

Football – A Christmas Eve Massacre at Arbroath

This year Christmas Eve falls on a Saturday meaning there will be a full programme of fixtures in the Scottish Professional Football League. There are those who have criticised the SPFL for proceeding with a 'business as usual' policy citing that Christmas Eve is a time for families getting together. In fairness, for football players it is very much business as usual – in fact, if anything, the Festive period is even busier than usual with fixtures scheduled between Christmas and New Year before the traditional New Year 'derby matches' take place around Scotland (not in Edinburgh, of course, given Hibernian remain in the Championship while Hearts are in the top flight...)

In years gone by, it was the norm for league fixtures in Scotland to be played on Christmas Day. I recall Hearts going down 3-2 at Celtic Park on Christmas Day 1971 for example.



This year, Hearts will travel to Dundee on the eve of Christmas Eve (it was originally planned for 24th December but the television broadcasting folk sabotaged Santa and have switched it to the 23rd...) and it rekindles memories of this ageing Jambo of the day before Christmas nearly 40 years ago when Hearts made the slightly longer journey to Arbroath.

1977 was a year Hearts and their supporters were glad to see the back of. Years of decline at the club finally took its toll when Hearts suffered relegation for the first time in their history at the end of season 1976/77.

It had been a season which had started promisingly with John Hagart's men memorably thrashing East German side Lokomotive Leipzig 5-1 at Tynecastle in the now defunct European Cup

Winners' Cup (Hearts were in the competition as a result of reaching the Scottish Cup final in 1976 – although they lost to Rangers, the Gorgie team took their place in the Cup Winners' Cup due to Rangers being in the European Cup as Scottish champions)

Sadly, Hearts fortunes took a turn for the worse in November when they contrived to throw away a 3-1 lead over Celtic at Tynecastle and lost 4-3. That was the turning point as confidence crumbled, players suffered a loss of form and the team plunged down the league. Although Hearts didn't quite finish bottom of the pile, they ended the season second from bottom – which meant automatic demotion.

Thus, for season 1977/78, Hearts fans could no longer look forward to games against Celtic, Rangers, Aberdeen and Hibernian and had to content themselves with trips to the likes of Alloa, Dumbarton and Montrose. So it was, the night before Christmas 1977, that Hearts fans headed back to the capital city after what proved to be a rare afternoon of pleasure during those dark days after seeing their side provide them with a Christmas cracker (sorry) at the unlikely setting of Arbroath.

Hearts had replaced John Hagart with Willie Ormond as their manager in the summer of '77 – a decision which, given Ormond's legendary status with Hibernian, didn't go down well with some Hearts supporters. Hearts had made a somewhat indifferent start to life in what was then called the First Division and as they headed to Angus on a wintry afternoon the day before Christmas Day. The Jam Tarts weren't top of the league they were expected to stroll through. In fact, Willie Ormond's side weren't even in the top three and were somewhat toiling in fourth place behind Dundee, Morton and Dumbarton, although only four points separated the four sides.

However, this didn't stop several thousand Hearts fans heading to Ice Station Zebra, aka Gayfield Park, Arbroath hoping to

see their favourites return with both points.

Given the scoreline at the end of the game, you may be surprised to learn Hearts struggled in the first half. A Willie Gibson goal was all that separated the sides at half-time – but what a different story it was in the second half.

Gibson scored twice more and cult hero Drew Busby also grabbed a hat-trick. With winger Malcolm Robertson also getting on the scoresheet, the game ended at 7-0 to Hearts. Gibson and Busby both earned a case of whisky for their efforts as a result of the league sponsors at the time awarding this to any player getting a hat-trick. Suffice to say, it was a very happy Christmas in the Gibson and Busby households...

It was at this game that I first heard the Maroon Army belt out the song 'White Christmas' although the lyrics were changed somewhat and the emphasis was put on the words 'IN THE SNOW'. It sounded good at the time...

One of the soundly thrashed Arbroath team that afternoon would bide his time to exact revenge on Hearts. And Albert Kidd would do just that, wearing the colours of Dundee on the final day of the league season eight and a half years later...

Hearts eventually stumbled over the finishing line at the end of season 1977/78 and ended in second place in the First Division, behind champions Morton. However, this was enough to gain promotion back to the Premier Division, as the top flight of Scottish football was called then.

On the night before Christmas 1977, some happy Hearts fans heading down the icy road from Angus to Edinburgh claimed to have seen Santa Claus preparing for his epic journey. Now they may have consumed too much alcohol that day but they were believed to have shouted to the big white-bearded figure 'Thanks, big man, but we've already got our present'

It was a 'sleighting' of a different sort at Gayfield Park on

Christmas Eve 1977...