

A BURNS DAY REMINISCENCE by W. George Lovell



The glory of the Bens

Across the road from my parents' house, tucked away in a cul-de-sac in the crumbling ruins of sunny Govan, lies Tinto Park, home in Glasgow to Benburb Football Club.

The Bens, a local name for both soccer

team and soccer park, conjures up a hundred different associations. When I was a young boy, the Bens was a haven for adventure. In its overgrown surroundings I would play with my pals for hours and hours on end during the long days of sum-

mer. When we were teenagers, and soccer became more a passion than a pastime, the Bens was our field of dreams, the place where we might display our skills before being signed to kick a ball big-time at nearby Ibrox Park, the hallowed abode (at least for the Protestant half of Glasgow) of Rangers Football Club. When I went on to university, where the study of geography called for systematic observation of people in place, the Bens was where I first discerned how drink, football, allegiance, and locale really do furnish an identity for countless thousands of Glaswegian men. As an expatriate, someone who drifts back to take stock of Govan and Glasgow for a few weeks each year, I now see the Bens much like my family, an enduring social microcosm of the district and the city as a whole.

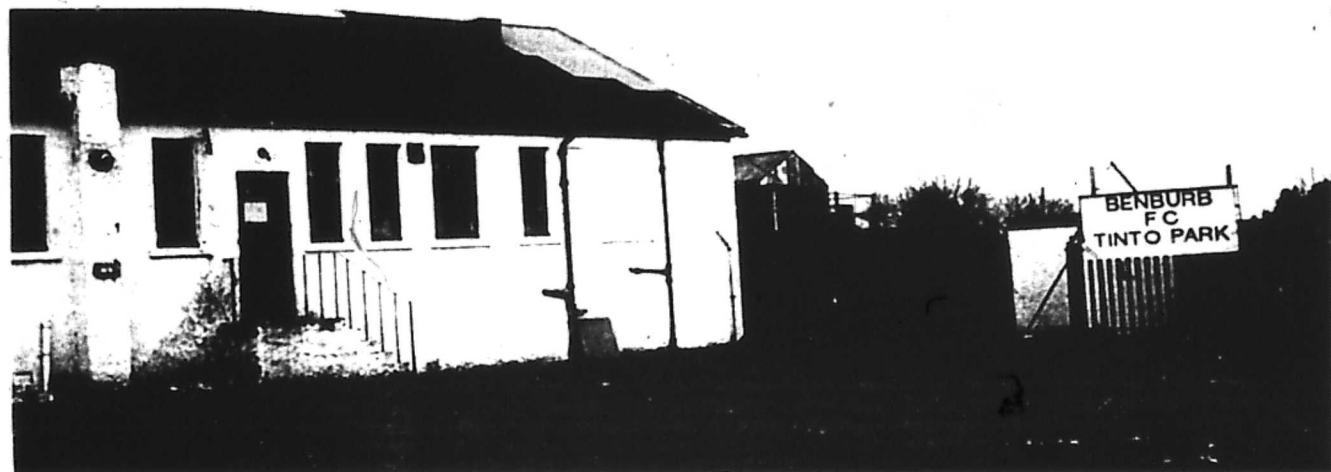
First, that curious name, "Benburb." The "ben" part is straightforward. Any good dictionary will tell you that "ben" in Scotland means "a mountain peak," derived from the Gaelic *beann*. Hence Ben Nevis or Ben Lomond. On a clear day, looking north from Tinto Park affords a magnificent panorama of the southern flank of the Scottish highlands some six or seven miles away; but mountain peaks in Govan itself are as rare an item as steady, well-paid jobs. The playing surface at Tinto Park, however, slopes notoriously upwards, north to south. Kicking uphill there on a winter's day, with the wind blowing cold and hard against you, probably does qualify as the soccer equivalent of climbing a mountain.

The "burb" part is trickier. Two flights of fancy are the best I can do. There's the verb "burble," which means to make a gurgling or bubbling sound. The case for some kind of water-related meaning is advanced by "burbot," the common name of the fish *Lota maculosa*, shaped like an eel but shorter and thicker, with a flat head, also called "ling" or "eelpout." Which leaves us with Benburb being either "the gurgling peak" or "the peak of fish." Alternative explanations are welcome.

