



"From Linktown to the League Cup: Raith Rovers since 1883"



John Litster was born in Kirkcaldy, leaving as an infant when his father was transferred to Glasgow by Michael Nairn & Co. He returned in 1984 to work for Alma Confectionery. A Raith Rovers supporter, he has written five books on the Club, about a dozen more on other football topics, and "Scottish Football Historian" has a memory seared into his mind which very few can share or have experienced.. On Sunday the 27th November 1994, as a Raith director in the main stand at Ibrox, he was able to view the explosion of undiluted joy from the opposite stand, as the Raith Rover's support in the Scottish League Cup was won. For those who follow this possibly unfashionable provincial club - that was our day - that was our hour.



We are delighted that a man who has been a supporter, programme editor director and club historian has accepted our invitation to write on a subject dear to many in the "Lang Toon"

Football with a semblance of organisation first emerged in Kirkcaldy in 1880, three years before the birth of its enduring practitioner. Before that, spectator sports were restricted to the cramped confines of the quaiting green, the cricket fields of Kirkcaldy and Dunnikier, and the rugby pitch at Newtown Park.

The round ball game was enthusiastically practised by the town's youngsters on the sands and on grassy parklands, but it was not until 1880 that Kirkcaldy Wanderers Football Club was formed



After a few desultory kick-about in the evenings, the Wanderers club was properly constituted at a meeting held in the People's Club and Institute, and Joe Turner, the father of association football in Kirkcaldy, was elected their first captain. He had previously played for the Hanover Club in Edinburgh and, like several of his team-mates, worked for A. Beveridge, Printers, where he was a bookbinder. His vice-captain was James Pollock who brought with him his workmates from A. McIntosh, Cabinetmakers.

Councillor Robert Stark, who for many years carried on a licensed business at the West Bridge, generously placed a grazing field leased by him (from the Laird of Raith) on Calloch Brae (now Pratt Street) at the disposal of the Wanderers, free of charge, and so in the spring of 1881 the pioneer club moved into the field now known throughout the football world as Stark's Park.

The new sport developed rapidly in Kirkcaldy during 1883, following the example of the Wanderers over the previous two years. A group of young men from the Links area of the town started kicking a ball about Sands Brae (now the Esplanade), in the area behind Peter Purvis's school on Links Street.



The youngsters' first formal meeting was convened at the Linktown Pottery kiln, the principal point of discussion being the name by which they were to be known. Rovers was chosen

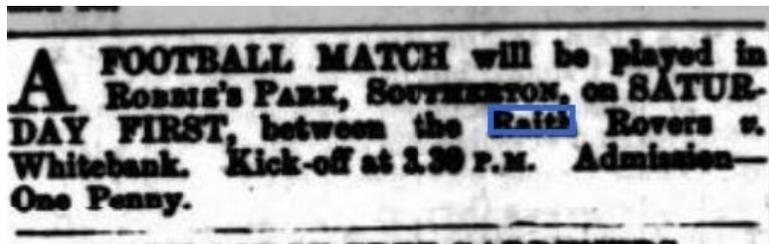
because no other local club had that appellation; they added the name of the local landed estate in the hope of gaining the Laird's patronage, which would give the club additional standing in a deferential community along with the prospect of an annual donation from its well-heeled patron.

The Kirkcaldy Times of Wednesday 19th December 1883 made its first mention of a name that was to become familiar. "Football - a match was played on Saturday in Mr Kinninmonth's park between the 1st West End Rangers and the 1st Raith Rovers. Rangers 5 goals Rovers nothing." The ground was also known as "The Skating Pond", and a return match was played at Rovers' pitch near Windygates Farm, in the approximate area of the present day golf clubhouse at Balwearie.



Their burgeoning ambitions required a better pitch than the open field in the Tiel valley, and they secured the use of a field at the old clay hole behind the railway line,

afterwards converted into a refuse depot and now the site of the handsome row of houses in Balwearie Road. Led by secretary Bob Donaldson, they approached the Laird of Raith's factor, with some trepidation, to enquire about leasing a pitch at Robbie's Park. The factor's house was well known to them in their Linktown playground, as it was located in Mill Street, beneath the steep slope to the Wanderers' ground on Councillor Stark's park (and later used as the offices for Sivewright's dairy). They were well received and returned jubilant from having secured a pitch for four months of the year, for a very reasonable rent.



