

# WHAT WAS FOOTBALL LIKE IN THE 1980s?



**RICHARD  
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## Chapter 1

# Four Decades Later – The Wasps, The Jags, The Gers...

IT SEEMED a good idea at the time. And POMO – Position of Maximum Opportunity – came to mind. I'd first heard the term used as the football mantra of Charles Hughes, the FA's director of coaching, in the 1960s. His approach on the football field was to get the ball into the opposition's six-yard box as quickly as possible – statistically the area where most goals are scored. In the 1980s, there were managers of clubs who applied this mantra.

My POMO was a little different. My partner, Jennifer, was away for six weeks visiting her daughter and granddaughter in New Zealand, giving me every opportunity to indulge my passion and interest in going to watch live football. Scottish football appealed. I'd been to a few grounds in Scotland but here was the chance to go to town and spend a weekend there.

Fixtures researched on the internet, the best weekend promised to be Friday, 4 October, Saturday, 5 October and Sunday, 6 October (2019) – respectively Alloa Athletic v Dundee United, 7.05pm kick-off, Partick Thistle v Queen of the South, 3pm kick-off, Glasgow Rangers v Hamilton Academical, 3pm kick-off.

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I toyed with the idea of a 'double-header' on the Sunday – Livingston v Glasgow Celtic at 12 noon before the game at Ibrox. Logistics in the way – it was almost impossible to see a way of watching the Hoops play the full game at Livingston and travel to the Gers for a 3pm kick-off using public transport. Foolhardy to attempt the task.

The Scottish weekend would mean missing (Sheffield) Wednesday's game at home to Wigan Athletic on the Saturday afternoon, but sacrifices had to be made.

Internet again – check the train times, connections and costs, and then the hotels. The thought of travelling from home in Hertfordshire to Scotland and back by car was a non-starter. Travel by rail looked remarkably straightforward – Home to Alloa – train at 08.28 on Friday into London St Pancras International, London Kings Cross to Edinburgh, change for the train to Croy (where?), change at Croy for Alloa, arrive Alloa at 15.34.

Game kicks off at 7.05pm – televised live on BBC Scotland.

Cost of travel by train with railcard discount, £55.10 – plus £1.30 admin fee. Seemed good value. Booked two weeks in advance.

Tickets for the games – register online with Glasgow Rangers and Partick Thistle and tickets then purchased. Website only for Alloa Athletic, no tickets for purchase online.

Single tickets only available at Ibrox – purchased one in the Sandy Jardine Stand Lower for the game – £29 plus the admin charge; many tickets available at Partick Thistle's Firhill – purchased one in the Jackie Husband Stand, £20 plus the admin charge.

For Alloa, the website stated a ticket price of £18 – no further information. The capacity at the oddly named Indodrill Stadium was 3,100 – that looked low. This could be a problem

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– the club website had an e-mail address for supporters to contact if they had any questions. ‘Can I purchase in advance or is it pay at the turnstile on the night?’ and ‘How long to walk from the hotel to the ground?’ The response was quick and very helpful – pay on the turnstile, the presumption must be they’re not expecting a capacity crowd, I’d get there early in any event to beat any rush and guarantee a place in the ground.

All booked and done, the first leg of three at Alloa. But I had no idea of the location of Alloa. I’d booked everything without knowing that basic fact. I hadn’t needed to. Indeed, for a while I felt a little ashamed that my education had not provided me with an understanding of the geography of Scotland. I checked. Alloa is in Clackmannanshire, five miles from the more well-known Stirling.

And the football club? I knew next to nothing about Alloa Athletic. They played in the Scottish Championship, wore yellow and black and were nicknamed ‘The Wasps’. Beyond that, nothing. Disappointed with my ignorance, I set out to learn more. The club website was my primary source – the Wasps formed in 1883, were champions of Scottish League Division Two in 1921/22. And that was it – no other football honours. The capacity of their home ground, the Recreation Ground, was recorded in 1980 as 9,000.

Most individual league goals in a season – 49 – scored by Wee Crilly in 1931/32, and their most capped player, Jock Hepburn, made one international appearance for Scotland in 1890/91.

The Indodrill Stadium (sponsor’s name) was referred to by many locals as the ‘Rec’ – they had been the second-to-last Scottish League club to install floodlights at their ground in 1979, Stranraer’s Stair Park the only ground floodlightless for longer.

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Having arrived in good time in Alloa, I made for the ground ... and there it was, oddly shaped floodlights leaning over, almost apologetically, from the Clackmannan Road side of the ground. A quick walk around the three sides of the ground that were accessible – Alloa Athletic's home a 'stadium'? Not in my book.

