, Charlie Dobbie, Andy Ruthven, Frank Mackie and myself sat and passed the final exams, only to discover that, as club officials within the SAFA we would not be allowed to referee while we still held office with an affiliated club.

This conflict of interest saw Jimmy Bond leave St Mary's to take up refereeing, but the rest of us stayed with our clubs and were just pleased to have learned a great deal more about the laws of the game. Indeed, I would recommend every player and every manager at whatever level to take a crash course in the difficult task of refereeing. It would cut out much of the aggravation across the length and breadth of Britain on Saturday afternoons!

By the mid 1970s, the Association had expanded to take in another two leagues, one for 11 and 12 year-olds only, with an aggregate age of 127 years, and the other for 9 and 10 year-olds, with an aggregate age of 105 years. Reserve leagues for both were also introduced, ensuring that youngsters of lesser ability still had the opportunity to get a regular game. Right from the start, the idea was to get local kids involved, irrespective of talent, and the Association committee never forgot that objective.

Around the same time, St Mary's wound up, with Kirkfield benefitting from an injection of a number of new players and, more importantly, two new committee members in Jim Forrest and Frank Mackie whose sons also made the switch to United's ranks.

Both men were to have a massive influence in the future direction of our club, with Jim in particular being the driving force in our expansion from a small local boys club to one that could proudly take its place among the strongest youth football clubs in Scotland. Jim Forrest can justifiably carry the title of '*Mr Kirkfield.*'

A few years earlier, the Scottish Football Association had refused our request to allow small goalposts and small playing fields (such as the 62-yards-long pitch at Kirkfieldbank) to be used for competitive matches. Permission was also denied for the use of five substitutes (one for each age at 121 level, plus a goalkeeper) on the grounds that it violated international football rules as laid down by FIFA.

The fact that these rules applied to *adult* players cut no ice with the hide-bound dinosaurs of the SFA. Rules were rules, and no exceptions would be tolerated. Full stop. Forty years down the line I am amused to find that the SFA have finally caught up with reality and are organising 7-a-side matches on small pitches with miniature goals. It's taken a long time, but the penny's finally dropped! And even now they don't have it right, in my opinion.

Be that as it may, the SFA's decision forced United out of Kirkfieldbank and we were indebted to Lanark Provost Harry Smith for pushing through permission for Kirkfield to rent the facilities of the newly-built Kildare Park. By this time we had a host of teams playing at different levels and we led a fairly 'nomadic' existence, playing also at New Lanark and, occasionally, Lanark Racecourse and Winston Barracks.

The two playing fields at the Barracks were superb. Built on a thirty-foot bed of sand that provided perfect natural drainage, they were nearly always playable, even at times of torrential rainfall, when games throughout the land were being called off due to waterlogged pitches.

Kirkfield had the run of the place and put a lot of effort into the maintenance of the wooden pavilion, keeping it fresh and watertight. Visiting teams could hardly believe

the standard of our facilities, and on occasions our ladies' committee would also provide tea and sandwiches for those who had travelled a long distance, as, for example, in Scottish Cup ties.

By the mid 1980s we had teams playing from Under-11 to Under-16 levels, playing within the South Lanarkshire leagues, (mixed age sides) the Lanarkshire YMCA leagues, (single age sides) and the elite Scottish Amateur Youth leagues, where we played sides such as Rangers BC, Celtic BC, and Motherwell BC at every level from Under-12 to Under-16 years, winning the Scottish Amateur Cup at Under-12 level with Tich Campbell's side in 1986. (?)

Each side had its own sub-committee and was responsible for its own funding for league fees, strips, footballs, transport, referees and the like. Payment was also made to club funds, to which all sides had access for emergency expenditure that may from time to time arise.

The organisation of such a wide range of activities fell, to a major extent, on the shoulders of Jim Forrest who, as our new club chairman, used every ounce of his energy and impressive powers of persuasion to keep everything on a level keel. It was a massive task and I can think of few others who would have been capable of seeing it through.

Not content with that, Jim was the driving force behind the organisation of foreign trips, starting with return visits to Yvtot, Normandy, in 1981 and followed by trips to Holland (twice) Amiens, and Germany. (Frank Mackie and I had a full head of hair before these adventures!)

As could be expected, some of our players caught the eye of senior clubs, with a number of boys signing 'S Forms' or taking up apprenticeships in the senior ranks. Dougal McCarrison went to Celtic and we are particularly proud of Robert Douglas who was signed by Meadowbank from the amateur ranks, going on to play for Dundee before his transfer to Celtic and his elevation to the International stage as Scotland's regular goalkeeper with a total of 19 caps.

* * *

Time, as the saying goes, has the nasty habit of marching on and nothing lasts forever. As the 1980's gave way to the 90s, the Barracks were bought over and pressure of work allowed things to slip from the control of the pioneers who had laid the foundations of success for both Club and Association.

As players outgrew the youth leagues and the interest of their parents naturally dwindled, it was left to the next generation of coaches to pick up where Jim and his colleagues had left off. A number of the new coaches had themselves played for Kirkfield or other clubs within the Association and this continuity is very pleasing to the 'old guard.'

I have now learned that Jim is once again getting involved (this time with his grandchildren) and with all his enthusiasm and experience, the future is bright for yet another successful chapter in the history of Kirkfield United Boys Club.

I wish everyone, old and young alike, continued success in the years ahead and may they often experience the warm glow of satisfaction that stems from a difficult job well done.

Good luck, and more power to all your elbows!