

The History of Fair City Athletic Football Club

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The Boots on Balhousie

By

Forrest Robertson

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To Iain, Julia, Alexander and George and
in memory of Forrest Frew Robertson.

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INTRODUCTION

My father Willie and his brother, Forrest Robertson, were born and brought up in the tiny village of Almondbank about four miles from Perth, and the first football match I was taken to, as a seven-year-old, was Queen's Park versus St. Johnstone on a crisp winter's afternoon at Hampden Park, so I've always had an affinity with St. John's town. I think Perth lays claim to two of the most endearing football club names in Britain: St. Johnstone and Fair City Athletic. You can't get much more romantic and evocative names than those! While the Sainties made it into the twenty-first century, winning leagues and Cups, Fair City sparked briefly at the fin de siècle then faded away. They are remembered vaguely as a "name" in early Scottish Cup rounds, never bothering the big guns and never joining the Scottish League, but can you imagine the delight that would come with the intonation of the results reader: "Fair City Athletic 1, Queen of the South 1"? Whar's yer Uniteds and Citys noo?!!

This is the story of Fair City Athletic, a club which grew from very modest beginnings to become Perth's, and Perthshire's, biggest, most successful Victorian club – winning cups with players who regularly featured in inter-county matches, with the best appointed ground in the city, the best playing pitch and the biggest support – which faltered at the height of its power and faded away after just 18 years, and dropped out of the city's two-star system with St. Johnstone, swirling, caught in each other's gravitational pull. Here's the never before told story of the club which sparked and sparkled but was caught out by the economic uncertainty of football in the early twentieth century.

CHAPTER ONE

The King's Lade has been supplying water to Perth for the best part of a thousand years. It branches off from the River Almond at Low's Work near Almondbank and winds its way four miles to the Fair City. On its way, there's a branch at Balhousie which used to drive a flour and a meal mill. The tale goes that Oliphant, the Laird of Balhousie, asked King Alexander II for permission to take a bootfull of water from the main lade. "Why, of course," replied the king, but the wily laird then built his own lade a boot's width, claiming the top of his boot to be 11" (28 cm) in diameter! There were therefore boots on Balhousie for nearly seven hundred years!

Records of football being played in Scotland stretch as far back as the fifteenth century, mainly from royal decrees banning it because it kept young men away from practicing archery and other pursuits required by the monarch for defending the realm or attacking neighbours.

Perth stepped onto the written football stage in 1546, when the city's Hammermen Guild forbade its apprentices and servants from playing the game, doubtless because of the absenteeism resulting from injuries, and the Fleshers Corporation followed suit, fining those found "guiltie at the wrastling at the football." However, the guildsmen lagged well behind Scottish kings in decrying the game. James I in 1424 decreed, "It is statute and the King forbiddis that na man play at the futeball under the paine of fiftie schillings." In 1457, his successor, James II, ordained, "and that the futeball be utterly cryed down and not to be used," and so on and so forth. Most such orders were, of course, merrily ignored, and matches of village against village, and artificial wars between various nobles, dukes and earls urging on their retainers using a ball rather than slightly more lethal weapons took place. Even Mary, Queen of Scots is reputed to have been a dab hand at the ba' game; a leather ball was discovered in the early 1970s behind panelling in a room used by Mary at Stirling Castle, and she recorded a game played in Carlisle.

Nearer to the home of my story, early in 1591 John Pitscottie and Finlay Errol, servants of the Laird of Balhousie, had to make their repentance in the local church after being found guilty of playing at the “foot ball.”

Football from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth centuries is usually described as little more than mob violence and a highly dangerous pastime played by village ruffians bent on resolving personal vendettas and causing damage to property, endangering wind and life. The game only civilised when it seeped out of Britain’s unique public-school system in the mid-nineteenth century. The truth is somewhat different. There *were* rules and regulations, however simple and minimal, for players of all social standings. A 1530s poem by Sir David Lyndsay gives an idea of the dexterity required even by a parson footballer:

Thocht I could preich nane, I can play at the caiche;
 I wut there is nocht ane amang you all
 Mair ferylie can play at the futeball.

Translated from Scots as:

Thought I could preach nothing? I can play at the catch;
 I bet there is none among you all
 more fairly can play at the football.

Football cost money to play, so boys were forced to raid for coins where they could, and one popular source proved to be the Saturday wedding. They’d wait at the church gate for the blushing bride and timid groom to emerge as man and wife, and howl for the “scramble,” at which the obliging husband was bound to throw a handful of coins. The contribution, known as the “baw,” went on the purchase of their ball. A refusal to donate could result in the traditional privilege of tearing the bride’s gown.

Seventeenth-century football of one description or another could be seen in Lerwick, Shetland on Up Helly Aa day (Christmas Day); in Aberdeenshire around Yule time (Christmas time); in Jedburgh with the Jethart Ba’, which was, and still is, held at Candlemas and Eastern E’en (the last day of Lent); and between the Uppies and the Doonies. Few parishes missed the opportunity to celebrate at least one religious festival with a game, generally with a prize to the winning side of a hogshead of ale or a fatted pig, or even a slap-up dinner with wine. Rarely was there a holiday, soiree or picnic outing where football didn’t feature, especially on Eastern E’en or Handsel Monday (the first Monday of the year).

