

Against All Odds

The Birth of Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC



2011 ONLINE EDITION

with updated author biography, preface, and a new introductory chapter

Charles Bannerman



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Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club

August 1997

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FOREWORD

by **Dougie McGilvray, Club Chairman**

The history of Inverness football is littered with failed attempts to gain representation for the Highland Capital at Scottish League level. It began to appear only a mirage, a dream always just beyond reach.

But there were those who always had faith, who knew that this was a prize worth the wait. I was one of those and it has been my rare privilege to be at the forefront of making that dream a reality.

It was noisy and it was messy, but births are like that. The infant, though, has grown and flourished and has moved to a new home, Caledonian Stadium which is in itself a steel monument to those who had vision, and the resolve to carry it through.

They know who they are - and we are forever grateful. There were those who helped - and those who hindered. We certainly felt the victim of some foul tackles and dodgy decisions from people who seemed determined that this club would not win.

But a window of opportunity had opened in the Scottish League's decision to admit two more clubs - and if we had missed out because of bickering and blocking manoeuvres, then Inverness football would have paid a heavy price once that window had slammed shut. It doesn't bear thinking about.....

I am grateful to my family for their support in allowing me the time to play a pivotal role in this club's evolution and the creation of our splendid facilities, which we have major plans to expand. I do take pride in what has been achieved and I feel great satisfaction for John McDonald, our Life President, who put his reputation on the line with his colleagues in the South and has now been vindicated.

The heritage of the old clubs lives on in Inverness Caledonian Thistle. But we have welded on a wide new cross section of support, of people ready to back their local community against others on a national stage.

Some might think this is very early to tell the story of such a young club. But it is a remarkable story. And in the years which lie ahead, I feel confident that more extraordinary chapters remain to be written.

Yours in Sport,

Dougie McGilvray

PREFACE

This book records how two clubs playing Highland League football became a single unit in the Scottish League which in three years became Division 3 champions in a brand new stadium at East Longman.

That all sounds so very simple if said quickly. But in reality this was a process fraught with unbelievable controversy and complications which time and again almost brought Inverness Caledonian Thistle down and the Scottish League dream in Inverness to the brink of extinction. Indeed the story was frequently so sensitive and controversial that it is only in the secure and triumphant atmosphere of the end of the third season that it can be told in full.

The club now wants the whole tale to be made public for the first time. That in itself is a measure of the extent to which the difficulties have been mastered, and also of the outstanding success which Inverness Caledonian Thistle now is. Many of those who were deeply involved at various points have cooperated fully in this project. All Board members have read the text in advance and their advice on matters of fact has been invaluable. However no-one has at any time sought the removal of any material or any alteration of my interpretation of frequently controversial events.

The most striking feature of the full story is the complexity of the task undertaken, and the limited time available for the achievement of very ambitious objectives. The idea of Inverness football clubs joining forces had been talked about and rejected for decades. It was then achieved in less than four months between INE's initial approach to the clubs and the votes on that historic evening of September 9th 1993. However at this point the real battle was only beginning and one frequently recurring theme of this text is the several occasions on which the merger so very nearly failed to materialise as a result.

From the summer of 1993 onwards, I was fortunate enough to witness at first hand many of the events which have comprised what I believe to be a significant episode in the history of the Royal Burgh of Inverness. With the additional assistance of many other sources, written, taped and verbal, it has been possible to put together a detailed account of what is perhaps already being regarded as a minor miracle - the birth of Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club, which indeed took place against all odds.

This is the club's own book and I trust that it accurately reflects one of the most remarkable stories in the history of Scottish Football.

Charles Bannerman.
Inverness - May 1997.

Acknowledgments

The controversial nature of the birth of Inverness Caledonian Thistle meant that it was not until the summer of 1996 that the Directors could perform the act of faith of giving the go ahead for this remarkable story to be published. I am therefore very grateful to the Board for being given the opportunity to relate in the club's name what is essentially an independent version of the whole tale.

Although much of my research has been in Council minutes, newspaper files, my own records and some club papers, a huge amount has been gleaned through personal interviews with something in the region of twenty people who are too numerous to mention individually. To them, and in particular those whom I consulted on a number of occasions, I give my thanks and my appreciation for their help and frankness.

One particularly useful source has been Inverness Caledonian Thistle's own official playing records and photographic archive, kept by Statistician Ian Broadfoot who has also proof read the final text. As Director in charge of Public Relations, Ken Thomson has been my first point of contact with the club throughout. To him I convey my particular thanks. My gratitude also to Allan MacKenzie whose technical scrutiny of the legal aspects of the text has been invaluable and to Calum Duncan for advice on matters relating to dealings with Inverness District Council.

Apart from the paper's own value as a source of facts and quotes, The Inverness Courier's photographic files were also a good indication of what material existed. Thanks to Sports Editor David Beck for his assistance and also to Editor John MacDonald for agreeing to the reproduction of the paper's masthead and headline of 19th December 1995 in Chapter 13.

I am very pleased to be able to use the fine photographs of Ken MacPherson, Trevor Martin and Gordon Gillespie whose work of the highest professional standards has been a great asset to this publication. My additional thanks go to Gordon for the trouble he went to get the magnificent aerial shot of the Stadium on the cover.

My appreciation also to the staff of the Inverness Library, HiScan and Highland Printers for a great deal of cooperation at various points. Also, there will be those whose involvement at the moment is as yet unanticipated, particularly on the sales side.

A special thanks too to the many sponsors whose backing has made the production of this book much easier.

Finally, to my wife Dorothy and my family, sincere gratitude for continually putting up with my frequent absences from normal domestic life during the ten months of the creation of this book.

Charles Bannerman.

Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC wish to acknowledge the financial assistance received from the following towards the production of the book. Without their support, the project would not have been possible.

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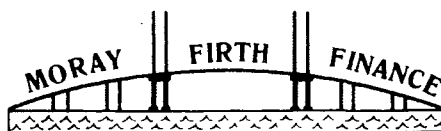
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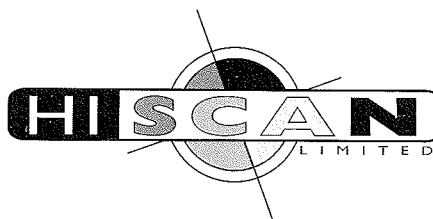


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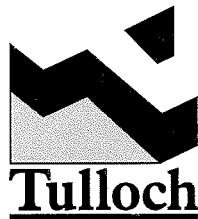

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The Author

Updated Author Biography : August 2011

Charles Bannerman's first experience of Inverness football was, as described in the new introductory chapter to this book, a fortnightly pilgrimage to Telford Street Park as a Dalneigh schoolboy in the 1960s. A move "up the hill" to Inverness Royal Academy cultivated a great admiration for Thistle as well while a love for Clach was possibly inspired by a grandmother with Merkinch connections. He continues to be a strong advocate of the game in Inverness.

After four years studying Chemistry in Edinburgh he returned to Inverness and has taught the subject at Inverness Royal Academy since 1977. He is in addition the school's press officer and has also written a series of three "Up Stephen's Brae" books reflecting life at the Royal Academy when it was situated at Midmills.

He has been the BBC's sports reporter in the Highlands on a freelance basis since 1984, contributing to local programming as well as national radio and television. Along with two of the photographers whose work is included in this book, Ken MacPherson and Trevor Martin, he is the only reporter to have followed Caley Thistle since the very start, or indeed before it. This involvement also provided him with much of the material for this book. He has also been the Inverness Courier's athletics correspondent since 1976.

His other great sporting interest is athletics, which he has coached at all levels from primary school children to Commonwealth Games, but he has now "almost" retired from both competition and coaching. He has two grown up children, Jenny whom he still coaches, and Martin.

Revised August 2011.

The photographic contributions of the following are gratefully acknowledged.

KEN
MACPHERSON
Photographers

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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PHOTOGRAPHY
GORDON GILLESPIE

PREFACE TO THE 2011 ONLINE EDITION

It was an idea which sprung out of nowhere one day in the summer of 2011.

Once again, the Forum on "CaleyThistleOnline.com", the ICT fans' website, was featuring a request for a copy of "Against All Odds", the official history of the club's formation which had gone out of print and sold out some years previously.

As it happens a thought which had never been too far away since the publication of the book in 1997 simultaneously re-entered my head. That was my regret that, in my haste to cut rapidly to the run up to the Thistle and Caley merger, I had not said as much in the book about the two clubs' Highland League past by way of introduction as I perhaps should have.

Then came the "Eureka moment" when it occurred to me in a flash that both problems could be solved at a stroke if the book could be republished online, with an additional, introductory chapter added.