Forty-five minutes before kick-off, there were many away supporters outside the ground sporting their tangerine and black favours.

The primary entrance to the ground was the best bet – on the same side that players and officials entered. Once inside, a look around – I'd call this a ground at best, and one that has most probably seen better days. An elevated section of ten rows of seating stretches half the length of one side from where the players' tunnel emerges, and opposite a smaller stand with seats similarly stretching halfway down one side. Standing at pitch level was possible at either end of the two stands.

The two ends – a covered end with shallow terracing, and an open end with similarly shallow terracing.

Refreshment bar, I joined a small queue – the guy in front of me asked for a 'stovie'. Looking at the refreshments available, no mention of a stovie. Intrigued, I asked the stovie purchaser, 'Excuse me, what's a stovie?'

'You dinnae know what a stovie is?' he responded with a marked tone of incredulity. Others turned and looked.

I resisted the temptation to respond, 'Why do you think I'm asking you if I knew what it was?' Diplomacy better here. 'No, I don't, I'm a Sassenach and live south of the border.'

This seemed to appeal to stovie man, chest puffed out a little. 'A stovie is basically pieces of meat with vegetables,' he paused momentarily, 'though the stovie here will not be as good as the ones I make myself.'

His timing in reflecting his prowess at stovie-making was ill judged – the stovie-serving lady had turned to him at that instant. The purchaser looked down, ensuring no eye contact, handed over his money (£1) and was on his way, stovie in hand.

For the record, the stovie was served in a polystyrene cup – the type that might contain soup. The content looked just like the purchaser had described – to the hitherto uneducated Englishman, it looked like the ingredients for a stew without gravy. And it was hot – a distinct benefit to warm the hands.

Time to find a place to sit in the ground – the stand opposite the players' tunnel looked the best spot, closest to the action. Walking round, it was clear it had been sectioned off, crates and pieces of tape across the terracing indicating it was out of bounds. Oh well, back to the main stand – up the stairs and to the steward. 'Am I OK to sit here?'

'Are you a season ticket holder?'

'No.'

'This is for season ticket holders only.'

'Where can I sit, then?'

'The stand over there.'

'But that's sectioned off just there,' I pointed out.

'Is it? Go around the other corner then and get in that way.'

No point engaging further. His knowledge of the apparent crowd-control measures in place was distinctly lacking. To the other corner – here a piece of tape stretched between two bins at the top and bottom of the terracing, presumably to denote this was sectioned off too. No matter – three girls lifted the tape and walked underneath towards the main stand. I lifted the tape and walked away from the main stand. Stewards watched and ignored.

I took a place amongst the Dundee United supporters in the stand. It became clear this stand and the open terracing



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I'd walked across was for away fans. The main stand and covered stand for home fans. Away fans here in numbers and in confident mood ahead of the game – they were top of the Championship and Alloa Athletic were bottom.

The league placings were reflected on the Ladbrokes coupon offering odds on the game – 3/1 a home win, 4/6 a win for their opponents.

With the game televised live on BBC Scotland, there were two bright lights at pitch level illuminating the area for pre-match interviews and they were far brighter than the ground's floodlights.

The game under way, the home side gave as good as they got and more besides. Within 14 minutes they had cut open what purported to be a defence, quick, incisive one-touch passing, and the ball swept in. Disgruntlement amongst the away support. That disgruntlement was to increase as the game progressed – the Wasps, the part-timers, were certainly the better team on the night. It was a good, competitive, open game; the home team made more chances than their fully professional opponents.

Much had been made of the Tangerines' striker, Lawrence Shankland, a prolific goalscorer who had been called up to the Scotland national squad for the first time a couple of days earlier. He barely had the proverbial look-in.

And to rub salt into the travelling supporters' wounds, the Alloa fans' chant of 'When the Wasps go marching in' was heard again and again as the game drew to its conclusion. Quite where and when the Wasps had last marched in, I don't know; that had no relevance for the home support as they took the game, 1-0.

In the following morning's *Daily Record*, Alloa boss Peter Grant was quoted, 'I was chuffed with that.' His opposite

number, Robbie Neilson, commented, 'If you're at Dundee United you have to win 50-50s, headers and second balls. You have to be aggressive with the press. We were letting people pass the ball around us. The quality wasn't there tonight.'

The crowd was 1,717, the majority supporting the away team. The programme for the game did not highlight previous attendances but it seemed reasonable to conclude that tonight's was likely to be the season's highest.