By the nineteenth century, football had become popular throughout the country, but especially in the northeast and Edinburgh. Some preferred the handling type, others kicking only, and yet more a combination of both. The informal games took root in villages, schools, universities and places of work with decisions made by the captains before the start as to which rules they followed. The very first known organised club is attributed to John Hope, who formed The Foot-ball Club in 1824 in Edinburgh. Perhaps not greatly resembling a purely kicking game, it was more a hybrid form, and the last record of matches came in 1841 just as the game began to blossom at educational institutes where the space available for play dictated the rules adopted; wide-open fields encouraged running with ball in hand and full bodily tackling, whereas a hard-surfaced cloister or yard restricted activity to kicking only, but all included a scrum or scrimmage, known also as puddings, bullies or squashes. All very well and fine where village or inter-house school matches were the only competitive aspect, but inter-town, school or university matches proved much harder to arrange when their various rules were incompatible. But the coming of the railways in the 1830s opened up cheap and speedy travel, and purely parochial games became less attractive. In the 1850s and 60s, Scotland boasted several clubs able to play each other by agreeing upon a loose set of rules, but primarily the handling type that had originated at Rugby School in England. The Edinburgh Academicals Football Club and Edinburgh University Football Club were both formed in 1857, West of Scotland in Partick eight years later, and Royal High School and Edinburgh Wanderers in 1867. Exact dates for Glasgow Academical, Merchistonians and St. Andrews University clubs are all shrouded in doubt, but they were all playing in 1867. A Stranraer Football Club started up in 1865 but didn't last long. The doings and organisation of football in Perthshire, Aberdeenshire, Lanarkshire, Glasgow and the borders have gone unrecorded.

Queen's Park Football Club, also formed in 1867, playing on the eponymous public park on Glasgow's Southside, contrarily chose the kicking game as preferred by many clubs in the London area, although they weren't averse to playing any form of the game with even ten or 14 or 15-a-side when any Saturday opponent would do. Records of Scottish football in the 1860s are scanty but there is every likelihood that the West of Scotland (Partick) and St. Andrews (North Glasgow) clubs may have been early unrecorded adversaries of Queen's Park because all their players came from the same offices, schools, shops and universities, when the game was still in a state of flux. What became known as association

football, as opposed to Rugby football, quickly took root in Glasgow and Dunbartonshire, and from there, at varying speeds, spread out over the rest of Scotland.

One of the dramatic changes which occurred in nineteenth-century Britain was the burgeoning sporting culture from being an occasional holiday activity (football and cricket) or a military-based practice (martial archery) to a seemingly all-encompassing, all-embracing social phenomenon, facilitated by reductions in trade and industrial workers' hours, the creation of popular newspapers, the invention of telegraphic and telephone communications, and the most dramatic of all railways, all of which played their part in popularising sport.

The earliest sports to expand in popularity in Scotland were curling, cricket, horse racing, bowling, golf, football and Highland games, with tennis coming later, all of which found playing spaces and, most importantly, patronage, because the latter provided the former with the necessary supplies; local dukes, earls, lords and wealthy landowners provided almost 90% of the facilities, presidential positions, competition prizes (cash, cups, medals), equipment (curling stones, bats, quoits, clubs and clothing), clubhouses and pavilions. The other 10% of patrons came from the military (army officers and soldiers), professionals (doctors, bankers, lawyers, etc.), building contractors, and manufactory owners. That the local nobility and property-owning elite dominate the list of patrons is hardly surprising given that, not only did they supply most of the physical requirements for the sport to prosper (fields, ponds, etc.), but their association with a specific activity added a cachet of social respectability.

Cricket in Perth established itself on the North Inch, probably in the years following the 1746 defeat at Culloden of Bonny Prince Charlie and his Jacobite army, when the stationing of a mainly English garrison in the town led to its introduction. By the late 1840s, the game had become well entrenched, with matches on the North Inch patronised by local magistrates, lawyers, lairds and the general public, so by the time my football story starts, the Fair City was besotted with the game, with club and county matches being followed by large, appreciative and very knowledgeable crowds on the North and South Inches (Perth's public parks). Two of these local cricket clubs, Victoria Cross and St. Johnstone, will come into my story quite soon.

Perth football patronage in the shape of 38-year-old David William Murray, 3rd Earl of Mansfield, brought 49 good men and true to the North Inch in 1836 to challenge a similar number of “prominent and respectable” citizens of the city, attracting a reputed (but dubious) 15,000 spectators. At one stage, the ball landed in the Tay, and at another in an adjacent ploughed field. After this, the Earl’s side refused to continue, citing rough play (!), while the good citizens declared, quoting Shakespeare’s Falstaff, that they wouldn’t march through Coventry with the country men. The previous year, the Earl had also sponsored a football match in the grounds of his family seat, Scone Palace, between 200 married and 150 unmarried men, all receiving a glass of whisky before the start. After three hours, the bachelors won by a single goal, which is recorded as only the sixth goal scored in the previous 102 annual games.

Although there had been a Roman legionnaire’s fort (Bertha) – the most northerly in the whole empire – near the junction of the rivers Almond and Tay as early as the first century, a settlement grew about three miles south on the west bank of the Tay at the highest fordable crossing, and King David I created Perth as a royal burgh in 1126, and the building of the kirk of St. John commenced on the site of a previous church. For centuries, the town went by the name of St. John’s town of Perth (there never was a saint called Johnstone!). The town prospered as the “gateway to the Highlands” and a bridging point into Fife and Scotland’s east coast. It also served as an industrial centre for linen goods; bleaching and dying (Pullers of Perth, the renowned dyers and dry cleaners, once had over 7,500 agents throughout the UK); tanning and the manufacture of leather goods (especially gloves and shoes); shawl and scarf production; shipbuilding; salmon fishing; iron works; brewing; and most significantly, distilling (Bells, Dewars and Gloag are the best known—there were 44 distilleries in the Perthshire area in 1819).