I posted the suggestion on one of the threads on CTO and within 24 hours CTO's leading lights Scott MacKenzie and Don Johnstone enthusiastically came on board to provide a host for this electronic version which can now be accessed universally. Scotty also made the very valid point that younger ICT fans will constantly be getting to the stage of wanting to know where their club came from.

There were one or two issues of having the original book scanned and getting the blessing of the club and the three owners of the photo copyright but that was very easily resolved with regular CTO contributor Neil MacKenzie arranging the vital scanning.

Then of course, the new chapter had to be researched and written, which turned out to be as much of a joy as assembling the original book. So here we are.

I would issue one slight caveat. The original 1997 text, for various, mainly technical reasons, has had to remain unaltered. Although it does not have the Highland League content I would, in hindsight, have liked, it still does have some reference to Caley Thistle's pre history. As a result, there is not quite the seamless join between this additional chapter and the main text that there would have been had the whole thing been written and published at once. As a result there may be the odd small episode of *deja vu* when you get to that original opening content - and especially the first couple of pages.

But what we do now have is an additional brief overview of the Highland League with specific reference to the two merger partners' time in it up until the late 1980s. That is where the original Chapter 1 takes up the tale to which readers

can then move on.

And I am so delighted that I will no longer will I have to tell people that the book is unobtainable.

Charles Bannerman, Inverness. August 2011.

INTRODUCTION

INVERNESS AND THE HIGHLAND LEAGUE.

The latter part of the 19th century, and the 1880s in particular, saw rapid development across the entire spectrum of sport both in Europe and in the United States. A lot of clubs and institutions in a wide variety of disciplines have their origins in this period when working practices were beginning to allow enough free time and money to participate more in sport, and competition was aided by the growth of the railways.

Inverness was no exception and all four of its longer term representatives in the Highland Football League have their origins in the mid 1880s. Of these Citadel, based close to where Cromwell's Tower still stands near Inverness Harbour, went out of existence just before the Second World War. But Clachnacuddin still exists at the time of writing in August 2011 as Inverness's only representative in the Highland League.

The apparent caution of that last sentence is easily justified by three Clach crises of the previous quarter century. The first two are described in Chapter 14 of this book, and they all came close to putting Clach out of business. With the third now successfully negotiated, this creates the hope that Clach will continue to represent Inverness in the Highland League for a long time to come.

That then leaves Caley and Thistle - two names which go together to epitomise the phenomenal progress which football in Inverness has made, starting with the transition from the Highland League to the Scottish Premier League in just a single decade.

One of the most conspicuous features of the merger of Inverness Thistle and Caledonian in the mid 1990s was the inability of the two partners to agree on a variety of issues. And it seems always to have been thus, literally from the very start. Because both clubs, quite independently of and oblivious to each other, have laid claim to be the oldest of the Inverness quartet which survived into the 20th century .

On the face of it, this honour looks to fall to Thistle who had always referred to themselves as having been founded in 1885. This includes in "The Hub Of The Hill", Thistle's centenary booklet which appears to be the product of a number of collaborators. On the other hand Caley always appeared to accept 1886 as their date of birth and held their centenary in 1986. But in Caley's centenary history "Caley All The Way", author and former manager Alex Main, on the basis of newspaper research, categorically makes the claim that the seniority lies with Caley.

One of the great difficulties in resolving the question of which of the merger partners is the older club is lack of information. Little of Thistle's early background survives while Caley's early records were destroyed when the Telford Street grandstand burned down in 1950. As it happens, that Telford Street catastrophe seems to have created a precedent. Clach's stand went up in smoke under mysterious circumstances in the late 1980s while Thistle's suffered the same fate in 1995 after Kingsmills had ceased to be a football ground (see page 96).

Both centenary histories have been invaluable in researching this chapter and "The Hub of the Hill" definitely places Thistle's foundation in 1885 by a Diriebught miller by the name of Smith, four of whose sons were players. On the other hand there is no supportive evidence for this statement although the booklet then goes on to claim that Thistle absorbed Crown FC in 1889 before taking over Union. This was in 1896 after Union had finished bottom of the Highland League in both the league's second and third seasons and a number of its players and officials defected to Kingsmills.

Main, on the other hand, puts a slightly different spin on events, suggesting that Crown effectively underwent a metamorphosis into Thistle, apparently at some point after Caley were founded and that the takeover of Union was at a rather earlier stage. This latter element is difficult to reconcile with Union appearing in Highland League tables right up to 1896 although Main does say that Crown and Union both continued as Junior clubs.

Main further edges Caley's foundation back a little in time with reference to a friendly played by a team called "Caledonians" on 9th December 1885. So in effect, despite the dates of 1885 and 1886 stated respectively by Thistle and Caley themselves for over 100 years, seniority is possibly too close to call definitively, especially given the extreme lack of information. And with Clach at the very least breathing down Thistle's and Caley's necks, it is not inconceivable that the seniority race among Inverness's major clubs might indeed be a three horse one with Citadel, founded 1887, also not far in arrears.

Both clubs' colours - which live on today on the shirts of Inverness Caledonian Thistle - appear to have been established at an early stage. Caley began life sporting narrow blue and white hoops before adopting plain blue. At the time of writing a large print of the original team in this livery is fixed on the wall behind the desk of club football secretary Jim Falconer (of whom much more later) in his office at the Caledonian Stadium. Thistle, who in their earliest years played in chocolate and white, adopted black and red from 1894, which makes me wonder if Mr. Smith had any connections with Glenurquhart?

Another sport which took great strides forward in the 1880s is Shinty and, 15 miles along the road from Inverness, Glenurquhart Shinty Club was formed at

almost exactly the same time as Thistle FC and also plays in black and red.

Thistle's first recorded base was right on Mr. Smith's home patch in the area at Diriebught which eventually became the site for Inverness Royal Academy's playing fields and for Millburn Academy which was originally next door and is now located on the old Royal Academy field. There is a further interesting, albeit unfortunate, connection here since it was on these very fields in 1967 that a Millburn pupil called Dodo Sinclair contracted tetanus after a fall, leading also to Inverness's entire secondary school population being inoculated. Dodo's father George, known as "Butch", was a long serving Thistle official and Vice Chairman.

However it doesn't seem to have taken Thistle long to relocate to Kingsmills Park on Kingsmills Road where the club was to stay until it played its very last game there in May 1994.

Onwards from that friendly of December 1885 where "Caledonians" beat Rovers 1-0, there were some others before Caley entered the Inverness Charity Cup in 1886, losing 3-1 to the Cameron Highlanders at the Barracks.

In the club's latter years, Caley fans published a fanzine called "(On A) Life Support Machine" and during the merger controversy in 1993 it featured a photo of the very first Caley team of 1886. Less than 20 years on, it is already possible to smile wryly at the caption the Fanzine editors placed below the photo and which is quoted again on p32.

"Well boys, what's it to be, do we go ahead and form the most successful Highland League club in history, or do we wait 107 years and build a petrol station instead down the dump with Fiona Larg?"

To paraphrase Churchill's response to Hitler's claim that Britain's neck would be wrung like a chicken's, it might be commented: "Some petrol station, some club!"

Just as Thistle played at Kingsmills from a very early stage, it did not take Caley very long to go to Telford Street. However Alex Main reveals that in its very earliest days the club played on The Carse although when he wrote that in 1986 it was just too early to reflect on the fact that, but for District Council indecision, the club might well have returned there just over a century later and the history of football in Inverness might have been very different. (see p8.)

Initially the Telford Street ground was leased and the precise location of the pitch changed slightly, especially before the Glen Mhor Distillery was built in 1905. Then in 1920 the club bought the land for the sum of £275, which pales into insignificance compared with the £1 million it fetched when it was sold three quarters of a century later as the biggest single asset of Inverness

Caledonian Thistle.

But even by the latter years of the 19th century, Inverness was well and truly divided into four football territories, all round the respective grounds. Caley's heartland was therefore the Big Green in the vicinity of Kenneth Street and the River Ness. Thistle had the Crown, Clach's fiefdom was the Merkinch while Citadel's sphere of influence was the Shore by the Harbour. Well over a century on, these lines of demarcation are still identifiable although history has also done much to fudge them.

The Highland Football League was founded in a Working Men's Club on Bridge Street in Inverness on August 4th, 1893. Again there is a parallel with shinty since both sports in the north appear to have enjoyed substantial club development during the 1880s before achieving some kind of inter club organisation in 1893 which is also the year that the Camanachd Association was formed.

The Highland League represented a further step forward in competitive opportunities for the likes of Thistle and Caley. They had both begun by playing friendlies but soon moved into the likes of the Charity Cup and also the North Cup when they both became founder members of the North FA in 1888. The clubs' records say that they each won the North Cup twice before the Highland League was even founded. But strangely they both claim to have been successful in 1889-90, Thistle under the name of Crown. Yet another typically substantial piece of late Victorian silverware, the Inverness Cup - known initially as the Pattison Cup - appeared in 1895 and Caley were its first winners.