A FOOTBALL MATCH will be played in **ROBBIE'S PARK, SOUTHINGTON,** on **SATURDAY FIRST,** between the **Raith Rovers** v. **Whitebank.** Kick-off at **2.30 P.M.** Admission—**One Penny.**

Their first match at Robbie's Park was on 29th March 1884 when they "unexpectedly" beat Whitebank Engineers, a team made up from the "black squad" of Key's engineering works, 2-0. This semi-enclosure allowed them to charge admission money, initially 1d, and their first gate amounted to 3s 9d (in other words 45 people paid to watch). The players and officials were young – in their mid-teens - and they all lived in the Links Street area. "Nearly every wynd in the Links had its football club"

The Kirkcaldy Junior Football Association was formed at a Thursday evening meeting in Morrison's Hall in February 1886 and the teams represented were : Albion, Rovers, Union, Dunnikier, Fern, Royal Oak, Crown, Eastern,

Kirkcaldy Star, Thistle, St Clair Blues, Blackburn, Parkhill, Abden, Ramblers, Ravenscraig Rangers. By the time the first round of the inaugural Kirkcaldy Junior Cup was drawn a fortnight later, five more clubs had joined, Rosslands (Kinghorn), Eclipse, Loughborough Swifts, Giffen Park (Dysart) and St Clair Star.

Later that year the “enterprising and most promising junior club had successfully negotiated for and obtained a piece of Robbie’s Park for their private use all the year round.” The new ground was positioned on the site now occupied by the Beveridge Park gardener’s house and a portion of the ornamental gardens, near the corner of



Boglily Road and Southerton Road.

Having achieved dominance in local and county Junior circles, and with the comparatively new railway transforming travel around Scotland,

Rovers turned senior in 1889, although they had some difficulty in enticing some of their players to move to that grade, as there was no monetary incentive, professionalism not yet having been adopted in Scotland. Provost Robert Beveridge’s death on 4th March 1890, aged 54, also



brought difficulties. On 23rd June the Town Council voted that Robbie's Park would be the site for the new public park, funded by Beveridge's bequest, meaning that Raith Rovers had to find a new home. They were fortunate in obtaining the lease of Stark's Park and their wooden pavilion made the journey down Abbotshall Road and Pratt Street, losing a gable ornament in the process.



The new senior club had to cast its net wider to attract better players, and the first to make a significant impression was former Hearts and Burnley centre half or centre forward Willie McKay. Although not designated as such, he was effectively the club's first player-coach, using his experience to influence by play and example.

Success came early; the King Cup was won in 1891 and following the example of the newly formed Scottish League, Rovers joined the Midland League, and won it, in 1892, when the Fife Cup was also captured for the first time.



Five trophies were gathered in 1897/98, two of them East of Scotland cup competitions, two Fife county competitions, and Kirkcaldy Wanderers were beaten 6-0 and 8-0 in the Nairn Cup. There was worse to come for the town's oldest football club. "Near the

top of Milton Road a new street is to be made to run eastwards and meet the new street emerging on Nicol Street called

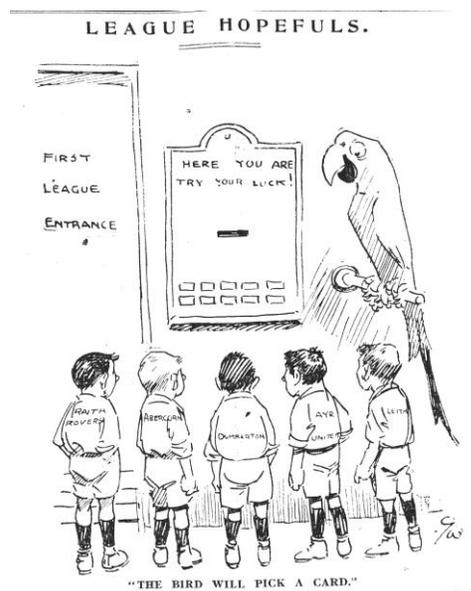
Beveridge Road. This street will cut through the Newton Park - the lease of which by the Wanderers Football Club expires next month - and will run straight on to Milton Road. Most of the



ground on the line of the street has already been feued, while almost the whole of Newton Park has also been feued and building operations will commence soon as the

tenancy of the Club expires.” Generations of football supporters attending Stark’s Park in the ensuing 122 years have parked their cars on Ava Street on the site of Newton Park.