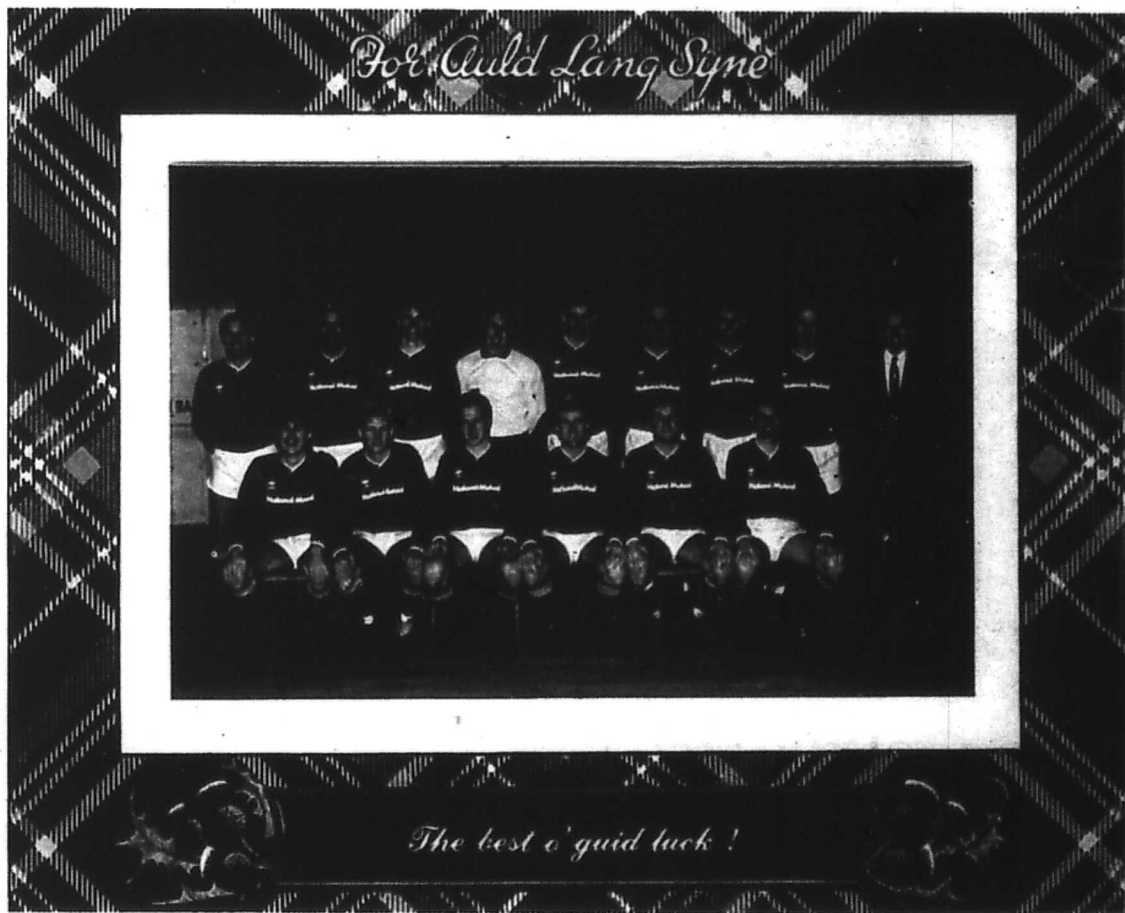
The nomenclature of "tinto" is more colorful, imparting a distinct sense of the exotic to the grey pallor of reality. One of my first and most memorable excursions abroad was to Spain, where I quickly learned that tinto means "red wine." The dictionary prefers to define "tinto" more specifically as a red, non-aromatic wine from Madeira. Govanites, as inhabitants of Govan are universally known, have a great love of wine, especially the fortified variety. Indeed, so fond are they of wines with intoxicating names like Lanliq and Eldorado that part of the district is actually called Wine Alley. What writers refer to as "the spirit of place" in Govan assumes a quite literal meaning. That leaves us with Tinto Park being "the soccer field of red wine." Red wine, of course, symbolizes blood, a great deal of which is spilled each time the Bens fight it out against visiting opposition. And as they spectate, supporters of the Bens have been known to fortify themselves at Tinto with tinto, not necessarily from Madeira.