That Working Men's Club where the league was founded was demolished in the early 1960s to make way for the development on the south side of Bridge Street which has been criticised for its architecture ever since. As it happens, in the mid 1990s that Upper Bridge Street development also housed the headquarters of Inverness and Nairn Enterprise whose substantial role in the foundation of Inverness Caledonian Thistle will emerge in later chapters. It was there in INE's Bridge Street HQ on 12th January 1994 that the celebration party was held following the announcement in Glasgow that afternoon that the merged Inverness club Caledonian Thistle had finished top of the poll to elect two new members to the Scottish Football League.

So in terms of time and space, the two most significant events in Highland football - the formation of the Highland League and entry to the Scottish League - were separated by almost exactly one hundred years on exactly the same spot.

Inverness's involvement in the Highland League is one of extreme contrast. The first season's line up in 1893 comprised Forres Mechanics and no fewer than six clubs from Inverness where the competition was founded. Then fast forward just over a century to find a league dominated by clubs from Aberdeenshire and

where twice - during Clach's crises of 1997 and 2010 - there was a distinct danger of Inverness interest in the competition disappearing altogether.

The very first Highland League title in 1894 was won by Thistle with Clach successful the next year and Caley's first success came in 1896 after they beat the Jags 1-0 in a play off at Grant Street. It took almost 20 years for the Highland League trophy to move out of Inverness whose four main clubs (Citadel's single win was in 1908-09) dominated the competition. In 1896-97 and again in 1901-02, the only teams to complete the programme were the Inverness quartet of Caley, Clach, Thistle and Citadel. The other Inverness interests in the league in these earliest years were Union, before they were taken over by Thistle, and the Cameron Highlanders.

The first non Inverness winners of the title were Aberdeen "A", which one takes to be the Dons' reserves and who were intermittent Highland League members on either side of World War 1. Aberdeen "A"'s two title victories came on their debut in 1912-13 and in their valedictory season of 1925-26. The pre war victory finally broke the early Inverness domination which, in the first couple of decades, had seen teams from the East regularly fill the bottom places. Forres Mechanics and especially an Elgin team, usually referred to as Elgin City, bore the brunt of the lower placings. Indeed Moray's capital provides the only three examples of "nul points" in the Highland League - a fate almost suffered by Fort William and Clach in the modern era - with Elgin City in 1900 and 1906 and Elgin Caledonian in 1901.

Gradually during the inter war years, teams from the East began to loosen the Inverness stranglehold on the league title. Buckie, who had joined in 1909, had their first success when the league restarted in 1919-20 after the hostilities and were to win it three more times during what has been called "the long weekend" between the two wars. Buckie's arrival brought numbers into double figures for the first time with ten teams including the Seaforths and Camerons, before Fraserburgh, Huntly, Keith, Rothes and Deveronvale all also joined before the advent of the second conflict.

By the time Hitler's Panzers were rolling into Poland in September 1939, the season had got off to a start with a record 15 teams but that was abandoned the following month and the league would not resume until 1946.

Despite Thistle's slightly faster start in those very first years, Caley began to established themselves at a fairly early stage as the more prolific title winners of the two. However this was initially not by as big a margin as later on when the sheer disparity between them in a number of ways would prove a major obstacle for the merger. Up until the Second World War, for instance, Caley won eight Highland League titles and Thistle five. Clach, on the other hand had by then won 15 but Clach's glory days very much came in the earliest years of the Highland

League when they won over half of the titles up until 1924 - 14 out of 26. The following 80 years would yield Clach just four more successes.

Thistle's history in the Highland League tended to feature purple patches whereas Caley's successes tended to be more consistent and accelerated into the 1980s. The first of Jags' three purple patches came in the mid 1930s. Apart from winning the League title in 1935-36 and the Qualifying Cup in 1932-33 they also lifted four consecutive Inverness Cups between 1932 and 1936.

The Qualifying Cup, which had been won the previous season by Citadel, was a particular triumph since it was a nationwide competition at the time and Thistle beat Penicuik 4-3 in the final at Borough Briggs, Elgin. The captain who would have lifted the cup aloft (or maybe not since it is massive!) was an R. Fraser. For an Inverness team this tells us little but this was not the last time that an R. Fraser would star for the Jags.

When the Highland League got under way again after World War 2 in 1946, the post war years provided some success for the Inverness teams. Clach had their "annus mirabilis" of 1947-48 when they won the League and also became the second winners of the new Highland League Cup. The Qualifying and North of Scotland Cups also came to Grant Street, although not the Inverness Cup.

It must have been a wonderful experience at that time to stand on terraces packed literally with thousands of fans, all desperate to inject a bit of Saturday afternoon joy into otherwise unbroken post war austerity. However the glory days of supporters attending Highland League matches in such numbers would not last forever.

Caley won back to back titles between 1950 and 1952 at a time when their ranks included the legendary goalscorer supreme Andrew "Jupie" Mitchell along with "Ginger" MacKenzie. Jupie hit the headlines when he scored all 10 goals for Caley in a 10-3 Qualifying Cup defeat of Fraserburgh in 1952 but it was at Kingsmills, where he went the following year, that he really made history.

Research in 2010 by Nairn based journalist Donald Wilson and former Caley secretary Ian Davidson revealed that it was Jupie with 77 league and cup goals for Thistle in 1955-56 who held the all time Highland scoring record and not that other scoring legend Davie Johnston who amassed 73 for Nairn some seasons later.

But despite the talents of the likes of Jupie, the latter 1950s were a fairly fallow period on the Highland scene at both Telford Street and Kingsmills. After Thistle's league title in 1936 it would be into the 70s before the trophy would return. And Caley's back to back successes of the early 50s provided their only league flags in a period of over 30 years until they won again in 1964, which is

my own first recollection of being a football supporter.

As a kid brought up in Dalneigh, it was almost inevitable that I would become a Caley fan. This may have been a relatively new housing scheme but it was firmly in Caley territory, so it was at Telford Street Park in the early 60s that I had my first experience of watching football. In these days, local urchins like ourselves had an unorthodox and very low cost means of entering the ground. Quite simply we "joooped in" over the back gate on Balnacraig Road at the corner of the Howden End rather than pay out 9d at the turnstiles beneath the two large plaster footballs whose fate, post merger, has never been established.

Once inside, typically at around 1:30pm, the next task was to take a trawl round the entire ground, picking up all the discarded MacKintosh's lemonade bottles - Red Cola, Queens Cup and all the rest - from the last home game and claiming the 3d deposits on them at the club shop. We would go right through the Howden End and also the corrugated iron enclosure at the Distillery End, which became the Comet End when alcohol production ceased on Telford Street and the Glen Mhor was demolished. This trawl would generate sufficient funds not only to acquire a few giant Penny Dainties and a bag of Smiths crisps with the blue paper twist of salt inside. It would also go some way towards raising the shilling it would cost to get into the front stalls at the La Scala the following Saturday if Caley were out of town.

Once the Jim Reeves and Jimmy Shand records on the primitive PA system had given way to an announcer reading the "2-3-5" team lines with its three half backs and two inside forwards - typically from Jimmy Smith in goals through to Ian Nelson at outside left - the game would get under way and apart from our vocal support, all that was required was to change ends at half time to ensure that we always got the best view of any Caley goals. In these days we were seldom disappointed, with the highlight an 8-0 thrashing of Highland League debutants Brora Rangers in that 63-64 championship season.

However the core of the Caley fans, including many of the diehards, would remain in the Howden End which backed on to the nurseries of that name. This was the engine room of the most passionate support for the club where supporters would be engulfed by the most frenetic atmosphere within the ground as well as a unique blend of aromas ranging from alcohol of varying degrees of freshness through cigarette smoke to the pies from the Howden End seryery.

There were occasional forays for Inverness derbies to Grant Street and to that haven of black and red paint which was Kingsmills Park. It was less easy to get into Kingsmills for nothing but I think we tried once from MacEwen Drive. It was also difficult to pass the black and red pie shop without succumbing and investing some of the previous Saturday's bottle money. But it was more or less

unknown for us to scale the external staircase off Broadstone Avenue and watch the game from the Thistle stand.

This was a 600 seater structure which had been erected in the early 50s for a grand total of £564.10s.10d but at that stage we were unaware of what was below that grandstand. It was only much later that I learned of the unenviable reputation which the Kingsmills away dressing room had as the worst in the Highland League. On the other hand, I can't imagine Chairman Jock McDonald affording much creature comfort to his opposition.

