

THE BARRHEAD SENSATION: ARTHURLIE 4, CELTIC 2

Whilst there has been a long and healthy record of giantkilling in the FA Cup, the near dominance of the Old Firm in Scotland had led to a situation where they have rarely been troubled by such inconveniences. In modern times the defeat of Rangers by Berwick back in 1967 and Celtic's loss to Inverness Caledonian Thistle in 2000 are two extremely rare incidents of major cup shocks. Prior to that one has to delve into the depths of history to uncover an earlier upset of similar proportions: in fact back to 1897 when Celtic fell victim to Arthurlie, a team not even considered of sufficient strength to be accepted as members of the Scottish League. On that occasion, however, the slaying of the giants from Parkhead was not so much a result of some well-aimed strikes by their lower-level opponents, but, as we shall see, a self-inflicted blow by a group of players who saw themselves as more important than the club. The consequences were far reaching and the re-organisation that followed paved the way for greater success in the following years.

Although the club had been in existence for barely a decade, Celtic could already justifiably claim to be Scotland's leading side by early 1897. Their record in the Scottish Cup (one win, losing finalists on three occasions) was less noteworthy than that in the Scottish League, a competition in which they had yet to finish outside of the top three, winning the title in 1892-93, 1893-94 and 1895-96. Irish and Catholic, although not exclusively so, in many ways they were the intruders in a Scottish, Protestant society and had already become a standard bearer for the community they represented. The top players were the super stars of their day and to some extent the problems that emerged in the 1896-97 season can be seen as a result of a group of these stars adopting an attitude that suggests they thought they were more important than the club and 'untouchable'. What is clear is that the Arthurlie defeat was not a one-off incident, a blip that could be soon forgotten, but part of a sequence of events which effectively saw the team self-destruct and which pushed the club to reorganise itself with a more modern, businesslike structure to ensure this did not happen again.

At the start of the 1896-97 season Celtic were looking to retain the Scottish League title and make it four wins out of five in the competition. In those days the Scottish League occupied the first half of the season, then from early January the Scottish Cup took over, with spare Saturdays generally filled with supplementary league competitions, which in the case of Celtic meant fixtures in the Glasgow League. The

club's troubles first came to the surface in November 1896 following a series of reports in the *Glasgow Evening News* and its sister paper the *Scottish Referee* criticising the team for rough play. The players demanded that the offending reporters should be excluded from the press box for the home game against Hibernian on 28 November. The committee refused to accede to this demand and three men, Barney Battles, John Divers and Peter Meehan, effectively went on strike, refusing to take the field. Replacements were found at short notice, but the damage to team morale and relationships with the committee had already been done.

That some players, however valuable to the team, felt they had so much power that they could decide who was allowed in the press box suggests there was something seriously wrong with the set-up in place at Parkhead. The club was a democratic, membership-based organisation, one member, one vote, run by a committee that was elected annually. However, below this there were few structures: Willie Maley, who was

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Prior to the tie at Dunclelie Park not even the most sanguine Arthurlie enthusiasts had the temerity to expect anything but defeat, but when the Celtic team, or to be correct, the Celtic scratch team, revealed itself, and no M'Arthur, Orr, Doyle, Russell, M'Eleny, M'Mahon, or even Gilhooly, made his appearance, the hope asserted itself that their men might at least make a credible show against their doubtful opponents. The Celts' first and only piece of luck was guessing the copper, and their failure to take full advantage of their good fortune by compiling a substantial lead to meet contingencies in the second half meant to all intents and purposes the loss of the tie. From the very outset the Celts showed their superior capabilities as manipulators, but the Arthurlie players more than made up for this by their knowledge of the ground peculiarities, which, to a team accustomed to play the close passing game, were pondered doubtfully difficult to overcome. Arthurlie's mode of procedure was not of the captivating order, but their long swinging drives, besides tending to upset the equilibrium of the Celts, usually contrived to bring them into the visitors' territory. Twelve minutes after the start, Hannigan with little difficulty gave Arthurlie the lead, which they never afterwards lost, with a shot from five yards out. Eight minutes later, however, M'Livney equalised. During the major part of

(*Scottish Sport*, 12 January 1897)





Willie Maley, appointed as Celtic's first secretary-manager in the aftermath of the Arthurlie defeat

on the playing staff, was match secretary but apart from a trainer there was no other intermediary between the players and the committee. Thus although the committee selected the team, the players would have relied on a degree of self organisation on the pitch, and probably on their own individual negotiating skills when making agreements as to contracts and wages. The committee, in their role as managers, reacted as most employers of the time would have done when faced with industrial action from their employees - they suspended the three rebels and carried on regardless.