And the programme – £2, it had the usual information you'd expect to see – Manager's Notes, away team information and an 'On this Day' (4 October) feature ... which included club photographer David Glencross, born on this day in 1960.

A first for me at the game – the first time I'd seen a football team play in black and yellow hooped shirts – the Wasps.

Different colours at the next game – red and yellow striped shirts for Partick Thistle.

On the Thursday before the Scottish Football fest weekend, the postman had been and gone without delivering a ticket from Partick Thistle. He may come on the Friday morning, but my plan was to be travelling north on the Alloa Express by that time. The ticket would languish on the doormat.

Call to Partick Thistle – the usual automated voice came on identifying the caller's options, depending on who the call was intended for. Fortunately, option 1 for the ticket office – automated voice-man cut off in mid-flow as the number 1 was pressed. A lady's voice on the other end, engaging and friendly – problem explained, she said, 'Two seconds honey while I put you on hold briefly.' Not expecting to be called honey, very friendly. Time goes slower north of the border; her estimated time to come back was out by more than a 1,000 per cent, but no matter, the friendly and engaging voice was back:

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‘I’ve found you. I’ve got the ticket. I’ll arrange for it to be at the Jackie Husband Stand reception on Saturday afternoon. You can collect it from there.’

‘Thank you.’

‘No problem, darling. I hope you enjoy the game.’

Call done and completed within two minutes and in that time I’d been referred to as ‘honey’ and ‘darling’. You don’t get that at the Hillsborough ticket office.

I needed to do a bit of research on Partick Thistle before my visit. I’d known only one ‘Jags’ supporter – Neil Roden, then HR Director for the Royal Bank of Scotland – when I worked there. I met Neil a couple of times and his passion for the club shone through. I recollect asking him about what I’d heard about Partick Thistle supporters, and whether it was true that in Glasgow the Protestants supported Rangers, the Catholics supported Celtic, and agnostics supported Thistle. Neil looked at me more than a little quizzically and said, ‘No.’

And Thistle? – amongst other players, Alan Hansen started his career there before joining Liverpool and having great success in the 1970s and 1980s.

Now the football – train from Alloa to Glasgow on Saturday morning – £6. Book into the hotel, then a walk to Firhill, the home of Partick Thistle. Google Maps – journey 2.7 miles. Made it with the odd unintended detour as either the software, the iPhone or the operator failed to pick up a change of direction at the right point. No matter. Approaching Firhill there was one pub, the Star and Garter, clearly Thistle, red and yellow chequered flags hanging outside.

Closer to the ground on Firhill Road, the constituency office of Patrick Grady, the Scottish Nationalist Party MP who represented Glasgow North. A picture of a smiling

Mr Grady was included in the match day programme (£3), highlighting his availability for constituents.

I purchased a Thistle yellow, black and red bar scarf (£9) from the Thistle store – it was cold for early October and the scarf would serve a useful purpose. Noticing the label on it – ‘Made in England’ – I wondered what Mr Grady would make of it. Certainly, the whole issue of Brexit was to the fore at the time and the SNP were making clear they were looking for another independence referendum. Could the days of the Thistle scarf being produced south of the border be numbered?

I circumnavigated the ground – a steep hill from Firhill Road to walk behind both ends. Ticket collected from a man with a box of tickets in the Jackie Husband Stand (Google research showed Husband had played for Thistle from 1938–50, had made 371 appearances and been capped twice for Scotland, and that was not the half of it – he spent a total of 52 years at Firhill as player, captain, trainer, coach, physio and kitman).

One thing was noticeable about the frontage of the ground on Firhill Road – it looked dated and a little tired. There were turnstiles at one end of the road with faded lettering on signs above the turnstile doors, ‘Parent and Child £5.00, OAPs and Boys £2.00.’ It looked as if the turnstiles had not been used for some time.

Once inside the ground it became clear why – the all-seated Jackie Husband Stand runs the length of the pitch down one side, opposite the old main stand. To the left and behind the goal was open grass banking with a scaffold in place for a television camera. The old turnstiles would have provided access to this area, but no longer. It was not in use for spectators.

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The other end had yellow and red banners and flags on display at the rear of this covered stand – it looked like the popular end for Thistle supporters. As kick-off approached, it became clear that the two areas of the ground used for spectators was the covered stand at one end of the ground and the Jackie Husband Stand. Except not quite – the main stand had no spectators apart from one area, the Directors' Box, which had a full complement in its seated area. It looked surreal – a large old stand with no spectators save for this isolated area in the middle.

