

Crowded House



Alec Venters turning after scoring in the game

The great Willie Thornton was just 18-years old when he ran out of the tunnel at Ibrox on January 2nd, 1939. The sight that greeted the players lived with him for the rest of his life, for inside the stadium that day were 118,730 spectators.

The greatest crowd for a league match EVER in British football - and a record that will surely stand until the end of time.

The visit of Celtic to Ibrox always attracted a capital crowd, but that afternoon it was simply off the scale, because another 30,000 were locked outside. And of the huge throng who did get in, there were many thousands who never reached even the rim of the huge bowl and who didn't see a single kick.

Almost 150,000 turning up for a Scottish League match. It was just incredible. Rangers won the game 2-1, with goals from Alec Venters and Davie Kinnear, a future Rangers trainer, while Joe Carruth grabbed a consolation for the visitors. The game marked an Old Firm debut for Thornton, who hailed from the West Lothian village of Winchburgh, which had a population of around 3,000. Thornton had never seen so many folk in his life!

In 1989, on the 50th anniversary of that great occasion, Thornton recalled: "We had been on the receiving end from Celtic for a few seasons and they'd already beaten us 6-2 at Parkhead.

“It was like the Jock Stein years when Celtic were so much on top. But that Ibrox game swung the balance of power in our favour and it stayed like that for many years.” This game would be the last peace-time league contest between the sides before the war.

Thornton said: “My immediate opponent that day was the Celtic skipper Willie Lyon. The next time I saw him was 1944 when we were both in the Army and marching up a road in Italy.”

The sheer scale of the crowd was something that stuck in the memory of one of Rangers’ greatest ever centre-forwards, and he remembered: “The passageways were jam packed, but strangely enough, despite the size of the crowd we were still able to shout to our teammates. In those days there was at least 50 yards between the goals and the terracing so the fans were distant.”

Unsurprisingly, a member of the Celtic side who played that day insisted he couldn’t recall much about the match. Matt Lynch said: “I don’t remember an awful lot about that game. I have far better memories of the earlier match at Parkhead because we won and I ducked a university exam to be there!”

That Rangers win put the Ibrox side a massive eight points clear of Celtic and Hearts, and many reckoned the title race was as good as over. Rangers still had 14 games to play though (we would go on to win the championship by 11 points). It was a cracking game that thrilled and delighted from the first kick to the last. It was also a punishing 90 minutes for the players as the speed of play never slowed down and the tackling was as keen as it always was in Old Firm encounters.

Rangers were the better balanced team, their forwards held together by the outstanding Venters. They were more cohesive in their work than the opposition line, which presented a relatively strange appearance, being without Divers and Crum. Celtic were a little under strength, so they did well to hold their opponents to a single goal. In the opening moments it appeared as though Rangers would win by a comfortable margin, but as the match progressed it soon became clear that it was going down to the wire. The two stars of the show were Venters and Geatons. The Rangers man at times gave the impression of having a double on the field so much ground did he cover, so much was he in the thick of it.

Geatons in defence and attack was equally powerful and no one did more than he to try and save the game for Celtic.

The game was productive of many exciting goal incidents as play swung, sometimes with amazing rapidity, from one end of the field to the other. It almost seemed as if the fates had destined that should Dawson be troubled at all, then one second later Celtic keeper Kennaway would also be in the thick of it.

Rangers started off as if it was only a matter of time before they had secured a commanding lead, and within the first three minutes, Kinnear rounded Hogg and shot hard, but Kennaway saved. Next, a run by Thornton tricked Lyon, but he was ‘grassed’ by Morrison as he veered to the right on his way into the box.

Carruth then hit the bar, with Dawson stranded, and both Venters and Delaney then squandered good chances. Incident upon incident took place until the 17-minute mark, when Hogg was caught dithering on the ball and he was robbed by Kinnear. The outside-left tore away and from about 15 yards he drove hard and true for goal and Kennaway had no chance. It was a bonny strike.

Thornton was an awkward customer for Lyon, but though the pivot was beaten many times by the centre, it must not be forgotten that Lyon covered a tremendous amount of ground, and he had to, for long sweeping balls with which Rangers made headway found gaps in the right of the Celtic defence because Lynch just wasn't mobile enough. The centre's quick thinking and trickiness led to the second goal six minutes before the interval. A long, raking ball was sent forward to him and he flicked it with his left foot, and it skidded past Lyon who had come in to tackle. Venters had anticipated the move and running forward found himself in splendid isolation with the ball.

As he shot, Kennaway advanced, but although the keeper succeeded in touching the leather he was more or less helpless in preventing it hitting the back of the net. 2-0 to Rangers.

It was a more determined Celtic that emerged after the break and there were decent claims for a penalty when Delaney was brought down by Symon, but the referee said no, and the Celt had to go off for treatment.