The absence of three star men seemed to have little impact on the club's campaign, and indeed at the turn of the year they must have been favourites to retain their title. Involved in a four-way tussle with Rangers, Hearts and Hibernian, Celtic were leaders, albeit on goal average, with two games remaining and victory in both would have ensured the trophy.

	P	PTS
Celtic	16	24
Hibernian	16	24
Hearts	16	24
Rangers	16	23

When the draw for the Scottish Cup first round was announced it seemed to offer an easy victory for the Parkhead club, indeed Arthurlie offered to switch the tie in return for £70, confirming that they considered their only gain from the tie would be financial. However, circumstances conspired to produce a very different outcome. Perhaps the most significant of these was that instead of just three players absent it seemed that the full first-team squad had made themselves unavailable for one reason or another. Some were legitimately absent through injury, but others appeared to have deliberately stayed away - suggesting that the 'player power' revolt of the previous November had extended to several other stars at the club. Although some modern sources suggest that Celtic failed to turn out a full team of eleven men, a trawl of a range of contemporary sources has failed to yield a single reference to the team being short of players and I can only conclude that this was not the case. The reports are quite comprehensive and if Celtic had begun with only seven men (as has been suggested) this would surely have been noted. It is undisputed, however, that Celtic were short of several regular first-team players for the match, and a comment in the *Evening Citizen* that, "Celtic were not fully represented, being without Doyle, Orr, Russell and Gilhooly," may have been the source of this.

Celtic's selection problems began with goalkeeper Dan McArthur, who had been carried off injured during the previous week's Glasgow League fixture against Rangers and had not yet recovered sufficiently to return to his place between the posts. Centre forward Alexander McMahon had recently suffered the loss of his father, which might explain his absence, although some reports also suggest he was carrying an injury, while Charlie McEleney was also on the injured list. None of these problems could have been avoided, but the situation was further compounded by the fact that the three rebels from the previous November were still under internal suspension, while the absence of four more men meant that the eleven players who lined up represented little more than a scratch team ("The Shadow of a Team" as the *Glasgow Observer* described them, 16 January 1897). Dan Doyle chose the occasion to withdraw his labours in connection with a dispute with the committee over wages, James Orr was injured, and it seems that both Davie Russell (who apparently missed his train) and Pat Gilhooly chose not to appear. The press certainly put no blame at the hands of the injured men, but others were publicly criticised: the *Scottish Referee* (11 January 1897) hinted that there might have been other reasons, "The disaster could have been prevented had certain players exercised a certain degree of moderation in their pursuit of pleasures." Although of inferior status, Arthurlie were still a competent outfit and had progressed to the first round via Qualifying Cup victories over Thornliebank,



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Kilmarnock Athletic and Blantyre Victoria. Significantly the circumstances surrounding the tie were similar to those surrounding many a famous cup giant-killing act over the years. Firstly the smaller team adopted a robust approach and their players were clearly fired up and ready for the challenge. Secondly the pitch and playing conditions were very much against Celtic - the ground was small and compact, the pitch was uneven and with a distinctive slope, while there was a stiff breeze blowing from end to end; these factors combined to render much of the bigger club's close-passing style of play ineffective. However, as almost every correspondent noted, the key factor in the upset was the strength of the team fielded by Celtic. The *Glasgow Observer* even went as far as to say, "It is safe to say that if the same elevens were pitched against each other on the same field Arthurlie would triumph four times out of five."

The teams lined up for the occasion as follows: Arthurlie: Airston; Smith, Hirst; Miller Tennant, Bodys; Hannigan, Tait, Ovens, Speirs, McGregor
Celtic: Cullen; John King, Crossan; Farrell, Kelly, Alex King; Morrison, Blessington, McIlveney, Henderson, Ferguson

Celtic had the advantage of the slope in the first half and with the strong wind behind them they made a promising start, peppering the Arthurlie goal with shots in the early stages of the game. The defence held firm and it was the home side who took the lead on seven minutes with a break away effort from Hannigan. McIlveney equalised five minutes later, but shortly before half time Hannigan added a second, again from a break away, to put Arthurlie in front once more. After failing to take advantage of the conditions in the first period, Celtic struggled during the final 45 minutes and rarely threatened, one report notes that Morrison and Blessington (two of the more senior players) were "particularly useless." They were a well-beaten team by the end of 90 minutes, Hannigan completing his hat-trick and McGregor adding a fourth before Ferguson netted a consolation for the visitors in the final minutes.

