

Jeff Webb



Scotland's Lost Clubs

Giving the Names You've Heard,
the Story They Own

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Contents

Introduction	9
1. Founding of the League	19
2. Renton	37
3. Vale of Leven	49
4. Third Lanark	61
5. Arthurlie	72
6. Cambuslang	78
7. Helensburgh	83
8. St Bernard's	89
9. King's Park	100
10. Cowlares	106
11. Abercorn	111
12. Airdrieonians	118
13. Leith Athletic	132
14. Clydebank	144
15. Dundee Wanderers	158
16. Armadale	163
17. Edinburgh City	168
18. Gretna	171
19. West of Scotland Clubs	201
20. South of Scotland Clubs	221
21. East of Scotland Clubs	228
22. Current Clubs	247
Bibliography	255

Renton

IN THE 1870s, Scotland was a hotbed of club football, and it was in 1872 that Scottish club football really took off, when of the 22 clubs formed around the world, 11 were in Scotland, ten of which were in Glasgow and Dunbartonshire.

Renton Football Club were one of those formed in 1872. Renton even now has a population of less than 3,000 people, the village sandwiched in the five-mile gap between Balloch on the banks of Loch Lomond and the former shipbuilding town of Dumbarton. Although the football club was founded in the same year as local rivals Dumbarton and Vale of Leven (in Alexandria), Renton weren't one of the eight forming the SFA in 1873. They were, though, one of the first 16 clubs to take part in the first-ever Scottish Cup.

It was at ten minutes to three on 18 October 1873 that Renton took on Kilmarnock at Crosshill in Glasgow. The team from West Dunbartonshire came out on top, 2-0. Although it has been difficult to obtain confirmation, three newspapers from the time claim that this was the first-ever competitive football match in Scotland. The *Glasgow News* of 20 October reported that: 'The Kilmarnock club were at a

SCOTLAND'S LOST CLUBS

disadvantage through not being thoroughly conversant with association rules, having formerly played the rugby game,' and went on to say: 'The Renton side received several free kicks in succession through some of the "Auld Killies" men persistently using their hands.'

That season would see Renton get through to the last four of the cup. After beating Kilmarnock, they went on to beat local rivals Dumbarton 1-0 after a replay. However, they went out of the cup on 13 December, losing 2-0 to eventual winners Queen's Park. The following season, though, Renton did even better. This time 23 clubs entered the cup and, after receiving a walkover in the first round, Renton reached the final. After beating another local rival Helensburgh 2-0 at home, they had another home tie, this time beating Glasgow team Eastern 1-0. In the semis, though, they were taken to a replay by neighbours Dumbarton after a 1-1 draw at home. Renton won the replay 1-0 to go through to the final against Queen's Park. In the final at Hampden Park, in front of 7,000 spectators, Renton were soundly beaten 3-0.

After their cup final appearance of 1875 the club struggled to get into the latter rounds of the competition until 1885. In this same season that Queen's Park reached their second FA Cup Final, Renton won through to their second Scottish Cup Final. En route they beat Vale of Leven Wanderers (the club's second team) 2-1, then in the next round travelled to Falkirk to play East Stirlingshire, where they ran riot, winning 10-2. That scoreline, though, was only the fourth-biggest of the day. Dunfermline were beaten 11-1 by Hearts, but both of these results were nothing compared with Vale

RENTON

of Leven beating Campsie Central 14-0 and Yoker winning 17-0 against Tayavalla.

In the third round Renton again ran up a massive goal tally in a 9-2 victory over Glasgow team Northern, then after receiving a bye to the quarter-final, they hosted Rangers, coming out on top 5-3. In the semis they travelled to Edinburgh to play Hibernian, where they ran out winners in a tight match, 3-2, but it was enough to see them into the final.

In the final they ran out against their classic rivals Vale of Leven. After a 0-0 draw witnessed by an unlucky 2,500 people, Renton ran out 3-1 winners in the replay to lift their first Scottish Cup, in a match watched by a more respectable 5,000 fortunate souls. During their cup run Renton had scored 32 goals in seven matches.