Again, the game was end to end, and when the visitors pulled one back with 15 minutes to go, there were loud howls for them to go on and get another. Rangers, for the briefest of spells fell back into defence, but it was only temporary and they were soon on the offensive again.

The game ended the way it had started, with the action coming thick and fast, and there was glorious uncertainty until the referee blew the final whistle.

It had been an exhilarating 90 minutes, packed with great play and lots of endeavour, and at the end of the match the huge crowd applauded both sets of players.

Meanwhile, upstairs in the famed Blue Room after the game, there was a traditional ceremony to be getting on with, and that was to toast the health of His Majesty The King. In a small line stood Rangers chairman, James Bowie; Lord Provost, P. J. Dollan, Sir John Stewart, Mr Tom White, chairman of Celtic, and Mr David Martin, chairman of the Scottish League.

On the table in front of Mr Bowie was a loving cup, gifted to Rangers by Sir Francis Joseph, an English industrialist. "Sir Joseph," explained Mr Bowie, "on the occasion of the Coronation presented one of these cups to every First Division team in England; to the two promotion-winning teams, one each to the League and Association, and one to the British Museum. He kept one for himself, but latterly gave it to our club in return for us playing Stoke City on behalf of the funds raised to bring relief to the dependents of a colliery disaster.

"It was a condition of the gift that after the first game of each year played at Ibrox we should toast the health of the King, and that is why we are here today."

The cup, filled with champagne, was then handed round.

There were speeches by the chairmen of Rangers and Celtic, and the Lord Provost, and all commented on the greatness of the game, the size of the crowd, and its excellent behaviour. Mr White said that long after those in this room had crossed the Bourne he hoped that this fine New Year's Day tradition between the two clubs would be carried on. It was a great sporting gathering that had become a national institution, and the appeal of it was steadily growing with the passing of the years.

Mr Bowie hoped that the day would come when even this latest record figure for the match would be considerably passed. "I am not saying," he declared, "that we are going to increase the holding accommodation of Ibrox, but I am sure the Celtic club feel as we do that the future clearly indicates that our grounds must have a greater capacity."

The Lord Provost expressed the belief after what he had seen that the future of Scottish football was all right. "There is no need to feel the slightest sense of alarm," he said. "The youngsters who played such a wonderful game here today showed us that we can safely leave football in their keeping. As long as we rear young players like them we can truly say that there are bright days ahead for our national sport."

To which everyone echoed, 'hear hear,' for without doubt the 22 gladiators served up a contest well worthy of the great occasion, and of the magnificent patronage which it received. It was unfortunate that there was crowding at the top of the West terracing, as the view from the press box bore testimony that everyone could have been housed comfortably had it not been for the last minute rush.

In the centre of Glasgow on the afternoon of the big game, there were long, impatient queues at the underground stations, crowds hunched excitedly at every tram and bus stop. Not a taxi could be had for love nor money, and anyone lucky enough to find one was soon sitting in a long queue of traffic heading from the city to Ibrox.

After the game, Rangers enjoyed a lead of eight points over Celtic and Hearts, and to think that a few short weeks previous, the Light Blues were being criticised in no uncertain fashion. Needless to say, manager Willie Struth and his directors were the happy men. They had secured revenge for that humiliating defeat earlier in the season, and were now sitting pretty, having added another record to the Rangers' long list of achievements. They had housed the biggest crowd that had ever attended a club game, beating their own previous best by about 18,000.

The goal scored by Venters extended his lead at the top of the Scottish football 'hot-shot' charts to six over Wallace, of Partick Thistle. Venters had scored a staggering 26 goals by the turn of the year. Young Willie Thornton had fired 18 goals.

One interested spectator at the game was celebrated Portsmouth manager, Jack Tinn. Afterwards, while chatting with Struth, and marvelling at the incredible crowd, he asked what it would take for him to allow Venters to travel south to join Pompey.

“Give me £15,000 and we will begin discussions,” said a smiling Struth. Tinn was out! Venters hit an incredible 35 league goals that season, and would remain at Ibrox for 13 years. He was a well respected goal machine.

The sides that day were. Rangers: Dawson, Gray, Shaw, McKillop, Simpson, Symon, Waddell, Harrison, Thornton, Venters and Kinnear.

Celtic: Kennaway, Hogg, Morrison, Lynch, Lyons, Geatons, Delaney, Carruth, Watters, Murphy and Birrell. The referee was Mr Henderson from Kirkcaldy.

Admission prices were two shillings (10p) for the stand and one shilling (5p) for the terracing. Rangers’ share of the record gate was £4,500, while Celtic took away £2,500. The Rangers players, who were paid £8 a week, collected a £10 winning bonus, but that was big money in an era when a pair of shoes cost just ten shillings (50p).