The newspapers were full of praise for Arthurlie, and the sensational nature of the result was immediately recognised. *Scottish Sport*, for example, noted that "... was a real blue-blooded sensation, which will in all likelihood be included hereinafter in the select list of historic sensations associated with the game." The *Glasgow Observer* referred to the occasion as, "A crushing disaster - the worst possibly in the history of the Celtic club." However, the blame for the defeat was almost exclusively placed on the players and sympathy was widely expressed for the plight of the club committee. The *Glasgow Evening News* was typical of most when it stated, "... the Celtic club is deserving of sympathy. It was through no fault of the Committee that the tie was lost." (11 January 1897) The events of the previous November had not been forgotten and were identified as having contributed to the defeat: "How far the Celtic's latest and greatest misfortune is attributable to the now historic 'revolt' of November last, it may not be possible to estimate precisely, but that it has had more than an outside and indirect influence we cannot doubt." (*Scottish Sport*, 12 January 1897)

Arthurlie met with defeat at the hands of Morton in the next round, but ironically were drawn to play Celtic in the first round the following season, again at Barrhead. This time there was no miracle and they were defeated 7-0. The two were to meet again in the first round in 1928-29, when Celtic won 5-1 at Parkhead. This was to be Arthurlie's last-ever Scottish Cup tie as the club then switched to Junior status.


The Celtic committee responded to the ignominious defeat immediately and over the next few months fundamental changes were put into place as they sought to prevent the downward spiral destroying the club. Within a week two of the players, John King and Harry McIlveney, were "given their walking tickets" and the following month Ching Morrison and Willie Ferguson were moved on to Burnley. Several players had their wages docked as a result of what happened at Barrhead and in fact almost all those who had lined up that day, plus the three November rebels, had departed before the end of the season. The players, perhaps sensing that the good times were over responded with some lacklustre performances, and the League title was effectively lost when Dundee secured victory at Parkhead with a last-minute goal. The situation became so bad that the *Glasgow Observer*, a strong supporter of the club, noted, "We are heartily sorry for the Celtic management at the state of affairs, because it is perfectly plain that the players are doing what they please, knowing that the bosses have no others to fall back on." (20 March 1897)



The week after the Arthurlie defeat Celtic officials had been involved in the establishment of a new athletics and cycling club, the Celtic Harriers, a venture which was also promoted by the Hibernian Swimming Club and which was to be exclusively Catholic. This club was to be allowed to use the facilities at Parkhead for training on Wednesday evenings, however, the need to improve those facilities to allow for championship racing would require the raising of funds. What better way to achieve this than by changing the status of the club to that of a limited liability company? This was the path chosen, and although there was dissatisfaction amongst the fans at the replacement of a democratic structure with one based on the power of money, the moves went through. One of the first duties of the new board was to appoint Willie Maley as secretary-manager and thus install a powerful management figure capable of controlling the players more directly. The investment produced by the share issue meant that money was more readily available to recruit players and as a result the team that lined up for the Glasgow Charity Cup final in May contained a host of new faces from England. The squad had been replaced almost in its entirety by the start of the 1897-98 season, with the dissatisfied players either having departed or having been brought to order, and the club was effectively able to start afresh once more.

In conclusion it can be seen that the defeat by Arthurlie was part of a sequence of events that resulted from an outbreak of 'player power' at Parkhead in the 1896-97 season, beginning with the November strike and ending with the disappointing failure to retain the Scottish League title. The committee having chosen to stand their ground with the November rebels had little choice but to sit out the problem and accept the loss with dignity. Fundamental to the problem was a widening gulf between the committee and the star players. This was resolved by restructuring the club as a limited company and appointing a secretary-manager to act as an intermediary between the board of directors and the players. In the short term this was successful, for the club were League champions once more in 1897-98 and this paved the way for the run of six consecutive League titles between 1904 and 1910.

Main Sources: Scottish Sport; Scottish Referee; Glasgow Observer & Catholic Herald; Glasgow Evening Times; Glasgow Evening News; Bob Crampsey, 'An Ignominious Discharge' in Tom Campbell (ed.), Ten Days That Shook Celtic (2005).



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