The mid 60s was still an era of relative harmlessness and naivety and pre dated the advent of the football casuals. Certainly the Caley Animals who would, among other less savoury activities, hold pitched battles with the Elgin Casuals, were still the best part of a decade into the future. And indeed for much of that early part of the second half of the 20th century, Caley's main rivals were Elgin City. Serious rivalry with Ross County was still some time away. Similarly within the town, Caley's principal bone of contention was Clach before Thistle latterly assumed that role.

Over at Kingsmills one legendary institution was the Half Time Harriers who would dash the 80 yards or so to the Corriegarth for a quick pint (or two) right on the 45 minute whistle. Frequently they would fail to return in time for the start of the second half and I still have to establish the authenticity or otherwise of the tale that on one occasion they came back to discover that Jags had conceded five goals in their absence!

However it was not all doom and gloom at Kingsmills Park and how Jock McDonald first became Chairman and then brought "King" Willie Grant in to manage the team to back to back triumphs between 1971 and 1973 is related on page 34. The League Cup in 1971 which preceded the first title was Jags' first trophy for a decade and it was certainly savoured Up the Hill as the start of their second purple patch.

A 6-1 victory over Clach at Telford Street had sealed the triumph for a team managed by Willie Grant with Murd Urquhart as trainer and which included such well known Inverness football personalities as Peter Corbett, Alistair "Titchy" Black, and Roshie Fraser - the second "R. Fraser" - who had been married just the previous day. Corbett and Fraser would for a few months in 1985 become rival managers of Caley and Thistle respectively although the great Inverness rivalry came later in that decade between Corbett and "Lofty" Black - "Titchy's" younger brother Brian who succeeded Fraser.

However Jags triumphant season was 1972-73 when they added the Qualifying and again the Highland League Cup to that second league crown. But the brief spate of successes was soon to dry up again for over a decade before Jags' third

and final purple patch in the late 1980s.

But if Thistle won the Highland League twice in the 70s, Caley did it three times. This also included two consecutive successes between 1976 and 1978 as they headed towards a final tally of 18 league flags - a record which was only equalled by Clach in 2004 a decade after Caley and Thistle had departed. At the time of writing, Elgin City - now also long departed - had won 15 titles, Buckie 10 with Thistle next on 8. So of the Highland League's five most successful clubs, only two remain in 2011.

Caley's double triumph of the latter 70s actually began a run of five titles in eight years since the club also achieved a magnificent triple between 1981 and 1984. Season 82-83 was a particular triumph because Caley finished it undefeated in the league.

Three in a row had only previously been done in the modern era by Elgin (1967-70) and Keith (1978-81). Clach had had runs of four between 1902 and 1906 and from 1920 to 1924. But all of this would later be eclipsed by the five consecutive triumphs from 1993-98 by the Huntly team initially put together by Steve Paterson. Given that Bobby Wilson had been in charge of the Keith side whose three in a row split Caley's five before going on to win it twice with Ross County, the men who pioneered the Highlands' foray into the SFL already had a considerable track record in the Highland League.

Clearly the end of the 70s and into the 80s under Willie Hunter, Alex Main and Raymond MacKintosh had been an extremely fruitful period for Caley. That would also continue from 1985 under Corbett whose first act as Caley manager was to reject an offer by his predecessor MacKintosh to return as a player.

Both clubs, and notably Caley with their formidable youth development organisation, also made their mark in the selling on of formidable local talent to larger institutions. In 1980 Kevin MacDonald moved from Telford Street to Leicester City for a then record £26,000 and from there to Liverpool where he did the English League and Cup double in 1986. In 1983, Thistle sold Darren MacLean for over £25,000 to Liverpool although his stay turned out to be short lived. Later in the decade, Les Fridge moved onwards and upwards from Kingsmills to Chelsea then St Mirren.

Perhaps the most sensational move came in 1978 when Billy Urquhart was signed on the spot for £15,000 by Rangers manager John Greig after scoring two against them in a friendly at Telford Street. After playing for Rangers in the Scottish League and in Europe, Urquhart had a spell with Wigan before returning to Caley to play a formidable part in their fine team of the 80s. His efforts included not only numerous goals but also vital matchwinning ones - including the last (and illegal! - see pages 50-51) competitive goal at Telford Street Park in

1994.

It is not the purpose of this introduction to the story of how Inverness Caledonian Thistle came into being to go into great detail about the honours won by either merger partner. But Caley's seven Qualifying Cup wins in the 19 seasons up to 1984, which also marked the completion of a "three in a row", was another outstanding feat. This also meant that by the mid 80s, especially when Scottish Cup runs were added into the equation, Caley were enjoying a run of success completely unprecedented in the club's and indeed the Highland League's history. This wasn't to last, as will be seen in the next chapter. But what the success of that era did do was to create a certain generation of Caley fans who, unlike their older colleagues, had known little other than consistent success as the club went into the final phase of its history. That would certainly fuel the "go it alone" and anti merger sentiments which would soon exist within the ranks of Caley fans.

Scottish Cup success was a relative newcomer to both the Thistle and Caley portfolios of glory but it came in no small way just as the two clubs were celebrating their centenaries. There is also nothing like a run in the national knockout to draw attention to a smaller club outwith the Scottish League but in terms of gaining entry to that organisation, clubs from the Highland League had drawn consistent blanks for decades with the nearest miss in 1973 when Thistle lost out by a single vote to Edinburgh works team Ferranti Thistle. Conspiracy theories as to how clubs in the South simply didn't want representation from the remote Highlands were abundant - and probably fairly accurate.

Inevitably one other consequence of Inverness's repeated National League rejection was the regular floating of the suggestion that there should be some kind of merger among the town's teams to create a stronger case. This was almost a hardy annual which was especially adept at surfacing off the back of someone's successful Scottish Cup run but never came to anything - until the scenario which is about to unfold. And in these days of Scottish League rejection, a run in the Scottish Cup was the nearest Inverness ever got to feeling part of the national football scene. Also, with only four Scottish Cup places latterly available to them, Highland League clubs had to run the gauntlet of up to three Qualifying Cup ties before they could even get into the competition proper.

Scottish Cup runs of any great length were not at all common before the mid 50s when Caley went out 7-0 at home to Falkirk in 1954-55 in the 6th round. Two years later Raith Rovers put them out 3-2 at Telford Street in round 5.

But Inverness's golden years in the Scottish Cup came in the mid 80s as they both prepared to celebrate 100 years of existence. These years provided huge high profile successes for both Caley and Thistle which made the injustice of the absence of Inverness from the Scottish Football League even more apparent.

In 1984, replay goals from Martin Lisle and Billy Urquhart away to Alex Smith's Stirling Albion brought Rangers to Telford Street for a fourth round tie which caught the national imagination and saw massive queues for tickets although Rangers eventually won 6-0. The following year, Nero MacDonald got two and Wilson Robertson the other in a 3-0 victory at neutral Methil in a second round second replay against Berwick. Hearts at Tynecastle awaited but again the scoreline was 6-0 in the wrong direction. Then in 1987 Smith saw a less disadvantageous outcome in Inverness when his St. Mirren team beat Caley 3-0 on their way to lifting the trophy itself.

Kingsmills' high water mark in the Scottish Cup actually came in the centenary year of 1985 when Thistle pulled off the unthinkable and defeated Kilmarnock 3-0 to win through to a fourth round tie at Celtic Park which must have seen the pound signs positively spinning in front of Jock McDonald's eyes. Once again that 6-0 scoreline haunted Inverness but it was a glorious departure for Thistle.

By now Caley's pre eminence of the 1980s was about to be seriously challenged by their neighbours from across the river. Inverness was about to impose a two way split of Highland League football's honours which would increase rivalry between Caley and Thistle to unprecedented levels. This was a development which would mark the start of what must be the most intriguing period in the history of the game in the Highland Capital.

Chapter One

TWO TEAMS AND A TOWN DIVIDED

Kingsmills Park, Inverness - Saturday April 30th 1988. Frustration was increasing among the packed ranks of blue and white as the score stubbornly remained at Inverness Thistle 0, Caledonian 0 with the Jags looking the better side. At this rate the Highland League title appeared to be heading for Buckie. Then ten minutes from time, the Caley support erupted as winger Wilson Robertson dashed in to grab the only goal of the game from 15 yards. This was the goal which, combined with Buckie's 2-0 defeat by Peterhead that same afternoon, effectively won Caledonian Football Club a 17th Highland League title. There were few at the time who would have dreamt that it would also be Caley's last.

However Buckie could still in theory snatch it with an eight goal defeat of Inverness's other team, struggling Clach at Grant Street the following Wednesday night. Given the third Inverness side's rapidly declining fortunes this was maybe just possible so the game attracted the biggest crowd seen down the Merkinch for years - most of them "neutral" Caley fans cheering like fury for their town rivals. It must have had an effect too - Clach salvaged a dramatic 2 all draw to give Caley that last League Flag with two points to spare.