Homeless Wanderers became the amateur club Kirkcaldy FC, and after a few years of absence re-formed as Kirkcaldy United, who played with some success in Pathhead until they failed to emerge from the First World War.

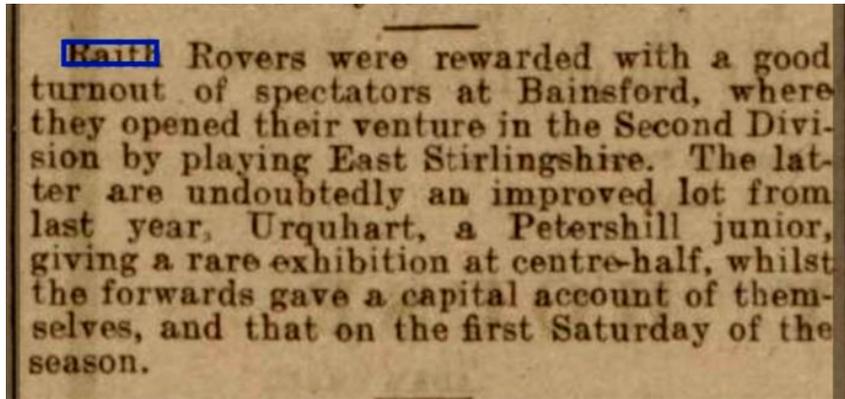


Rovers applied annually for election to the Second Division of the Scottish League, and while they continued to gather local and regional cups and attract enviable attendances, they were unsuccessful until 1902, when as Northern League champions and East of Scotland Qualifying Cup winners, they accompanied Falkirk into the national league.

The bad news was that the team whose success had earned the club election to the Scottish League was dismantled by its players joining First Division clubs. Three left for Dundee and star striker Alex Mackie signed for Rangers. Rovers received not a penny for the loss of

more than half their team before the introduction of the retain-or-transfer system of contract registration.

Despite their appearance on the national stage, local considerations still prevailed, and the opening League



match against

East Stirling

on Saturday

August 16th

1902 was

switched to

Bainsford,

due to the

Raith Band Contest in Kirkcaldy. Hynd scored Rovers' first goal in the Scottish League, from the penalty spot, but East Stirling scored four times to give Rovers a sobering start to their League career.

A sign of the problems which were to befall Rovers in that difficult, debut season was that they started their first ever home Scottish League match with nine men on the pitch. The two latecomers eventually appeared, having missed Mr Michael Nairn of Bendhue unfurl the Northern League championship flag, in doing so "expressing the hope that this would not be the last championship flag [Rovers] would have the honour of winning."

With the benefit of historical perspective, the Kirkcaldy Times of 28th December 1904 contained an article, not in the sports columns, of greater significance to Raith Rovers than most of that season's match reports. As linen manufacture, the traditional staple industry of the town, gently declined, Kirkcaldy became renowned for its manufacture of floor coverings, principally linoleum.

Michael Nairn & Co, and Barry, Ostlere & Shepherd dominated the world-wide supply of an essential household product, in the days before fitted carpets and laminate flooring. The wonder has always been as to why some of the former companies' riches never found their way towards Stark's Park.

"Last night the annual treat to the Old Folks was given at the Corn Exchange. 500 were entertained. Sir Michael Nairn, Dysart House, presided, accompanied by Lady Nairn, the Misses Nairn and a number of local clergymen. Sir Michael, in his opening remarks, after referring to the entertainments provided at this season of the year as counter attractions to the public house, dealt with the question of football, and stated that he was approached the previous day for a subscription to assist a Football Club in Kirkcaldy.