When the Perthshire Football Association was set up in 1884, its members came from Callander, Aberfeldy and Dunblane, and even when the Fair City Football Club showed up, the Puller’s Rangers, Erin Rovers and Caledonian clubs took centre stage in Perth. Perhaps “centre stage” is an exaggeration, though, because, as noted, Perthonians’ primary sporting love revolved around the thwack of willow on leather. Contrary to most areas of Scotland, football developed not in the major city in Perthshire but in the villages and small towns surrounding the county town. They had a history of a variety of sport sponsored by the local gentry where, again, curling took the top spot of popularity with cricket, shooting and bowling

not too far behind: Dunblane had to thank, for example, Sir Donald Currie for his generous contribution to their Duckburn Park and the associated gymnasium.

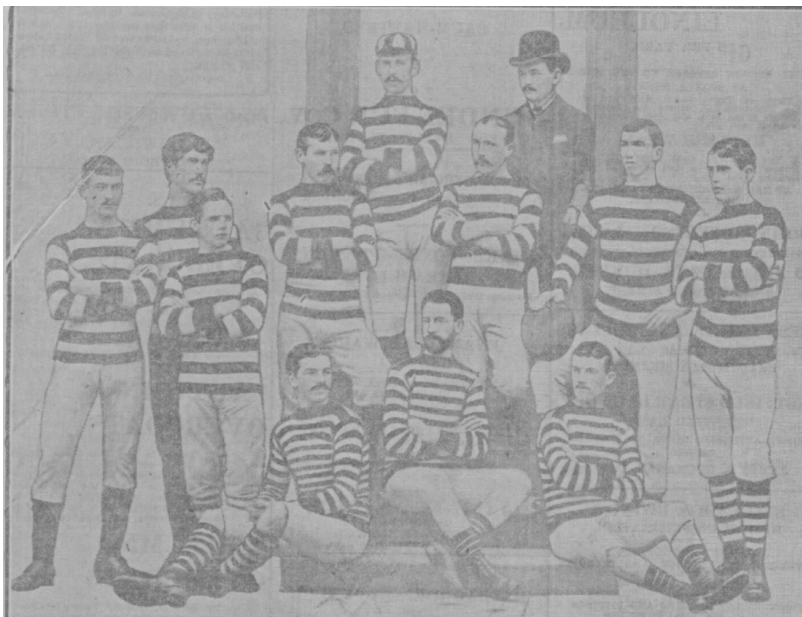
In nineteenth-century England, the development of organised and codified football from its earlier village origins trickled down from the public schools and universities to the masses, but in Scotland, while the handling form of football followed a similar path, the purely kicking style initiated by Queen's Park in Glasgow stemmed from the professional and artisan sections of the community. The members of the Queen's Park club were either schoolboys, university students, warehousemen, trainee lawyers, doctors, solicitors or mechanics, and this was typical of most other clubs of the time. In rural Perthshire agricultural workers and estate employees could be added to this list.

CHAPTER TWO

1884–85

On September 1, 1884, a group of young members of the Victoria Cross Cricket Club – John Scott, John Robertson, Robert Mackay, W. Martin, John Allan, David Crow, John Guthrie, John Ross and John Crerar, together with friends Alex Blair and Willie Bissett – met in the Globe Inn under the auspices of local tradesman John Wallace, with the view to form a football club. Several names were bandied about, and “Our Boys” seemed favourite, but Fair City Athletic won the vote, with John Scott being elected secretary and John Wallace, captain. The boys chose to wear Perthshire Cricket Club’s black-and-white hooped jerseys, and – with a ball and jerseys donated by Sir Andrew Clark, an eminent London physician living in St. Martin’s Abbey out Balbeggie way – they set about practicing on the South Inch. Sir Andrew thus became the club’s first sponsor, although his enthusiasm may have originated with their cricket club. What interest he subsequently took in the football club is unknown, because his main residence and his practice were both in London, and his Perthshire home may only have been seasonal, while John Wallace, as captain and prime mover, appears to have sought out more steady and lucrative patronage.

On November 17, 1884, a small notice appeared in the Perth press announcing: “A football club has been formed in Perth designated the Fair City Athletics. Secretary – David McQueen, 216, Smith Street, Perth” – a quick change of secretary from John Scott, obviously. Further down the page, another notice informed readers that Puller’s Rangers had administered a sound beating to the new club by three unanswered goals on the South Inch – a tough baptism for the raw laddies.



This is the very first photograph of a Fair City side from 1884–5 season. Back row: D. Martin, P. Robertson (president); Middle Row standing: J. Guthrie, D. McLaren, D. Crow, J. Miller, Jack Donaldson, J. Wallace (with ball) – captain, J. Ross; Front Row seated: W. Marnoch, D. Scott, “Sudger” Clarke.

It didn't take long for the new boys to get into the swing, and their next game against one of the big boys, Erin Rovers, Perth's Irish pets, brought their first win, 3–2, again on the South Inch. Another group of youngsters hove into view, and Balhousie, with a name which will resonate and become synonymous with Fair City Athletic, were sent back up the road after a 7–1 drubbing. On Ne'erday 1885, Western brought forth a goodly crowd to the Inch which revelled in 14 goals; sadly for the homesters, 13 of these were struck by the visitors. It's more than likely that Western was little more than a scratch team of local lads who'd come home for the holidays from Glasgow; they flit across the page, never again to appear in the story. A couple of days later, an XI of the *North British Daily Mail* employees turned out and won 2–1. (*The North British Daily Mail*, with a Perth office, morphed into the *Daily Record* around the turn of the century.)