So with the League title and Qualifying Cup residing at Telford Street and the North of Scotland, Inverness and League Cups on the Kingsmills trophy shelf, these two Inverness clubs - Caley and Thistle - had between them completed a clean sweep of all the Highland Football honours for season 1987 - 88.

Telford Street Park, Inverness - Saturday November 19th 1988. This time the packed ranks of blue and white were filled with dismay as the Thistle supporters' chants of "three ni-ill" wafted over towards the Howden End. This was the Qualifying Cup Final replay, following a 1 all draw at Kingsmills where Billy Urquhart had saved the day for Caley after Fraser "Crazee Frazee" Taylor had put the Jags ahead. However second time around there was no doubt about who were in charge as Danny MacDonald, Taylor again and a Billy Skinner penalty made sure that this time the celebrating fans were in black and red. But once again this was a swansong because it was the last

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time Thistle were to land one of the three biggest honours in Highland football.

These two encounters, with each club sealing a major title at the ground of the other, represented the high water mark of a long period of intense rivalry between Caley and Thistle in the late 1980s, when they carried all before them. It was a time when by anybody's money they were simply the two best clubs in the Highland League, a federation of eighteen often impecunious, semi professional clubs, mainly based close to the Moray Firth coast. At the best of times there was a tribalism in Inverness football which maintained an intense and often bitter rivalry among the three clubs Caley, Clach and Thistle. And when two of them happened to be disputing the Highland game's highest honours, matters sometimes approached civil war.

For a long time it had been immediate neighbours Caley and Clach who had been at daggers drawn, but this was an era when the supreme rivalry was between Caley and Thistle. Merger in as emotionally charged an atmosphere of local rivalry as this and in such a climate of success on both sides of the River Ness would have been a remote prospect. A lot was to change over the next five years as Inverness football approached what was to be one of the longest, most complex and most bitter controversies ever to be seen in the Scottish game.

Thistle's rise to prominence originated from the team built up by Roshie Fraser before his departure on a snowy night in November 1985 when his troops held a good Celtic side to a 2 all draw in a friendly. This was the side which had pulled off a sensational 3-0 defeat of Kilmarnock at Kingsmills on the road to that famous Scottish Cup tie ending in a glorious 6-0 defeat at Parkhead the previous February.

It was on occasions like this that chairmen of successful Inverness clubs tended to be asked about possible mergers, and in February 1985 Thistle's Jock McDonald said NO in every way he knew. Jock would not always view things so.

Roshie Fraser's successor was one of his players, Brian Black, who created a sensation by winning his first League title in his first full season of 1986 - 87, losing only the very last game at Peterhead. These were great days at Kingsmills. Apart from the League title, a clutch of trophies and many fine Scottish Cup runs, the supreme rivalry with Caley added extra vitality. These were the days when players like Davie Milroy, Mike Noble, the Black brothers, Les Fridge and Fraser Taylor were heroes in black and red. It was also a time when the North FA clubs were very much in ascendancy over their Aberdeenshire counterparts in the Highland League, and much of that was due to the strength of Thistle and Caley.

However both Inverness clubs soon fell from their shared pedestal. Jags' initial decline was relatively modest. It was probably a 1-0 Scottish Cup replay defeat by East Fife at Methil early in January 1991, following a 1 all draw in Inverness, which effectively sealed Black's fate. However the final straw was Thistle's 3-2 first round exit from the North Cup at the hands of Fort William later that month. The Thistle committee met two days later and 24 hours after that Brian Black was gone.

The dismissal of a man who had taken the club through one of the most successful periods in its history seemed a harsh decision. In hindsight it was a turning point in Thistle's history. But the boardroom had quickly come to expect the highest standards from this fine side which then lay 12th in the League, 14 points behind title chasing Caley.

Within a week an approach had been made to and rejected by Nairn manager Brian MacKay. Not long after that rumours began to circulate that Jim Leishman, recently sacked after a 22 year association with Dunfermline, was on his way to Kingsmills.

It may have been a long shot on the part of Jock McDonald, but it found its mark and on February 19th Leishman was unveiled in poetic fashion as the new manager of Inverness Thistle. He was certainly an instant media success and "Leishmania" soon swept Inverness where for a time it

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appeared that Thistle was the only club. The internal chemistry also seemed to be right between the committee and the man dubbed "The Flamboyant Fifer".

Leishman soon put together a thirteen game undefeated run including ten straight wins, culminating in a 1-0 home success over eventual champions Ross County. This for a time took Thistle up to third in the table.

But despite a rash of highly publicised signings and optimistic noises, the euphoria failed to survive the closed season, although Leishman did. Few had expected him to stay more than a few weeks but come August he was still there - to participate in one of the most fraught periods in the club's history.



Thistle stars of the Leisham era - left to right - Derek Wright, Kevin Sweeney, Willie Callaghan, Steven MacDonald.

A hat trick from Danny MacDonald, who had by now crossed the Ness, gave Caley a 3-0 League Cup victory in the first derby of the season. Then Thistle's Scottish Cup aspirations died at the Qualifying stage when Ross County reversed that earlier 1-0 scoreline. In the League, Elgin and Cove both scored six as Thistle drifted towards ninth place at the end of November 1991. By now there were a few calls from the terraces for Jim's resignation, but most of the heat was turned on Jock. It may just have been that some thought Leishman was immortal. But it was the Chairman who suffered the bulk of an intensifying torrent of abuse and criticism from the fans. Their logic appeared to be that if the manager was infallible, it all had to be the Chairman's fault.

It was what they screamed at him after after the 4-0 Festive Derby defeat at home to Clach that was the final straw for Jock McDonald. Within days he had resigned, followed by his great friend, trainer Murd Urquhart, and five committee members.

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The departure after 25 years at the helm of Jock McDonald, the toughest man in Highland League football, apparently in response to a few weeks of abuse from a minority of fans, was a mystery. It was only much later that he revealed that he had also felt responsible for taking Leishman to Kingsmills, a move which simply hadn't worked out. Between one thing and another he felt that he could do without the grief he was receiving. But his resignation deepened a Kingsmills crisis from which Thistle never fully recovered in its two and a half years of existence which remained.

Then on Hogmanay 1991, Leishman himself announced his departure to Montrose, although the ten months he stayed in Inverness were much longer than anybody had expected. Despite, and possibly because of his experience and success in all reaches of Scottish League, Leishman never appeared fully at home with the realities and the spirit of Highland League football. He had also presided over the breaking up of a potentially good team. The £9000 he had got from Caley for defender Billy Skinner was certainly big money by Highland League standards. But it was this calibre of player that Thistle needed so badly to get their own bandwagon back on the rails.

Furthermore his continued residence in Fife, with forays North to stay in the Rannoch Lodge Hotel only when necessary, did little to enhance Leishman's role. The strategy of importing a high profile absentee manager had failed. But it was to be repeated on the other side of the river within 18 months - with knock on consequences for the as yet unanticipated new club.

However this was an amicable parting, and the warmth of the greeting between the ex-Thistle contingent and that club's penultimate manager has been a feature of subsequent occasions on which their paths have crossed.

Leishman had also been something of a veneer - an attractive front which perhaps created an over optimistic mirage of a club which in reality was not the heavyweight which many believed. Thistle was in reality finding it increasingly difficult to keep its financial head above the water and what Leishman had been paid wasn't helping the coffers either.

Deeply wounded and down to nine committee members, Thistle appointed Charlie Cuthbert as the new Chairman. Whether he would have accepted had he known what was just over the horizon is another question. Cuthbert had become a Committee member in 1969 as Secretary and Treasurer of the Social club gaining promotion to Vice Chairman in 1986 before being catapulted into the hot seat. Like his Caley counterpart Norman Miller, Charlie Cuthbert was no natural politician nor had he any aspirations in that direction. All the same, both men would soon have such a role thrust upon them.

Henrik Madej was brought in from Fort William to manage what was by now a severely demoralised team, and there was further bad news to come. A record £12,000 was spent bringing in striker Calum MacLean as a hoped for Messiah to Kingsmills, but before he had kicked a ball in anger he was badly injured in a friendly and never really played a significant part on the field.

With the merger now just round the corner, Thistle's fortunes both on and off the field had declined a long way since those heady days of optimism of the late 1980s. Winning the Inverness Cup in their last season 1993-94 came as a modest consolation.

Thistle's fate was paralleled in part at Telford Street. Here a club whose honours in the 1980s alone included five Qualifying Cups and four Highland League titles, three of the latter in consecutive seasons, was suddenly to find the trophy cupboard bare. The most successful club in Highland League history won nothing at all in the two seasons 1989 - 91. Indeed all Caley got in their last six years after the 1988 League title were the Inverness Cup, the North Cup and the Qualifying Cup once each - thin pickings by their normal standards.