The following season the club again made it to the final, beating Kirkintilloch Athletic 15-0 on 12 September 1885 in their first-round match. This scoreline, as impressive as it was, was absolutely nothing compared with Arbroath beating Bon Accord 36-0, and on the same day Dundee Harp put 35 goals past Aberdeen Rovers. In the second round Renton played against the short-lived team Dumbarton Athletic, winning 7-2, then in the third round squeezed past Albion 1-0 to set up a match against Cowlairs in the fourth round, which they won comfortably, 4-0. Their fifth-round tie was a repeat of the previous season's final against Vale of Leven. Again, it went to a replay. This time round the first match ended 2-2, but in the replay Renton won 3-0. After a bye into the semis, they travelled again to Edinburgh to play Hibernian in a match they won 2-0 to put them into the

SCOTLAND'S LOST CLUBS

final against Queen's Park. However, unlike the previous season, they wouldn't walk away with the cup, beaten 3-1 in torrential rain. That season in the cup, Renton scored 35 goals in eight matches.

In 1886/87, Renton played in the English FA Cup, beating Accrington and Blackburn Rovers before finally being put out by Preston North End, 2-0 at home. They did lift the Glasgow Merchants' Charity Cup that season, though.

However, it would be season 1887/88 that would be the greatest in the club's history. Firstly, they won the Scottish Cup, scoring 35 goals in seven matches during their run, including beating Cambuslang 6-1 in the final on 4 February 1888. This, though, was just the warm-up act.

In 1888, Preston North End were one of the greatest teams in England and would the following year win the first-ever league season in England, and do it unbeaten. In the 1888 English FA Cup Final they came up against West Bromwich Albion, but were so confident about victory that before the match kicked off, they asked to have their photograph taken with the cup, because afterwards their white shirts would be muddy, which wouldn't make for such a good picture. However, as often happens when a team get cocky before a match, they were stunned by being beaten 2-1 at The Oval. After the match the Preston captain stood motionless in the centre circle for several minutes, so much so that a policeman had to tap him on the shoulder to get him to move off the pitch.

In the previous season a tentative move had been made by the clubs who had won the English and Scottish FA Cups to play a match that would become 'The Association Football

Championship of the World'. That first match was between Aston Villa and Hibernian, which ended in a 3-0 win for Villa at Perry Barr, leading them to be known as the very first 'world club champions'.

So, in 1888, after Renton won the Scottish Cup, they contacted Preston North End to organise a match between the teams, as everyone believed that Preston would win the FA Cup. However, when West Brom took the trophy, Preston simply walked away from the agreed match with Renton. So, a letter was sent to West Brom to ask whether they would take part instead. They agreed, so on 19 May 1888 at Hampden Park the two champions faced off.

The Scottish game at this time was in a stage of major crisis, with the creation of the English Football League in 1888 and the allowance of professionalism in England since 1885. These changes had led to a mass migration of Scottish players to England and had a major impact on the clubs in Scotland as they tried to keep hold of their players. It therefore forced several clubs in Scotland to start paying players secretly. This included, but wasn't limited to, Hibs, Rangers, Celtic and Hearts. These clubs had reportedly two sets of books, one they let the SFA see and one that was actually accurate.

When in 1888 Renton lined up to face West Brom, it was seen as a battle of the old-school amateur players, who simply played for the love of the game, against a team of mercenaries, who were only there for the money. It was a dream match for the Scottish press, who had pushed the line of the English players being paid to within an inch of its life. Renton ran out 4-1 winners and became the world champions. Granted

SCOTLAND'S LOST CLUBS

it was only between English and Scottish teams, but it was still a great accolade to have and to claim.

The 'world championship game' would only be played four times. Following the victories for Aston Villa and Renton, it wasn't played again until 1895 when Sunderland beat Hearts 5-3. Within the Sunderland team that day was Johnny Campbell, who had also played for Renton in 1888 when they won the title, therefore becoming the only player to have helped both a Scottish and English team to become world champions.