The pitches on the South Inch weren't enclosed areas – it was and still is a public park – and when the press described an attendance as “goodly” it's unlikely to have been much above a hundred on a sunny afternoon, and as few as a handful of friends huddled around the touchlines during the winter months. Why then play during the winter at all? As can be seen above, football had been played over centuries by teams of any number, from as many as dozens if not hundreds to as few eight or nine during winter and summer months, but to cricket we must turn for the regularisation of the season and team numbers. Cricket, as already noted, had well established itself as the country's premier team sport by the time football had morphed from a purely holiday and public-school activity, and cricket matches took place during the spring, summer and autumn months, usually on the only open space in any village, town or city. What and who were left? Schools and universities had ample playing grounds, but the recently emancipated members of society found initially only those green fields on which to practice and play this new game, and only when the cricketers didn't need them. In many cases, these sportsmen saw football as a good way to retain their camaraderie and fitness during the darker days of winter, and with 11 in a cricket team, what could be a more sensible number for a football one? The kicking version of football took root with the general public because it required little more in the way of equipment than a ball and a relatively level piece of playing surface for a basic game, whereas the handling game necessitated more complicated rules and a proper grassed playing field, not often available for a kickabout.

The Scottish Football Association inaugurated a national knockout cup competition in 1873, and within a few years Edinburgh, Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, Glasgow, Forfarshire (encompassing clubs from Dundee, Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) and several others (even Bute!) had instigated their own county imitations before The Perthshire Football Association's 11 member clubs, including Fair City Athletic, set off in pursuit of the Association's new Cup. On January 17, 1885, Athletic and Puller's Rangers met on the South Inch in their very first cup tie. Rangers was one of a number of “works” sides which proliferated in the nineteenth century, usually organised and subsidised by the factory itself, in this case the nationally renowned dry cleaners and dyers. Fair City were a goal to the good at half-time and ran out 3–1 winners. But wait! South Inch was a public park and not even a rope separated the pitch from the few hundred spectators who, naturally, crowded forward for a better view of the action. Puller's successfully protested that the encroachment had hampered them,

and the Perthshire Association determined a replay on a “private ground” which Puller’s had out at Hillyland Farm. In the first half, McLaren neatly opened the scoring, becoming Athletic’s first recorded hitman, but Rangers equalised after the break, and although both sides tried hard the game ended 1–1, leaving the 400 strong crowd looking forward to a second replay which, because of the Association’s insistence on a proper ground, took place at Hillyland Skating Pond (a grassy field outwith its frozen use). Cup football – with its excitement in progressing via a knockout game to win a prize, i.e., a cup – has always engendered bigger crowds than mere friendly or league games. As is often the case in hard-fought cup ties, the third meeting was a bit of a cakewalk for Fair City, who lined up: Martin (goal); Millar and Wallace (full backs, the latter being the captain); Guthrie, Blair and Ross (half backs); Marnoch, Clarke, Crow, Scott and McLaren (forwards). No score in the opening half in front of another big crowd, but Athletic stormed away after the change of ends to cruise through with a 4–0 finish. Unfortunately, none of the names of the goal scorers have come down to us.

On the following Saturday, Fair City travelled down to Dunblane for the semi-final. A cup final in their first season? Sadly no: on a sunny afternoon on their own Kippencross Park, The Heather emphasised the yawning gap between county towns and city slickers, and battered Fair City by 13 goals to one. In between the Cup excitements, Athletic beat the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment and Lochee United, lost heavily to Crieff (another county side, another beating), drew with The Royal Highland Regiment, and beat an Erin Rovers scratch XI. Perth City Council had become increasingly concerned about the mess the footballers were making on the South Inch and banned the game after heavy rain, which encouraged Athletic to look for a new ground, and settled for the rest of the season on Hillyland Skating Pond. The name of the ground is a bit misleading because it only iced over after heavy rain in winter. Crow contributed a hat-trick in a 6–2 win over Lochee again, then there was a creditable 1–0 defeat to Crieff at their Market Park in a game of 30-minute halves, followed by defeats of 4–1 by Vale of Allan from Kinbuck and 4–2 by Blairgowrie’s Our Boys. However, on May 2, Fair City closed their season with a 3–1 win in the maiden meeting with new city rivals St. Johnstone, a club barely three months old, having been formed, like Fair City, by the cricket-club members.

1885–86

Hillylands would never be more than a stopgap and Athletic, searching for a new ground, secured the lease on a piece of land immediately north of Wallace Works on the Dunkeld Road. Over the summer, a trim little ground with an oval running track surrounding the pitch with shallow terraces and a little wooden pavilion stood ready to welcome the new season, and on Saturday September 5, local businessman David McGregor officially declared the ground open, where Dunblane, Perthshire Cup winners, beat Dundee's Strathmore 4–2 in front of 600 eager onlookers who, well satisfied with the fare, wended their way home or to enjoy a light refreshment in the city's many public houses; a well-recognised and established practice which continues to this day.