Fans' singing took place before the game – I recognised none of the songs. This may have been in part because my ear was not attuned to the melodious tunes being sung with a marked Glaswegian accent. That said, I picked up one line, 'Oh Maryhill is wonderful.' Maryhill is the district of Glasgow where Firhill is situated. Wonderful? – its beauty would be in the eye of the beholder, with its many high-rise blocks.

Thistle were managed by Ian McCall – this his second game in charge in his second spell at the club. There was confidence in the air – the previous week Thistle had won 3-1 at Inverness. On the betting coupon Ladbrokes quoted 5/6 the win for Thistle, 5/2 a win for their opponents.

The confidence was misplaced – the only goal of the game a header in the second half by Queen of the South's Darren Brownlie, direct from a corner. The Thistle faithful were increasingly restless from that point – whether manager McCall's post-match assessment brought them any comfort is open to doubt. 'We did not deserve to lose the game – that's a given – although I don't think we deserved to win it.' (*Sunday Post*). Seems a roundabout way of saying he thought it should have been a draw – for my part I thought Queen of the South were good value for the win.

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The crowd totalled 2,910, of which the stadium announcer stated 259 were Doonhammers (Queen of the South's nickname). No attendances for previous games were shown in the match programme.

During the game, I kept up to date with other scores across the country – Wednesday won 1-0. That's a positive.

After the game, I found a different and more direct way to walk back into central Glasgow – follow the Forth and Clyde Canal situated directly outside the ground. Interesting information on boards by the canal highlighted the many sawmills that had been situated around this part of the canal in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

And now thoughts turned to Glasgow Rangers. From being a lad growing up in Sheffield, the Gers had been my second Scottish club (after Montrose). They played in blue and their name began with 'R', and they were one of the two clubs in 'The Old Firm'.

For the game at Ibrox, I decided on a taxi from the hotel, leaving at 1.30pm for a 3pm kick-off. The taxi driver was not overly impressed with his fare – he was a keen Celtic supporter and from a professional perspective he thought there would be major traffic problems getting to the ground.

His concerns misplaced. It took 20 minutes. Circumnavigate the ground – this is an impressive stadium. There was a Fan Zone behind the stand at one end of the ground – it was busy. Two guys with a microphone talking to the crowd and the European Cup Winners' Cup won by Rangers in 1972 on display in front of them. One was Derek Johnstone, a famous Rangers player of the 1970s. He was responding to questions – 'Who was the funniest guy in the Rangers' dressing room when you played?'

Johnstone considered the question.

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‘Jim Denny, some of our older supporters will remember him. And you know at this club as well as other clubs, supporters tend to make a judgement about a player quickly. And they did that with Jim – not a favourite.

‘There was an Old Firm game here at Ibrox, Jim on the bench when manager Jock Wallace said to him, “Go and have a warm-up, it looks like you’ll be coming on for Sandy [Jardine], who’s injured.”

‘Jim went to have his warm-up at the end where the Celtic supporters were gathered. On returning to the bench, Jock asked him why he’d gone down to that end for his warm-up – “Simple boss, I get less stick down there than warming-up in front of our own supporters!” Laughter from the gathered throng.

I purchased a programme, £3.50, and asked its seller who would win today. ‘Rangers, easy, 3-0.’ He told me my poster was inside the programme – it was a full team line-up of Rangers. Splendid. It would be staying in the programme.

Outside, at a corner of the stadium, a statue. At its base small plaques with names – 66 of them. Fresh flowers lay in front of the statue. People stopped and looked, and thought, saying little. The statue was of John Greig, Rangers’ legendary full-back and captain in the 1970s. The names on the plaques were those of the 66 people who had died in the Ibrox tragedy on 2 January 1971 on Stairway 11, coming out of the ground as the end of the Old Firm game approached. People falling down, taking others with them, tumbling, a crush of bodies. At that time the worst football tragedy in the United Kingdom. Almost 50 years on it resonated.

Once inside, it was readily apparent this was a stadium, a place with atmosphere, a place with great support and passion, a place to play and watch football – I sat in the three-

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tiered Sandy Jardine Stand and the place looked magnificent. Atmosphere building as kick-off approached. Not a seat left to watch the game, except in the Hamilton Academical corner, where there looked to be no more than 50 hardy souls in their red and white favours, isolated by the hundreds of blue seats around them. They must have felt like strangers in a very foreign land.

Full house for the Rangers support – 48,838 in attendance. And if the Gers fans needed any geeing up for the game, it came in the form of a result from Livingston an hour before kick-off – the home team had defeated the Gers' arch-rivals Celtic for the first time ever, 2-0. Ibrox buoyant. A win this afternoon and they would leapfrog the Bhoys to go top of the Premiership table.