The final time the championship was played was in 1902 when Hearts won, beating Tottenham Hotspur 3-1 in a replay.

Renton built on their 1888 victory by finally getting to take on Preston North End in a match at Hampden on 2 June 1888, winning 4-1. It was after this that the club commissioned a cup to be made, which is now on display at Hampden Park, stating that Renton were indeed world champions. To drive home this fact, they also had a sign made that was hung on the pavilion at their home ground Tontine Park stating that Renton FC were, even for a small time, Champions of the World.

By 1890, clubs in Scotland were starting to become restless, having viewed the success of the league in England and wanting some of the action themselves. Renton played a major part in the founding of the SFL, including sending the notice out to other clubs to attend a meeting to create a league. They played their first league match on 16 August 1890, travelling to the original Celtic Park, where they won 4-1 in front of 10,000 fans.

Renton's time in league football was interesting to say the least, and despite their essential role in the creation of the league, it didn't stop them from being one of the first casualties of the system.

In September 1890, Adventurers complained to the SFA about a Scottish Cup tie they had lost to St Bernard's on the grounds that the opposition were paying players, after a player transfer from Dunfermline Athletic to the Edinburgh team seemed strange. During the following investigation it transpired that the player had been lured away by a job in a biscuit factory. The suspicion came from the fact that in the job he did outside of football, he was earning more in Fife than he would in Edinburgh. Soon, though, it became clear that he was receiving an extra ten shillings per football match he played in.

On 25 September 1890, the SFA found St Bernard's guilty of concealing professionalism and they were suspended. With this judgement, the club met that night and formed a new team named Edinburgh Saints. To show just how undaunted they were by the SFA, they kept the entire same playing squad and membership. The following week, the 'new' club organised a friendly with Renton. Renton attempted to secure clearance from the SFA to play the match but were told very clearly not to play it. Renton, though, on the back of a promise of good money, carried on regardless and played the match.

The SFA took a dim view, as the *Scottish Sport* wrote afterwards:

The managers of the St. Bernard and the Renton must have been very short-sighted indeed if they

SCOTLAND'S LOST CLUBS

imagined that the mere change of name was sufficient to clear the club of the consequences of their peregrinations in the paths of professionalism ... The sentence is a severe one, the expulsion from the Association of the two clubs, the suspension of the players involved until the end of the season, and the social annihilation of the officials concerned.

This sentence meant that Renton played only five matches of the very first season of league football in Scotland. Renton and St Bernard's were merely the example set by the SFA in its final days of fighting against professionalism. When the league had been created it had allowed players to be paid a fee for expenses. Shockingly, in an unforeseen move, the bigger clubs started paying players higher expenses but maintained that they weren't paying players to play, just to travel. Finally, in 1890, the SFA took a deep look into clubs' finances after the St Bernard's affair.

As this investigation started, a sense of panic ran through almost all Scottish clubs, none more so than Hibs, Celtic, Rangers and the unfortunate Cowdairs. Firstly, Hibs had some interesting things in their books. To start with, the SFA asked all clubs to show them the last five years' worth of accountancy books. In 1887, Hibs had won the Scottish Cup, defeating Dumbarton in the final. Although a private detective had found out that a Hibs player, William Groves, was being paid by the club four times what he earned as an apprentice stonemason for 'broken time' to allow him to play football, the SFA still rejected Dumbarton's protest

about Hibs paying players. However, justice would come shortly after when in the weeks after the cup final the Hibs treasurer, a Mr McFadden, disappeared to Canada with most of the club's funds and even some money belonging to the Archdiocese of Edinburgh.

The extent of the investigation the SFA launched can be questioned as Hibs had three different treasurers in that five-year period. Yet somehow all five sets of books came in with the same handwriting on them. Rangers, on the other hand, had somehow lost the safe keys so would need to wait for the safe to be opened and, strangely, when the safe was opened two of the sets of books were badly burned. Celtic, though, had arguably the best reason. Their books were a week late being sent to the SFA, which Celtic said was because the people in the secretary's house had all come down with a fever, so the books needed to be disinfected. They had sent the books away to the Glasgow sanitary authorities to be cleaned before sending them on to the SFA. Even with these interesting stories, every club but Cowlairs passed the SFA checks and were allowed to carry on as before.