The 1990 - 91 Highland League campaign was a frustrating one for Caley. A 2-1 win at Kingsmills in Davie Milroy's testimonial late in April had kept them in it. But two dreadful performances in

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Thistle goalkeeper Jim Calder preserving a lead over defending Highland League Champions Ross County at Kingsmills.

their final home games - defeats of 3-0 by Elgin and 4-2 by Cove - left Ross County with the task of beating Huntly 2-0 to win the race. This was a critical moment for County too. It was the first of the back to back Championships which were such vital steps in their progress from bottom of the Highland League to Division 3 of the Scottish League in seven years. The following season, Caley blew it in even more dramatic style, losing three games in a row towards the very end, which allowed County to retain the title. The fact that these two sides had been in such close contention at this time went a long way later on towards intensifying rivalry on the Scottish League platform.

This was the Caley side which many complained was getting too old. The likes of Billy Urquhart, Kevin Mann, Roddy Davidson and Bob Summers - men who had stood up to the might of Rangers and Hearts in the Scottish Cup - were past their best, according to some. But although the trophy famine had begun to set in, the great moments still lived on in the Scottish Cup. These came both before and after co-manager Peter Corbett went to Clach in May 1991. John Docherty succeeded him as John Beaton's partner and then Beaton decided that Highland League management was not for him, leaving Docherty on his own.

There was the great night of the penalty shootout victory over Airdrie in a Scottish Cup third round replay at Telford Street in January 1990. Then just over two years later, thanks to Caley's 3-1 third round defeat of Clyde, it was the turn of St. Johnstone to discover the Howden End. After 90 minutes manager Alex Totten faced the press outside an away dressing room door stove in by the boot of a frustrated Perth player, explaining how his team escaped with a 2 all draw after being 2-0 up.

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Goalmouth action at the Caley v St. Johnstone Scottish Cup tie.

In the home dressing room, Beaton's explanation boiled down to three memorable words - "typical Caley tradition" - which he just could not help saying again and again with increasing pride. But the replay, with its prize of a quarter final against Rangers, was not to go Caley's way, despite the A9 being thick with cars and buses many of whose occupants simply couldn't get into a packed McDiarmid Park. That night may have ended in a 3-0 reverse, but that "typical Caley tradition" was still there.

However there was dissatisfaction at the Howden End at a time from 1989 onwards when Elgin, then Ross County and Huntly - significantly under Steve Paterson and Bobby Wilson - grabbed control of the Highland game. The lifeblood flow of trophies had dried up, and the occasional bite at the Scottish Cup cake, however glamorous, was no compensation. The Qualifying Cup victory of 1991 was to turn out to be Caley's only trophy of that decade until the North Cup was won just weeks before the team went out of existence. Not for many years had morale at Telford Street been so low although, unlike their neighbours, Caley's problems were hardly profound enough to penetrate the very fabric of the club.

But the declining situations on both sides of the Ness meant that Caley and Thistle were both to face the merger proposal with abnormally low rations of the success and self respect which boost the spirit of independence. From that point of view at least, the time was ripe in 1993 for a merger.

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The Caley squad of 1992-93 with manager John Docherty.

Grant Street's darkest hour came in 1990 when all-amateur Clach's debts rose well into six figures and their goals conceded to 153 while spectators struggled to outnumber the players on the park. Eventually something had to give, and in came the receiver in the early summer. Then at a time when the 50th anniversary of Britain's deliverance from wartime disaster in 1940 was being celebrated all over the land, Clach were rescued in remarkably similar fashion. When all looked lost, there emerged at the eleventh hour a miraculous salvation.

Clach's "Dunkirk" was a syndicate of businessmen who bought out the club and the debts of the Rodgers era. They included David Dowling who was to become Chairman, Charlie Forbes, folk hero of the Merkinch, and others assembled by former Caley Vice President David Love. All of this, which led to the formation of Clachnacuddin (1990) Ltd., happened more or less as the Sheriff signed the final order which would have relegated Clach to the pages of history.

The new regime was greeted by rapturous applause in a packed Merkinch Community Centre one memorable July evening. Roshie Fraser took over as manager with just one signed player, but although Clach was saved that summer, the early 1990s were hardly a high point on the Inverness football scene.

At least from where they started, things could only go up and up for Clach - for the first three years at least. And although that initial success was relatively short lived, it still meant that when the merger scheme came along in 1993, Clach were going in a different direction and with a different club structure from the other two.

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One other important issue of the immediate pre-merger period was fought out not on the football field but in the Town Hall. It was in the late 80s that Texas Homecare first expressed an interest in buying Telford Street Park, reportedly for around £750,000, sending Caley on a lengthy but fruitless search for a new home. Abortive attempts had included Canal Field, the Northern Meeting Park and Kinmylies where they were driven out by Resident Power in the autumn of 1991.

Caley's attention then turned the following summer to a site at the Carse where again local residents put up fierce opposition and there was a lengthy wrangle about whether or not this was vital industrial land. However it was in the Council Chamber that the most complex comings and goings took place on this question, and it was here, initially in 1992, that the move to lease the land from the Council failed. However Caley were not yet finished, for the following March - once the necessary six month waiting period required by Standing Orders had elapsed - they approached the Council again.

By this time the whole issue was becoming notorious as a perpetually unresolved problem, dubbed "The Carse Farce" in some quarters. However for both club officials and Councillors this was to be no more than a modest warm up for the amazing saga which as to unfold within the Council, the Law Courts and various club venues over a period of almost three years. Additionally, the Carse affair gave some warning of the problems the District Council appeared to have in coming to a difficult decision.

Merger negotiations had begun in the summer of 1993 as the Carse scheme started to show signs of petering out for a second time. But had that gone ahead either then or the previous year, or if it had even still been a strong runner at the time of the votes in September, it seems unlikely that any merger would ever have taken place. Had the promise of Caley's own new Stadium materialised it would very probably have been more than enough to swing their close vote the other way - if matters had even got that far.

Caley would then have gone for a Scottish League place on their own. But with Clach and Thistle possibly also there to split the pro-Inverness vote, success would have been far from guaranteed. Evidence also appeared later to suggest that had they got in, their viability might have been very suspect.

The most conspicuous recurring theme in the story of how Inverness Caledonian Thistle came into being is the many occasions on which the whole scheme so nearly foundered on a range of closely fought but vital issues. One of the most critical was the failure of Caley's Carse project which, if successful, would most likely have strangled any merger negotiations at birth.

So before Scottish League vacancies were even thought of, events in Inverness, both on and off the field, had begun to open the door to an unusual combination of circumstances which had started to create a climate where a two, if not a three club merger might be possible. It would only happen if these unusual circumstances were to coincide with the rare act of the Scottish League deciding to recruit new members. But, however unlikely, that was exactly what happened.

* * * *

The notion of an Inverness Football merger was not new. Nor was the town's apparently unanswerable but so far unsatisfied case for a place at the Scottish League table.

For decades there had been rumblings off and on about the three Inverness clubs - despite their bitter rivalry - joining forces, and not only when the prospect of Scottish League football emerged. "Inverness United" had been the working title for such schemes and indeed that was the term used in the earliest stages of the merger process. But so far the only Inverness United which ever appeared was a team of youngsters who carried the town's football tradition to many parts of the world on tours. As the separate barometers of circumstance and fortune went up and down, so did the three

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clubs' apparent enthusiasm for joining forces.

For instance in the mid 1980s, Clach under the chairmanship of George Rodgers Jun. were seeing the beginnings of a decline and publicly proposed a merger. But this was when Thistle were on their high after their phenomenal Scottish Cup adventure at Parkhead, and Jock McDonald turned down the notion flat. Meanwhile Caley went for the "well we've never actually been against it - but....." option.

To many in the North it seemed inconceivable that a growing town the size of Inverness which had three clubs should continue to be left out of the Scottish League. Failing that, the case for some kind of representation from the Highland League area was overwhelming. This omission meant that the huge tract of land to the North and West of the Aberdeen - Perth diagonal had no access to what was meant to be a National League. Inverness was the Capital of the Highlands and a growing commercial centre, with 60,000 people resident within five miles of the town centre.

It was not only in terms of its present size and importance that Inverness was able to present such an overwhelming case to be part of the National body. For centuries the town had occupied a strategic and historic position on the Scottish scene.

Historians believe that Inverness was a base for the 6th Century Pictish King Brude and for MacBeth in the 11th Century. Its position at the apex of the Moray Firth gave it enormous strategic significance and from 1100 onwards it became a magnet for trade and population. It is an ancient Royal Burgh and was the recipient of a series of Royal Charters from the 12th Century onwards. These also resulted in successive monarchs granting land to the Burgh. This was the origin of the town's Common Good Fund which was to play such an important part in the creation of Inverness Caledonian Thistle F.C.