So delighted with their new Balhousie Park were Fair City that they proceeded to play nine consecutive games there and won the lot, starting with an 8–1 beating of Dundee Rovers on September 12. Not a bad score really, but is put into perspective when, in the Scottish Cup on that very same day, Dundee Harp beat Aberdeen Rovers 35–0 and Arbroath put 36 past Bon Accord's luckless goalie; some say 42 actually whizzed past him, but the referee sympathetically chalked off half a dozen. This was followed by a 6–2 win over The Wanderers, also from Dundee, with three from Clarke and singles from McLaren, David Crow and Wilkie. Roll up, roll up, Crieff next – the side which had beaten them twice the previous season on a 7–0 aggregate – but this time the boot was distinctly on the other foot, and although the visitors scored first, they too found the pace too hot and suffered a 5–1 beating. Well into their stride now, Fair City handed Dundee West End a 5–0 lesson: a single in the first half then two little clusters of two. Our Boys from Blairgowrie put up stiffer resistance but the folly of starting a game at four o'clock in October nearly put paid to the game, and only the leniency of the referee allowing the game to carry on in darkness gave Athletic time for a last-minute goal to win 2–1. This Scottish habit of starting games late on winter Saturday afternoons came about when the trades working week ended at one o'clock on that day, and it allowed the men to get home, wash, change, have their dinner and get along to the park. But it tended to misfire on murky days long before the advent of floodlighting when games ended in total darkness or were called off before the regulation hour-and-a-half, as was the case in at least one Scottish Cup Final.

When Breadalbane travelled the road and the miles from Aberfeldy, they too found Athletic too tough a nut, and Martin's two in the first half laid the foundations of a 3-1 win. Looking next for any kind of opponent, Coupar Angus sent their second XI to face the music, and they duly lost 6-1 – FCA naughtily didn't let the public know it wasn't Coupar's first XI! Now it was derby time again, and Erin Rovers crossed the city only to come a cropper in controversial fashion – of course. Fair City scored two in the first half to the Green Jerseys' one which the homesters disputed. But when Fair City quickly scored another three, the real fun started. While the referee and his two umpires discussed another dispute, a Rovers man ran the ball through the Athletic's goal and threatened a walk off if it wasn't allowed. From then on, the game was more of a kickfest, but five home goals to two "disputed" ones went into the record books. The pair of umpires, one from either side, controlled the game on the pitch, deciding on goals, corner kicks, fouls and such, and only when they couldn't agree would they "refer" to the neutral man on the touchline for a ruling. This didn't change until 1891 when the referee was given charge on the field and the umpires were banished to the sides of the pitch and given little flags to wave. Caledonian now stepped forward for another derby day, with Marnoch's and Campbell's goals giving Athletic their 2-0 win. And then it was cup time again, and they went over to St. Johnstone's Recreation Grounds to meet Perth Rangers. Seven goals in the first half were quite enough, so Athletic took a seat and let Rangers in for a token goal for a scoreline of 7-1. Coupar Angus took ample revenge on the mauling given to their second XI the month before, swatting away Athletic's feeble efforts with a 7-0 win. Bad? Worse visited the Balhousie Boys two weeks later in the Perthshire Cup second round when Couper trounced them 9-2 at their own Larghan Park. Thus ended FCA's cup exploits for the season with Christmas still two weeks away, leaving four months of friendlies or "ordinaries," in contemporary language. Thirteen such games are recorded, all but three (at Forfar's Station Park, St. Johnstone's Recreation Grounds and Dundee East End's Pitkerro Park) being at home, and with a mixed bag of results. Forfar Athletic home and away were both narrowly lost (5-6 and 3-2), Dundee's Strathmore won 10-2 and Broughty Ferry proved better at winter sports, winning 5-3 on a pitch covered in three inches of snow. Over 1,500 fans crowded into Saints' ground for the derby to see Athletic come out on top once more by two goals to nil, but their propensity to throw away a winning position often cost them dear, as witnessed in their penultimate game of the season when Athletic led 2-0 at half-time at East End's ground, only to be pegged back to finish level at 3-3. The poorest, however, came in the game

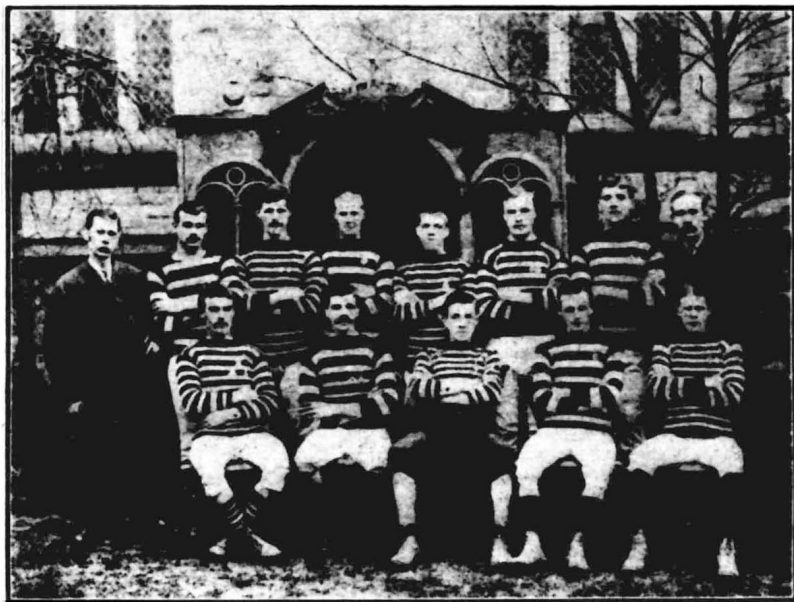
against Strathmore (the Dundee version; there was also one in Arbroath), where Athletic scored first, then conceded ten.

The Perthshire FA organised a City vs. County game on March 20 with the following city team: Thomson (St. Johnstone), Campbell (Fair City), D. Robertson (Caledonian), Lyden (Perth Rovers), R. Winton (Puller's Rangers), J. McLean (St. Johnstone), Jimmy Clarke (Fair City), Scott (Caledonian), McKenzie (St. Johnstone), O'Neil (Perth Rovers), McFarlane (Puller's Rangers); a diplomatic share of the city clubs. And clubbed they were too, because the county side, drawn from players from Dunblane, Vale of Teith, Coupar Angus, Breadalbane and Blairgowrie, accentuated the county dominance by winning 8–1 on Balhousie Park.