"The club had got into debt to the extent of £150. When he received the application it fairly staggered him. He approved of football, and thought it was very good in its own way if kept within certain limits, but in making enquiries into the application he found that this Football Club paid about £15 a week in wages to professional men. This was all humbug (hear, hear and applause). That was not sport at all, and he did not intend to give a penny to that club (hear, hear and applause). He was quite willing to give support to the recreation of young men, but he wished it to be made public that he would not support such a form of sport as this professional football. It was time, he added, that an end was put to such sport as that (applause)."

The club struggled to make its mark on the 12-club Second Division, with 11th, 5th, 10th, 8th and 10th placed finishes in the first five seasons, the last of which, 1906-07, provided a turning point, with the winning of the club's first national trophy when they beat St Bernard's in a replayed Scottish Qualifying Cup Final.



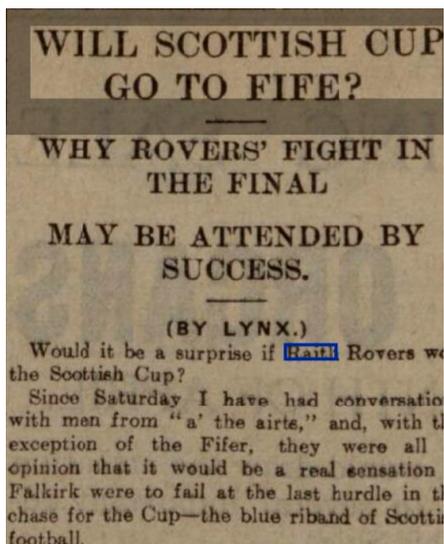
J. James, *Manager*, E. Wilkie, A. Mison, J. Manning, W. Downie, A. Green, R. Davidson, *Secy.*,
A. Inglis, G. Dalrymple, G. M'Nicol, *Captain*, E. Gourlay, A. Cumming,
J. G. Mitchell, J. McDavid.
RAITH ROVERS F.C.—Winners of Scottish Qualifying Cup 1906-07.

The importance of the run to the final of the Qualifying Cup cannot be overstated. The revenue from the two final matches (aggregate attendance 25,000) transformed the club's hitherto precarious finances as they struggled to pay Scottish League wages to their players.

A new attendance record was set for Stark's Park when Hearts won a third round replay in March 1907, which the visitors had not relished. They offered half the gate (including the stand), would pay all expenses and give free admission to Rovers' members (ie season ticket holders) to have the second match at Tynecastle, but the lucrative offer was turned down, leaving Rovers with a lot of work to undertake in a fortnight. Additional pay boxes were erected, and "the work of banking up Stark's Park has been begun for the purpose of providing the extra accommodation that will be necessary for the great replay." The construction of the mounds behind both

goals, which would eventually include substantial terracing, began with this fixture. "The new railway embankment proved to be popular with the crowd, the grandstand and enclosure in front were full, as was the seated accommodation around the field of play." £310 was taken at the 17 payboxes, plus £60 from the Stand and Enclosure, by some distance a record for Fife, as an estimated 17,000 watched a great contest which Rovers were unfortunate to lose to a Bobby Walker goal. Rovers also had their share of a 15,000 attendance at the first match at Tynecastle Park.

The club's new found wealth was put to good effect in strengthening the team, which shared the Second Division Championship with Leith Athletic the following season. Two second-placed finishes in the following seasons bolstered Rovers' case for election to the First Division, which was finally successful in 1910. In 1907, the members' (i.e. season-ticket holders) club was transformed into a Limited Liability Company.



As before, transition to the higher level proved to be difficult, with 15th, 15th and 16th placed finishes in the 18-club League, the last of which coincided with the club's one and only Scottish Cup Final (to date (!)) which was lost by 2-0 to Falkirk at Celtic Park on

12th April 1913. To compete in the First Division, the club had to recruit from further afield, and their first internationalist, Harry Anderson, who played for Scotland against Wales on 28th February 1914, was from Rutherglen, via Hibernian.



Football moved back-stage with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, and after five of their players had enlisted in McCrae's Battallion "Raith Rovers directors have generously intimated to their players that any who enlist and are called into active service before the end of the football season will be paid half wages." No fewer than seventeen Raith Rovers players eventually enlisted, seven of them in "The Footballer's Battalion." The team finished 19th, 20th (bottom) and 19th in the first three seasons of war-time League football.