Interestingly, the Ladbrokes coupon had no reference to the Rangers game – perhaps like the programme seller they thought it was a foregone conclusion. For the game at Livingston they had 7/1 the home team, 2/9 Celtic. Coupon-buster.

And the game against the Accies – very one-sided. In the *Scottish Daily Mail*, John McGarry reported, 'It was plain in the opening seconds that Rangers were at it and Hamilton were all at sea. The only wonder was that it took seven minutes for the opener to arrive.' 5-0 the result – it could and should have been more. Jermaine Defoe, 37 the following day, scored a hat-trick.

From the second goal, the noise, the singing, the *joie de vivre* that was Ibrox, climbed the scales. 'We shall not be moved ...', sung with feeling and with strength, reverberated and reverberated again around the stadium – the home support in full cry.

Half-time provided a brief interlude. Half-time draw for the winning lucky number to be drawn on the pitch. The



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ex-player making the draw is – small pause by the stadium announcer – ‘Gazza ... Paul Gascoigne.’ I barely heard the surname – the stadium erupted, the ovation for Gascoigne was incredible, like no other. He could not help but be moved and you could hear it in the cracking of his voice as he addressed the crowd. The legend returned 25 years and more after he’d left the club.

And now to the draw – ‘Gazza, over to you’, pause and then Gazza, ‘The winning number is ... 9 ... 9 ... 9.’

The stadium announcer knew something was up. He took the ticket and read the number out – it was a six-digit number, the details of which I don’t recollect. The crowd laughed heartily well before the announcer had time to put things right.

Gazza was thanked and gave a wave of acknowledgement to each side of the ground. Cue further loud applause.

Final whistle at the end of the second half – joy unconfined for the Gers supporters, a 5-0 demolition of the Accies and now top of the league. For the players on duty for their respective countries over the next two weeks, they would meet up with their international team-mates. For the clubs, it was the international break – no games the following weekend for those clubs with players away with national squads.

A look at the programme – well produced, glossy, lots of information both current and historical for the Rangers fan. And then one thing struck me – aside from the team line-up on the back page, there was no information about the visitors’ team. If you wanted to know anything about Hamilton Academical and their players, the match programme was not the place to look! I think it’s the only time I’ve seen a programme bereft of such information.

After the game, a walk back to the hotel in the city centre – a long walk, more than two miles, I was far from alone. A

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snake of people to the front and back made their way – many of them to Glasgow Central Station.

An interesting weekend. Three games in three days. Different experiences at the three venues. And how does it compare to the 1980s? In that decade:

- Two divisions in the Scottish League, not the current four
- No international break. Internationals were played midweek; club games continued
- No live second tier games on television
- No keeping up to date with scores at other games by smartphone – a portable radio was best for that purpose in the 1980s
- And the grounds – not all-seater, terracing covered the greater part of the ground with fencing
- No coupons for betting in the ground
- With no internet, there was no chance of easily understanding the rail journeys required, and booking those journeys was much more time-consuming and problematic.

A comparison of the three home clubs and how they fared 40 years ago is interesting.

In 1979/80, Alloa Athletic finished bottom (14th in Division Two) of the Scottish League (34 clubs). Their highest attendance that season was 1,600, the lowest 300, with an average of 691.

Partick Thistle finished seventh in the top flight, the Premier Division. Their highest attendance that season was 23,000, with a crowd lower than 3,000 recorded once (2,000) and an average attendance of 8,445.

Rangers finished fifth in the Premier Division. Their highest attendance was 36,000 for an Old Firm game against

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Celtic, their lowest 8,000 against Kilmarnock and an average attendance of 21,154.

Aberdeen, managed by Alex Ferguson, were the Premier League champions in 1979/80.

And I thought about how things are nowadays following my club, Sheffield Wednesday. A season ticket at Hillsborough in the North Stand, £555 – for 23 home league games in the Championship. All turnstiles had stewards, who checked anyone carrying baggage into the home spectator areas.

Away games? Tickets available to supporters based on the 'points' achieved from attending home and away games. It was a meritocratic approach and ensured those who attended most games had the first opportunity to purchase tickets for away games.

All away games had stewards and police present – it usually entailed an outer body search, as well as baggage searched before entry into the ground. And a new one the previous season at local rivals Rotherham United – police and dogs present, and supporters checked for any so-called recreational drugs in their possession! It wasn't like that in the 1980s.