1886–87

Over the close season, the Balhousie pitch was realigned and the pavilion and fencing repositioned accordingly. The Perth football season kicked off on August 21 when the famous Queen's Park player, Charles Campbell, brought north a Glasgow Select XI (actually a full Queen's Park side) to play a combined Perth/Dundee side on the Recreation Grounds. Jimmy "Sudger" Clarke represented Fair City in a plucky side which managed a goal to the Spiders' five.

Fair City went up the Firth of Tay to Broughty without several of their better players and paid the price, losing 10–0. They opened their new pitch facing a strong Forfar Athletic side, and with all their top men on view ran the visitors close in a 4–3 defeat. Having joined the Scottish Football Association on August 24, they were slated to play at Coupar Angus in the first round but remembering the bashing they'd twice taken the previous season, discretion took the better part of valour and Athletic scratched. Not to worry: cup football arrived the very next Saturday when Scone came to Perth for the Perthshire Cup's first round. The saying "A's fair at the ba' o' Scone" didn't hold good, and Athletic kicked them off the park 8–0. If this win buoyed them up for the visit of Arbroath, the Red Lichties disabused them of this notion. Famous for ultra-big wins, they scored in the opening couple of minutes, then they scored again and then again, and at 13–0 allowed Athletic one single morsel of comfort – a single, paltry goal.



An 1886–87 team. Back row: N. McPherson (trainer), J. Guthrie, R. Campbell, T. Campbell, C. Morris, L. McLaren, J. Ross, J. Lindsay (secretary); Front row: J. Clarke, W. Marnoch, J. Mackay, H. Clark, J. Barclay. The variety of hooped jerseys reflects the fact the braw laddies bought their own strips.

Rossie Park played temporary host when Athletic entertained Shettleston – a rare example of a visit from the West of Scotland. The creditable 2–2 draw was marred by roughness both on and off the field. And then it was cup day again and Athletic faced Crieff in the local Cup’s second round, breezing past the “Capital of Strathearn” 3–0. Two draws followed, one very creditable versus Coupar Angus, and another with St. Johnstone in a charity game for the new Perth swimming baths fund, with the band of the Perthshire Rifle Volunteers serenading the crowd throughout the match. Then came a win over Blairgowrie’s Our Boys which led to the Cup’s third round and a trip to Erin Rovers’ St. Margaret’s Park. On 3–0 at half-time, Athletic relaxed too soon but hung on for a 5–3 ticket into the semi-finals. Great annoyance was caused, “by a squad of mill girls ... shouting and yelling ... as an encouragement ...” Good heavens, you can’t have that kind of thing – girls yelling at a football match! St. Johnstone edged their first win over Fair City (on their fourth attempt) by 4–3 on their Recreation Grounds, the lead changing hands four times. The Perthshire

Cup semi-final on Balhousie Park pitted Athletic against Caledonian Rangers, a recent amalgamation of Puller's Rangers and Caledonian. It was wet, it was miserable and the ground cut up badly, but Clarke waded through three times to help Athletic to a 4–1 half-time lead, after which they eased off, letting Rangers in for a late consolation. And the Hoops were in their first Cup Final.

A few weeks before their Cup tie with Caledonian Rangers, an amalgam of FCA and Rangers went up to Montrose for a holiday Thursday game on Links Park, and provided plenty of entertainment and goals, losing 11–2 to the ground club.

On Fair City's big day, December 4, 1886, at the Recreation Grounds, Coupar Angus pitched their tent on the other end of the field. A hard frost had left the pitch slippery but the huge crowd still saw a good game. Marnoch kicked off for Athletic who, for a while, had the upper hand, but gradually the more experienced Coupar side pushed forward and took the lead midway through the first half when centre-half Stewart headed home a corner. Athletic equalised soon after when a shot just crossed the line before the Couper keeper could claw it back: one umpire confirming, one denying the effort, but when they referred to the neutral judge on the touchline, he said yes! A few minutes later and Honeyman put Coupar back in front, and there it sat at half-time. Fair City strove throughout the second spell but were handicapped by the loss of Clarke to injury just before the break, and the ten men just couldn't put the finishing touches to several chances, and in the end had to admit defeat by two goals to one. Coupar took the Cup for the first and only time, returning home to a street parade from station to hotel accompanied by not one but two bands.

To provide a little cheer, Athletic put St. Johnstone out of the Swimming Baths Fund competition: Clarke and Barclay contributing to a 3–1 success with the 1st Perthshire Rifle Volunteers pipe band again cantillating for the full 90 minutes. There followed a couple of trips into darkest Forfarshire: a praiseworthy odd-goal defeat at Montrose on Ne'erday, and a catastrophe at Station Park. On the heavily sanded pitch, Forfar were 4–0 ahead in the opening 20 minutes, and by the cup of tea and biscuit break led 9–0. They eased up a bit thereafter and Athletic stole in twice, but in between the Loons helped themselves to another ten goals running – correction, walking – home 19–2, easily Fair City's heaviest ever defeat. Athletic studiously and wisely avoided Forfar for another 12 months.

From then till the end of the season, they played 14 more ordinaries with a medley of wins, draws and defeats, including a draw with and another win over St. Johnstone, an 8–3 win over Caledonian Rangers, and an 8–1 defeat administered by Broughty. A “cup” win DID come Balhousie’s way when, after disposing of St. Johnstone in the Semi-final, Fair City overcame Erin Rovers in the Perth Swimming Baths Final on a replay, coming from a goal down to win the badges 3–2. Pullar’s Dyeworks band provided the melodious background music this time.