Spirits at Stark's Park were further depressed by the outcome of a meeting of the Scottish Football League in Glasgow on 15th March 1917, concerning the following season. "The opinion was expressed that owing to the difficulties in securing teams and the reduced travelling facilities, a splitting up of the competition has become a necessity. After a prolonged debate, it was officially intimated that the League had decided that "Dundee, Aberdeen and Raith Rovers be asked to refrain from taking part in the competition next season, and that the average on-cost charges of these three clubs, from the last three years, be met by the clubs taking part in the competition

next season. Should the restrictions continue at the opening of next season, a League may be formed to include Aberdeen, Dundee, Raith Rovers and the leading Fife clubs.”

1917-18 was spent, unenthusiastically, in the Eastern League, and only a handful of friendlies were played the following season. On the eve of the 1919/20 season, the club’s directors enunciated their hopes and aspirations.



“Two factors that should help the ‘gates’ very considerably at Stark’s Park in the coming season are that the bulk of the club’s supporters are now demobilised, and that the Rosyth workers, of whom there are a very large

number, are now having a half holiday on Saturday, a boon which they did not have in war-time. Altogether matters are looking very hopeful, and a most successful season is anticipated at Stark’s Park.”

The optimism was not matched by results, with 19th and 16th placed finishes in the 22-club League, but that changed dramatically in 1921/22, when only Celtic and Rangers finished above Raith Rovers, the club’s highest ever place in Scottish League football. That was the first of four golden seasons in



the League, with a fourth place in 1923/24 and some marvellous football and footballers in the club's colours.



As before, success came by recruitment from across Scotland.

Centre half Dave Morris, who captained Scotland in half of his six appearances, was from Leith and Alex James, arguably the greatest player in pre-war world football, was born in Lanarkshire, as was centre forward Tom Jennings who still holds Leeds United's goalscoring record. Closer to home, John "Tokey" Duncan was from Lochgelly and would be capped by Scotland at his next club, Leicester City, and full back Bill Collier, the third player to be capped for Scotland while at Stark's Park, was from Pathhead.



The building of a new - and extremely durable - stand in 1925 diverted funds from the team and necessitated the sale of star players resulting in relegation in



1927, followed by immediate promotion and relegation again in 1929 which ushered in an unprecedented spell of nine seasons in the Second Division during which the club

seriously considered reverting to amateur status as it flirted with extinction. Only the fund-raising exploits of the recently formed and energetic Supporters Club kept the club afloat.

The 1937/38 team, hastily assembled by manager Sandy Archibald, surprised everyone by winning the Second Division Championship by scoring a (thus far unassailed) British record of 142 goals in 34 League games, but it proved to be a false dawn and the team were relegated on their return to the top division.

Another World War in 1939 brought no end of difficulties, but the club was wonderfully sustained under the caretaker management of Kirkcaldy coal merchant Willie Reekie, who had run the successful Abbotshall junior club before the war. As he had always intended, Willie stood down when peace-time football resumed in 1945, leaving both club and ground intact, and the makings of a decent team.

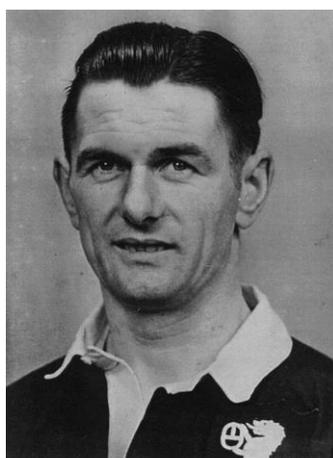
He was succeeded by his brother-in-law Bert Herdman, a french polisher who had been treasurer of the Supporters club since 1930 and had run the successful and prolific juvenile club Raith Athletic during the war. The first two seasons of post-war football saw a modest improvement from 16th to 14th place, and in 1948/49 the club were promoted back to the First Division as champions, also reaching the Scottish League Cup final where they lost to treble-winning Rangers.