Memories haunt the place. My father's working week stretched from Monday through Sunday, with the daily grind in the shop broken only on Saturdays when the Bens played at home. He would position himself faithfully behind the goal at the northern end of Tinto Park, up a few steps from a one-armed man he called Wingie, best remembered for his rallying cry "C'mon the Govan people!" when the Bens were one or two goals down and toiling, as they were often. My father's preferred location offered not just a perfect view of goalmouth action. It also enabled him to look across the road to our house, behind which rises the green tower of his pigeon loft. He could thus enjoy the game, keep his eye on the house, and also see how any pigeons he had out were doing.

Pigeon flying in Glasgow is a culture unto itself, and the friendships it spawns are lifelong. One of my father's "pigeon friends" was Bobby Calder, chief talent scout for Aberdeen Football Club. Bobby's job took him all over Scot-



Tinto Park, home of the Benburb Football Club, is set 'in the crumbling ruins of sunny Govan' in Glasgow, Scotland.



The Bens Team, 1987: 'As usual, won nothing,' noted Lovell Sr.

land, and his successes in spotting professional potential on the junior circuit were legendary. Watching the Bens play at Tinto Park allowed Bobby not only to check out promising prospects, but also to catch up on pigeon gossip with my father. It was at Tinto Park in the 1960s that Bobby spotted Jimmy Smith, the most gifted player I ever saw play in the blue and white colors of Benbur. It came as no surprise when Bobby lured Jimmy Smith to Aberdeen. Jimmy Smith headed south, like many Scots, to seek his fortune in England, where his mesmerizing dribbles and dead-ball artistry, alas, fizzled out. One Govan boy who did make it big in England, however, is Alex Ferguson, currently manager of Manchester United and former classmate of my brother-in-law. If he didn't actually sign for Benbur, Ferguson recalls training at Tinto Park before turning professional and realizing every Govan boy's dream (Catholics not included), of playing for Rangers.

Along with the Smiths and the Fergusons are untold others whose soccer history dates back to Benbur. One such individual is Chic (Charles) Sneddon. For a couple of seasons I played soccer alongside Chic for

the 281st Boys Brigade, before Chic was snapped up by the Bens. Tinto Park was then a treacherous expanse of black ash and patchy grass, not unlike the surfaces we played on at the so-called "Fifty Pitches" in Cardonald, where Chic and the 281st for a while reigned supreme. Chic's career peaked at Benbur, for which he played a stalwart centre-half. If he ever appeared to tire, especially before a corner kick was taken, my father would encourage him by shouting "C'mon Veg" - Chic's father was once a greengrocer - "Take that lead oot yer boots!" Chic never vocally responded to my father's exhortations, unlike a good many Bens players who habitually react to the advice offered freely by their supporters, usually not in printable language.

These days my father considers himself a "butterfly" supporter, limiting his personal attendance at Tinto Park to games played in clement weather. My brother's attendance is far less sporadic, and reveals another factor in what it is that makes Benbur tick, generation after generation: loyalty.

Although he himself no longer lives in Govan, my brother returns to Tinto Park

again and again to watch the Bens play, standing on the terracing bellowing away. He and scores like him have a homing instinct as keen as one of my father's pigeons. The pilgrimage my brother makes from Hillington, however, involves not a fraction of the effort required of Bens fans displaced from Govan during the urban demolition of the '60s and '70s, when entire families were shipped off to rot in Castlemilk, Drumchapel, or Easterhouse, modern housing scheme built on the edge of Glasgow. Unable to find there, or unwilling to create there, any rewarding semblance of community, the old Govanites keep coming back.

They returned in full voice on Nov. 6, 1993, to watch Benbur confront a formidable force in the West of Scotland Cup, Auchinleck, the prize team of Ayrshire and former junior champions of all Scotland. One-nil down, things looked like they might turn in the Bens's favor after Auchinleck had a player sent off for dissent. (After being shown a yellow card for a minor offense, the player in question was heard to query: "Hey (ref, did ye no hear me? I telt ye tae go an' f--- yerself."

His second yellow card was followed automatically by a red).

The one-man advantage seemed a curse when the Bens went two goals down. Defeat and disappointment appeared inevitable. Two goals down against Auchinleck would signal the demise of many a team, but not the Bens at Tinto Park. First, a face saver. Second, an equalizer. Third, a match winner! The crowd went delirious, all several hundred of them, visitors excluded.

Not that I was actually there for the occasion, which happened to fall on my mother's birthday, a happy conjunction not lost on my father or my brother. No, I watched it over Christmas on video. Benbur Football Club on video? Yes. Admittedly a small, private edition, but the pride and the glory of the Bens that day were mine to relish. □

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