Renton, though, were, for now at least, banned from all footballing activity. So, the club, not wanting to take this ruling lying down, decided to take the SFA to court. They claimed £5,000 against the SFA on the grounds of lost earnings because engagements were being cancelled, the vested interest in their fame as a club (even in the court papers they mentioned being world champions) and the fact they had brought their ground up to the new requirements the SFA had set out. The club took the SFA to the Court of Session in Edinburgh, where they argued that friendlies

SCOTLAND'S LOST CLUBS

shouldn't impact on them in league competition as long as league matches weren't moved for them. Renton managed to win their fight, were awarded the £5,000 plus expenses and were restored to the SFA. From the 1891/92 season, they were back in the league.

By 1893 professionalism was finally permitted in Scottish football, and while this was good news for most, Renton were starting to struggle. By the end of the 1893/94 season they were relegated to the Second Division. The club was small in size and even in their heyday could only attract crowds of around 300 people, so now they started to come under extreme financial pressure. During the amateur years, clubs were only paying for travel costs, which prior to the league campaign wasn't so bad, but as soon as you add wages and stadium requirements, 300 spectators aren't going to bring a great deal of income.

The 1894/95 season was a mixed bag for Renton. In the league they struggled to pay for travel to away matches, and in their last match of the season they played a much-needed monied glamour friendly against Queen's Park instead of travelling to Dundee to play Dundee Wanderers. While their league form was terrible, Renton did manage to get through to what would be their last Scottish Cup Final. They played none other than St Bernard's at Ibrox Park, where the Edinburgh team ran out 2-1 winners.

Despite this cup final appearance, Renton's time in the top leagues was drawing to a close. In 1895/96 they finished third in the second tier and then sixth the following season. It was, however, in 1897/98 that they finally pulled out of the league, after just four matches of the season. The club that

RENTON

had helped form a league, whose committee had taken the first initial steps into creating that league – a club who had been world champions less than ten years previously – played their final SFL match in September 1897 in a 3-1 home defeat to Leith Athletic.

Since they had played that friendly against Edinburgh Saints in 1890, Renton had been on a downward spiral. Whereas the other teams in the league had become used to the format and the requirements of league football, Renton had been somewhat more cavalier in their approach to league matches and kept getting their knuckles rapped for opting to play lucrative friendlies instead of their league fixtures.

After 1897, Renton dropped into the Western League, where local rivals Vale of Leven were also playing. Meanwhile, Hamilton Academical took Renton's place in the SFL. However, Renton would go on to play in the Scottish Cup until the club's very end. They did manage to have one last cup run in 1907, which included beating Dundee, who would go on to finish second in the top flight that season, and facing St Bernard's, who were by now leading the Second Division, before being knocked out by Queen's Park.

The former football world champions would drift on until finally folding in 1922. They had entered the 1922/23 Scottish Cup but failed to turn up for the tie and subsequently folded. The club's ground was sold and used for housing. The former centre circle is now a memorial garden to the club from a tiny village in Scotland that was once the greatest team in the world.

The story of Renton Football Club deserves to be known more widely than it is, as they were undisputed champions

SCOTLAND'S LOST CLUBS

of the world, even if it was for a short period of time. Sadly, no club was ever formed in the town in the aftermath of the team folding. If you ever wish to see the ground where the world champions once played, it can be found just off John Street in Renton.

In 1988 there was a match played between Dumbarton and West Bromwich Albion. The match had been agreed many years before and should have been between Renton and West Brom. However, as Renton had become defunct, the nearest senior team left from the area was Dumbarton. In the match, West Brom lost again, 2-1 this time, which led to the local paper in West Bromwich running the headline 'Second World Cup Defeat for Albion!'