Star striker Jackie Stewart had been sold to Birmingham City for £8,000 a year before, smashing the club's transfer record. The opportunity was taken to dissolve the two debt-laden companies (the Football Club, and the Grandstand Company) and form a single, solvent corporate entity. Large gates in the promotion winning season (24,150 attended the last-day promotion decider against Dunfermline Athletic), the run to the League Cup final and the 47,000 who attended the replayed second round Scottish Cup tie against Hibs gave the club a substantial war-chest for their return to the top division, in which they remained for an unprecedented 14 years under the astute guidance of two former Supporters Club officials, manager Bert Herdman and Chairman Jimmy Gourlay, a primary school headmaster.



There was a respectable start with 9th and 6th placed finishes, then a very commendable 5th in 1951-52, followed by three seasons at the wrong end of the table in the ultra-competitive 16 club division; but they survived to enjoy the comparative comfort of a top division expanded



to 18 clubs, in which Rovers finished in fourth place in 1956-57. There were three Scottish Cup semi finals, two of them lost in “we wuz robbed” circumstances in what was truly the club’s golden era.

And what players! Left back turned centre half Willie McNaught’s five Scotland caps would have been multiplied several times over had he played for the Old Firm; Andy Young and Andy Leigh were half backs of the highest quality, as were outside right Jimmy McEwan and right back Willie Polland, and in attack there were few more prolific goalscorers in Scottish football than Ernie Copland and Bernie Kelly. Later recruits sparkled too, such as future Lisbon Lion Willie Wallace and Jim Baxter who, like Alex James, would develop into one of Scotland’s all-time great footballers.



After a brush with relegation the previous season, Bert Herdman was replaced in October 1961 by former Hibs’ manager Hugh Shaw, nine years his senior. The club was relegated in 1962/63 with nine points, and no home wins

the League, although they did reach the semi finals of the Scottish Cup, where they were heavily beaten by Celtic.

It took four attempts to return to the top division under manager George Farm who promptly left for Dunfermline Athletic, and that spell in the top flight lasted just three seasons before relegation in 1970. It took 23 years for the club to return to Scottish football's top tier, a dispiriting period of the club's history which saw attendances fall to below 500 and included five seasons spent in a third division which had been formed when the Scottish League was reconstructed in 1975. There were



two flirtations with promotion to the top tier, in 1972/73 during George Farm's second spell as manager, and 1980/1 under Gordon Wallace when a commanding lead at the turn of the year was agonisingly overhauled by three other promotion contenders.



The foundations of a long-awaited recovery were laid during Frank Connor's four years as manager, and his young and ambitious replacement, Jimmy Nicholl, completed a very entertaining and successful championship winning side in 1993. There was an immediate relegation, but a controversial financial reconstruction of the club's shareholding paved the way for another second-tier



championship - and the club's first national senior trophy success when Celtic were beaten in a penalty-kick decider in the Scottish League Cup Final at Ibrox Park on 27th November 1994.



With that victory came qualification for European football, with a memorable run in the UEFA Cup and the unaccustomed heights of six place in the Scottish Premier Division the following season. Despite the influx of money from on-field success, the sale of star players in an inflated transfer market and a grant-aided reconstruction of Stark's Park into an all-seated stadium, the new look club was not built on strong foundations and after just two seasons found itself back in the second tier following Nicholl's rancorous departure.

If the 23 seasons between 1970 and 1993 seemed a long time for Raith Rovers fans to wait for top flight football to return to Kirkcaldy, the current spell of 24 seasons has

been no less painful. As in the previous lacuna, the club has twice flirted with a return to the top flight, in 2010/11 under John McGlynn, and 2015/16 under Ray McKinnon, but there have been miserable times too, with eight seasons spent in the third tier [there was another reconstruction to four divisions in 1994]. There were fifteen changes of manager and heavy financial losses resulted in the club relinquishing ownership of Stark's Park in September 2003.

The history of Kirkcaldy has been reflected in the fortunes of its senior football team across the decades since its foundation almost 140 years ago; early growth fuelled by the fruits of the industrial revolution; periodic slumps during trade depressions followed by years of plenty during the post-war consumer boom, but latterly a long struggle to manage the difficulties of de-industrialisation. Yet still both survive, and for its football club, there is Always Next Season.