The importance of Inverness as a route centre has meant that it has been at the centre of affairs throughout history and in the mid 17th Century it was regarded as important enough to be garrisoned by the Commonwealth Army. A Citadel was also built at that time, later giving a name to one of four Highland League teams in the town until the 1930s.

Inverness is probably best known for its part in the final Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 which ended tragically at Culloden five miles away the following year. Latterly the town developed as a vital administrative centre - "The Hub of the Highlands" - and after World War 2 it saw massive population growth which still continues.

But still in the 1990s Inverness was without a Scottish League presence which for so long had been taken for granted in considerably smaller places like Arbroath, Alloa, Stranraer and Stenhousemuir. Certainly many South clubs thought the Highlands were at the end of the earth. There were even people down there who believed that buses might have problems crossing Drumochter Pass where in fact an elaborate dual carriageway creates significant speeding problems. In addition, many of the lesser lights feared any injection of new talent, an attitude which led one local politician just before the 1993 League Reconstruction to refer to "this Division 2 protection racket".

Inverness had very nearly got its place in the Scottish League at the last election in 1973 where Thistle lost out by a single vote. That the place in question should have gone to Works team Ferranti Thistle, soon to become Meadowbank and in 1995 Livingston, was the ultimate expression of the kind of politics which had kept Highland League clubs out of the Scottish League set up for so long and was little short of a scandal. The state of the A9 may also have been an excuse at that time, but this was not to be the case for much longer.

Had Thistle been successful here it is intriguing to speculate about the consequences. Certainly by the time the 1993 vacancies arose any bid by Caley and/or Clach could not have made the case that the town needed Scottish League football, and it is perhaps rather unlikely that a second team from

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Inverness would have been allowed in. Then there is the question of where Thistle's admission to the Scottish League would have left Caley and Clach - apart from in the Highland League. That can only be the subject of speculation, but one parallel which might be drawn is the tailspin into which Clach went after the merged club moved up a grade in 1994. On the other hand, how successful might Thistle have been in the Scottish League on their own? Or might the Scottish League presence in Inverness have precipitated some kind of merger activity in the years following 1973?

In 1986 the so called "Rebel Nine" big clubs, led by Hearts chairman Wallace Mercer, threatened to break away to form their own League. At one point they attempted to force the Scottish League to bend to their will by offering a welcome to outsiders including, specifically, teams from the Highlands. Inevitably this caused massive interest in the North - until the Rebel nine came to terms with the Scottish League again and the Highland clubs, having shown their hands, were left in the lurch. A furious Jock McDonald, who had been keener than most to get his club into National League football, complained bitterly about being "sold down the river" by the nine, and Highland League clubs continued to dig a groove in the A96.

It was about this time too that Caley lodged what they called their "letter of intent" with the Scottish League. This could not be construed as an application to join because there was no vacancy, but it was a standing expression of interest in membership should one arise.

In the early 1990s it looked as if Berwick Rangers were ready to go to the wall, and Inverness eagerly watched the situation - on an hourly basis at one critical point. But like Mark Twain, rumours of Berwick's death were greatly exaggerated and another Highland hope came to nothing.

In the summer of 1992 there was further discontent within the Scottish League, leading to the proposed formation of a breakaway Superleague. Five, and latterly nine Premier League clubs expressed support for the venture fronted by The Carnegie Partnership. Other interest was sought, with Inverness given specific mention.

The three clubs instantly jumped at the bait and applied for membership of the Superleague. And almost in anticipation of what was to happen a year later, there were serious suggestions from the Inverness clubs themselves that if the Superleague so wished, merger talks should take place. Thistle's Charlie Cuthbert openly supported the possibility of discussions among the three town clubs while - again anticipating events 12 months on - Clach's David Dowling highlighted the potential incompatibility of committee run Caley and Thistle with Clach which was owned by its directors. On the other hand there was also the hint that Dowling - who had even gone as far that summer as to speculate about an Inverness team playing in Europe! - might have perceived Clach's Limited Company status as an advantage to their own application. Meanwhile Caley chairman Norman Miller declined to comment.

However it was all to come to nothing. Within a fortnight of the Inverness applications being lodged the Superleague announced that it was to go ahead initially with ten big clubs before collapsing when Celtic pulled out.

But what did emerge out of the Superleague episode, apart from early recognition of a possible merged bid for Scottish League membership, was the suggestion that the 38 club League, so often undecided about its own composition, should convert to four Divisions of ten clubs. If adopted, this proposal would create two vacancies - the first for 20 years.

So after decades of rejection and disappointment, it seemed that Inverness might once again get the opportunity to bid for the Scottish League football which it so richly deserved.

This happened too at a time when amalgamation was again in the air, and when the climates in two of the clubs at least were more conducive to that than at most other periods. Each of these was an unusual circumstance in itself, but more unusually still they all happened to coincide in the middle of 1993.

Chapter Two

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Much had changed since Thistle's ill fated League application of 1973. In particular the tragedies at Bradford and Hillsborough which spawned the Taylor Report on safety at football grounds sent the issue of stadia to the very top of the agenda. Certainly if newcomers were ever to be invited into the Scottish League again, what they could offer by way of a venue was going to be just as important - possibly more important - than their pedigree on the park. Criteria for prospective Scottish League members would be stringent. New clubs would have to be much more substantial entities than some of the lame ducks which subsisted in the lower reaches of the League in 1993. At the upper end there had been discontent for some time with a twelve club Premier Division, with 44 League games in addition to cup ties. This was far too heavy a programme argued the big clubs - which with four votes apiece had the clout.

Momentum grew within the Scottish League for a structure comprising four Divisions of ten clubs, necessitating two new recruits. And with that momentum grew anticipation all over the country. In the Highlands in particular it was realised that the opportunity may soon arise to put a longstanding injustice to rights.

A decision on this issue was fixed for the Scottish League's 1993 AGM on May 27th. All three Inverness clubs were among those which publicly declared interests in Scottish League football.

Then on May 20th - just a week before the AGM - the Local Enterprise Company Inverness and Nairn Enterprise dropped a bombshell. It announced the start of talks with Clach, Thistle and Caley with a view to negotiating a merged bid for a place, should the League decide to reorganise.

Officials of all three clubs were visibly excited at the prospect. Jock McDonald, who chaired the initial Steering Committee, said at an early stage, "It makes good sense for the clubs to investigate ways of bringing forward the best facility for the town and in so doing strengthen the prospects for Highland League representation in the Scottish League." Caley secretary Jim Falconer described the concept as "really exciting" and said that "the big carrot is Scottish League status." Clach also expressed an immediate and very enthusiastic interest.

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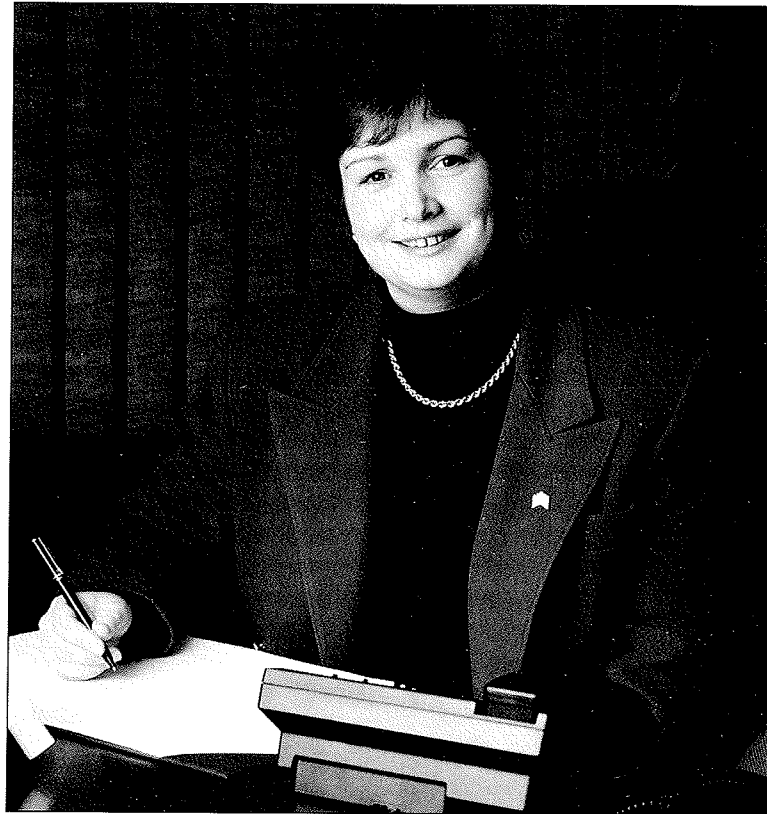
Inverness and Nairn Enterprise were specialists in the stimulation of the local economy. Their grasp of the enormity of what they were proposing, in the context of what made Inverness football tick, was much more limited. That was perhaps just as well because anyone who appreciated the minefield which was being entered might have been much more easily put off.