If we ignore for a moment the 1, 1, 1, 8 (goalkeeper, full back, half back and eight forwards) and 2, 2, 6 line ups (2 full backs, 2 half backs and 6 forwards) of the very early years up to the 1880s, all sides lined up 2, 3, 5 (and even now the syntax is used when reading out teams!), where no. 2 was right back, 3 left back, 4 right half, 5 centre half, 6 left half, 7 outside right, 8 inside right, 9 centre forward, 10 inside left and 11 outside left (a free lesson for all under 40s!). This is based on looking back at the XI from the centre line and reading left to right, but in nineteenth-century newspapers the common (but confusingly not exclusive) way of reading the team was from the goalkeeper’s perspective, again reading from left to right so the left back would be our no. 2, the right back no. 3, left half no. 4, centre half no. 5, right half no. 6, outside left no. 7, inside left no. 8, centre forward no. 9, inside right no. 10 and outside right no. 11. In the 2, 2, 6 line up, the half backs were nos. 4 and 5, the outside left no. 6, the inside left no. 7, left centre forward no. 8, right centre forward no. 9, inside right no. 10 and outside right no. 11. The numbers are of course anachronistic and used merely to denote sequence. Numbers on jerseys didn’t become common until the 1940s, so of course Fair City’s jerseys never sported numbers.

Representative games go back to 1866 when London played Sheffield at Battersea Park and became a Victorian staple. Glasgow played Sheffield annually from 1874 right up to the 1960s, and soon almost all shires were at it, even Buteshire. They’d mostly faded away by the beginning of the twentieth century when professional clubs proved reluctant to expose their costly investments to injury, and when national and local league competitions eradicated empty Saturdays. The Perthshire FA – a relatively poor organisation, still predominantly in rural towns and villages – could rarely afford far-flung challenges, but the next county, Forfarshire, with mighty clubs in Dundee, was easily and cheaply reached by train and vice versa.

Fans were eager to claim bragging rights for their particular province and the games drew in much needed cash for both city and parochial associations, adding a spark of glamour when fixture cards had a blank. FCA men Barclay, Campbell, Clarke and Guthrie were picked for the City versus Perthshire game on April 2 at St. Catherine's Park, which City won 2-1, and Guthrie and Barclay found places in Perthshire's first representative side which turned out at East Dock Street, Dundee on May 7 to play Forfarshire in a match sponsored by the *Dundee Evening Telegraph*. It was not a red-letter day and more a red-faces day: Forfarshire won 13-1.

With no wall-to-wall television coverage, the only way to see football was to pay your 3d or 6d and turn up at the ground. Seeing the stars (Arbroath's Ned Doig was a contemporary Scottish Internationalist) could be problematic but was solved by various visiting Travelling Wilbury type teams such as "Glasgow Select," "Queen's Park XI" and "International XI," who all toured the provinces packed with Internationalists and other weel kent faces drawing big crowds wherever their caravanessi pitched up.

1887-88

The financial report at the club's AGM was very positive, and over the summer, FCA spent good money realigning the pitch, again on a north/south axis, re-erecting the pavilion accordingly and building a new wooden grandstand, confidently proclaiming this would be their best season yet. And off they bowled with a spanking 6-1 win over Arbroath's Strathmore, fielding Rutherford, McLean, Joe Campbell, Guthrie, Harris, Joe Reekie, John Barclay, Stewart, Mackay, Willie Gloag and MacFarlane. This time the Masonic band was delightfully on hand. With a Scottish Cup tie looming, a 6-2 defeat at Lochee didn't bode well but the Athletic pulled themselves together and went up to Kippencross Park to face the pride of Dunblane in the Scottish Cup's first round on September 3. Things looked more than a tad bleak with 20 minutes left with the home side cruising 2-0 ahead when Athletic scored and Dunblane collapsed, allowing Athletic to score twice more and win a famous 3-2 victory.

Coatbridge's Albion Rovers visited and administered a 5-1 beating, and then it was back on cup business, this time of the Perthshire variety and Erichside from Blairgowrie stepped onto Balhousie with some trepidation, a concern duly realised in a 9-2 shellacking. Unsurprisingly, Erichside was a one-season wonder; thereafter they disappeared forever.

The Scottish Cup second round the following Saturday brought a pleasing derby, with St. Johnstone coming over to accept a 3–0 beating. Goalless in the opening spell, Saints played the second half with ten men because of a serious injury late in the first half – this was long before the introduction of substitutes in competitive games – and duly found that burden just too heavy. A couple of wins in ordinaries intervened and then back on cup business where Our Boys took the train down from Dundee at one shilling and 8d each (8½p) in the Scottish Cup third round, and here endeth Fair City’s Cup journey because the Blues comfortably ran out 5–0 winners. This was not the most surprising home defeat of the round, though: Hearts put out holders Hibs. Oh well, there’s always next year.

Football, compared to the game played today, would be considered a pretty rough exercise, contested by tough men. Many of whom either laboured in fields or factories or had a military pedigree. Contemporary press reports are littered with references to players leaving the field either temporarily or permanently nursing injuries. The SFA and the media constantly decried the asperity all too evident but to little avail, and, to be honest, the authorities did little to change things. The tackle from behind anywhere from ankle to thigh was a common ploy, as was barging the goalkeeper by one or more players whether or not he was in possession of the ball, while hacking (shin kicking) – even if illegal – was quite common, along with barging and mauling. Prior to a national health service or the idea of a personal insurance policy, a serious injury, especially to a married man with children, would almost certainly mean the loss of a job with looming destitution. Although the diet of the working man was surprisingly good (he ate more fresh fruit and vegetables than today), his life expectancy reached only about 45 years. Few risked playing on into their late 20s unless being well paid to so do. Top professionals (officially illegal in Scotland until 1893) might earn between £2 and £5/week, but the players of Fair City Athletic and their ilk could expect only a few shillings.

Another cross-city handshake with St. Johnstone and another Perthshire Cup tie (second round) four weeks later brought another win for Fair City, this time by three goals to one, with over 2,000 fans round the ropes. Clarke and Guthrie scored for Athletic, with the third being “forced through” – a euphemism for, “Come on boys, we’ll put ball and goalie over the line.” The third round took Athletic out to St. Margaret’s Park to meet Erin Rovers in a pretty rough game. Clarke opened the scoring and Athletic kept control for 80 minutes, by which time they led 5–2, then

conceded two goals but scrambled through by the odd goal in nine. Dunblane turned up for the Final at Balhousie on December 10. The pitch, after the heavy rain, was a coup and Dunblane protested, but with a big crowd having followed them they played on. Willie Marnoch headed Athletic ahead in three minutes, and Willie Gloag added a second then a third. Barclay had a double and by half-time they led 6–1. In the end, Athletic won 7–4, but would the PFA hand over the Cup? No, they would not, and ordered a replay on a neutral ground. In the time between, FCA played five friendlies, including home defeats over the New Year holidays to Falkirk (2–1) on January 2 – where the home side was described as “seedy” and “not in a condition for playing” – and the touring St. Mirren, lost by 5–0 on a gluepot.

It must be remembered that football pitches were no more than open fields, and in Perth mostly low-lying fields at that. There was no artificial drainage nor even a camber, and certainly no such thing as pitch protection. If it rained, the ground soaked it up; if it was very cold, it froze; if it snowed, it lay. As the season drew on, the grass withdrew until only the bigger, richer clubs weren't performing on muddy brown acres. One wonders just what state the ground must have been in when the occasional game was cancelled!

The Cup replay with Dunblane took place at Recreation Park on January 7, and this time Fair City protested on the grounds that Dunblane's goalkeeper wasn't qualified to play having been signed contrary to rules for this specific game. Athletic turned out: Rutherford, Campbell, McLaren, Guthrie, McFarlane, Reekie, Mackay, Barclay, Marnoch, Gloag and Clarke. The pitch was, if anything, in as sloppy a state as Balhousie's in the first match, but the huge 3,000-person crowd had plenty of entertainment, even if they didn't see a Perth win. Marnoch equalised an early Dunblane goal, but then the Reds scored two quickies and then another two before half-time, at which they led 5–1. Clarke pulled one back but then keeper Rutherford unwisely headed a shot clear, leaving his charge empty, and it was 6–2 and soon 7–2, and a late Athletic strike was a mere token, and when the PFA rejected Athletic's protest they were runners up on a 7–3 scoreline.

That virtually ended Fair City's competitive adventures for the rest of the season, which stretched now for the next four months and, as per 1886–87, results were a mixed bag. Forfar came, saw and thrashed Athletic 7–0 (three in the first 45 minutes and four in the second) and, on the day

Renton beat Cambuslang 6–1 in the Scottish Cup Final, Montrose put a similar half-dozen past Rutherford, although Barclay, Gloag and McFarlane bagged goals for the Hoops. On the other side of the profit-and-loss account, 8–1 was run up against Caledonian Rangers, and an Athletic record 16–1 against Rossie Boys from Montrose in a charity game in aid of the school. The school secretary sent a note thanking the club and confirming that, after expenses, 22/6d had been set aside (£1.12½ – about a farm labourer’s weekly wage then). St. Johnstone won at Balhousie for the first time (2–0), but then did it again on their own ground 3–2 the following week in the Reid Charity Cup, a new local competition with a silver cup for the winners presented by Daniel Reid, licensee of Perth’s Hammerman Inn.

On the representative level, the Hoops’ McFarlane played in a far from full strength Perthshire side at East End Park, Dunfermline, in a 1–1 draw with Fife on February 11, and Tom McFarlane was joined by Gloag for the incredible 6–6 draw with Forfarshire at Balhousie Park on March 23, the visitors declining an extra half-hour to decide the Cup’s destination – they had a train to catch, chaps. Joe Reekie, McFarlane, Jim Clarke, Willie Gloag and John Barclay played in a Perth XI against a touring Scottish FA sponsored team on April 21 at Balhousie Park in front of a reputed 6,000-person crowd, who watched entranced as the Internationalists displayed all their tricks to win 6–0. The following day, Perthshire lost 3–2 to Renfrewshire, again at Balhousie, with Clarke and Gloag to the fore. Deep into the cricket season, Forfarshire travelled down to Balhousie to replay the Evening Telegraph Cup and trounced a Perthshire side, including McFarlane, by eight goals to two.

1888–89

Balhousie Park’s curtain raiser had a Perth XI entertaining Scottish Cup holders Renton, and the side which had been proclaimed World Champions three months earlier – by beating their English equivalents West Bromwich Albion 4–1 at the second Hampden Park – duly showed how it was done with a showy 3–0 win, much to the big crowd’s delight.

Albion Rovers provided Fair City’s first footers on August 25, and they did well to hold the Coatbridge side to four goals to their own two. And then it was Scottish Cup time and they set off on the road to Hampden with a convincing 5–0 win over Caledonian Rangers, all five coming before the lemons. Two weeks later and St. Johnstone visited on Perthshire