A Steering Committee was soon set up comprising representatives of all three clubs as well as INE plus Duncan MacPherson and William Fraser, Council leaders of Highland Region and Inverness District respectively. There was much to discuss at their meetings at INE's Bridge Street Headquarters.

When the Enterprise Company set themselves up as "honest brokers" in an attempt to get the three clubs together, they saw benefits both for football and for the community as a whole. What had brought INE into the football equation in the first place was an approach by Caley about their Carse scheme. But when Scottish League reconstruction began to look likely, the logical extrapolation was the merger idea - or "amalgamation" which was the favoured term in the early stages. The prospect of creating a large football stadium was prime among several benefits perceived by INE. These ran from the simple joy of seeing the town's name on the classified check through to ambitious economic objectives.

The case for amalgamation which was very soon put to the clubs was based on the idea that a conglomerate would be a more formidable entity than the sum of its constituent parts. There was a large element of "added value" resulting from the joining of forces.

A combine would be able to attract help in the form of sponsorship and funding which no single club could command. There were many potential sponsors who shied away from helping any one of the existing rival Highland League clubs. Several of these would be expected to come fresh into this very different market. In a rapidly expanding town there was also a new species of Invernessian - the incomer - to whom the tribalism of the last century meant nothing. Therein lay a potentially vast source of untapped support which would hugely enhance the 200 - 600 which was the current norm at Kingsmills, Grant Street or Telford Street.



Inverness and Nairn Enterprise Chief Executive Fiona Larg.

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Also it was Inverness rather than any one of its clubs that was perceived to have been so far frozen out of the Scottish League. This was therefore a chance for all the town's football interests to participate in the remedy for that wrong. A different league would require different attitudes to the game.

INE also said that while they would be unable to back the case of any single existing club, they could certainly put their weight behind a unified Inverness effort.

In parallel with the economic benefits the suggestion was also floated that one application from Inverness would have a better chance of election. However on this issue the waters became just a little muddied.

At quite an early stage public attention was grabbed by the notion that the Scottish League themselves wanted a merged bid from Inverness. This received a great deal of currency that summer and the extra mileage certainly wasn't discouraged by those in favour of joining forces.

League officials have consistently denied that any such suggestion was ever made. Caley office bearers also confirmed to their members just minutes before that club finally voted on a merger that the League had expressed no such preference. On the other hand there is little doubt that Inverness was given a strong hint to amalgamate from some of the larger clubs commanding up to four votes apiece if it came to a ballot. These larger clubs had much more time - and votes - for a substantial business-backed unit, in effect a smaller clone of themselves, than for a Highland League "minnow".

The obvious point was also made by the men who controlled the votes that two or three applications would split the Inverness support. So if there was no pressure coming from the League itself, some of its individual, influential members certainly appear to have pushed the Highland Capital towards a merger. Although the League was saying nothing up front, the feedback from the informal lobbying was clear.

It was still a strange irony that the town with the strongest claim should have placed upon it the extra obligation to join its teams together to make reasonably sure of entry. Jim Falconer's carrot of Scottish League membership was now in combination with the stick of outside influence which gave Inverness just that extra prod towards a combined effort.

What League Secretary Peter Donald did say which was of comfort to the Inverness cause was that if a stadium was not currently in place, that would not work as a disadvantage. The other side of that coin is the implied expectation that a new facility would be forthcoming - sooner rather than later.

All that was needed now was for the Scottish League to opt to change its structure, the recommendation being for the new set up to remain for at least five years. The necessary two thirds majority was only achieved when Raith Rovers director Bob Paxton went against the party line and cast his club's four votes in favour. A long awaited opportunity to get Scottish League football in Inverness had at last arrived - but only just. The Inverness merger was to get used to owing its existence to close run things. On this occasion it owed everything to Mr. Paxton who suffered a great deal thereafter at the hands of Raith fans fearing the drop from the smaller Premier League.

Immediate interest was forthcoming from both extremes of the country. Inverness was solidly for inclusion, be that collectively or individually. Ross County and Elgin City declared an interest at a very early stage as well, and it was also inevitable that Gala Fairydean from the Borders would be putting up a strong challenge.

There was a general feeling in the North that the Highland League deserved both places. But Elgin's manager John Teasdale blew away any local solidarity out of the water even before the decision to reorganise. In an ebullient statement at Mossett Park, Forres within minutes of "winning" the Highland League title on Friday, April 23rd 1993, he affirmed that Elgin had the best team and the best ground, and poured scorn on any Inverness claim to Scottish League football.

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However his remarks were soon to backfire on him. Six days after receiving the Highland League championship trophy in both their own and the League's Centenary year, Elgin were stripped of the title and disgraced. The League Management Committee found the club guilty of bringing their final fixture forward to the Friday night in order to field Teasdale and another player John MacDonald whose suspensions began the following day. The Championship, in which Caley had finished fourth, Clach seventh and Thistle eighth, was declared null and void.

It was an ignominious episode compounded by allegations - albeit never proved - that Teasdale had laid bets on the 6-0 scoreline. Elgin's appeal was rejected by the SFA just a fortnight before the League's AGM. In addition to whatever other disadvantages their case for membership may have had, the Teasdale Affair certainly hampered Elgin's bid before it ever got off the ground.

There was some light relief a couple of weeks after talks were announced when The Inverness Courier ran a readers' poll to assess the public's views about a merger. Soon the paper announced that there had been an 83% indication against the clubs joining forces!

There was certainly something "not quite right" about that result. It seems inconceivable that the Courier's readers - mostly unattached neutrals - should be so rabidly against the joining together of clubs in which they had no immediate interest. At best the vast majority of the votes had been returned by the hardline diehards among all three sets of support. Alternatively it was possible that someone had managed to get hold of a large number of coupons and returned them all in the negative. There was certainly a hint of the Courier's own faith in the validity of its poll when the result commanded no more than a column inch at the bottom of a related news story.



Sergei Baltacha in the tunnel at Telford Street.

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At the end of the 1992-93 season John Docherty, in sole charge at Telford Street after John Beaton had resigned, himself stood down due to pressure of work commitments with the Fire Service. Rumour soon had it that the new man was to be St. Johnstone's Ukrainian defender Sergei Baltacha, and indeed it was he who arrived with Chairman Norman Miller at a Press Conference at Telford Street on June 16th.

This was a man whose playing credentials other players, as striker Charlie Christie once put it, "could only dream of". Thirty five year old Baltacha owned 50 Soviet caps and an Olympic bronze medal in addition to European medals with Dynamo Kiev. He had first come to Ipswich Town when the Iron Curtain was dismantled, before moving North to St. Johnstone. Impressive coaching credentials were another asset and at first inspection Baltacha appeared to be the ultimate catch as a player manager for Caley. His wife Olga also had a considerable sporting pedigree. She had been short listed as a Soviet heptathlete for the 1980 Olympics before withdrawing from the squad when it transpired that Sergei Jnr. was expected.

No one could fail to be impressed by this highly accomplished footballing giant whose spontaneous charm instantly captured all who met him. Sergei was also an immediately likeable person and a gentleman. On the other hand he had chilled Alex Totten to the bone when he asked St. Johnstone for a car when he signed for them. That was until it emerged that what Sergei wanted was a Lada! In Inverness he would have to do with the regulation MacRae and Dick Rover.

But as Baltacha began to answer questions, one or two doubts began to emerge when it soon became apparent that his command of English was very limited indeed. This was quickly brushed aside with the claim that the language of football was universal and that communication was not rated as a problem. Someone even suggested that at Telford Street his linguistic skills could only deteriorate!

It was also stated that Baltacha would be moving with his family to Inverness as soon as his house in Perth was sold. So it appeared that Caley, like Thistle two years previously, had signed their high profile manager, but without the fundamental disadvantage of absenteeism. It was not quite going to work out that way, though.

Caley's appointment of Baltacha was seen by some at the time as a gesture of independence against the merger. But with the benefit of hindsight this can be reinterpreted as a case of hedging bets. If the merger went ahead Caley would be strongly placed to have their man in charge. If it didn't - and many then believed that it wouldn't - they would still have their high profile manager.

Baltacha's appointment did have a humorous sequel. The following evening he was due to be introduced to the Caley membership at their AGM in the Muirtown Motel. To find the venue in a strange town he had been instructed to tail Norman Miller in his car, but Sergei never arrived at the meeting. And although no one believed he had taken cold feet, the entire company was mystified.

There was a perfectly simple explanation. Even with as formidable a target as Miller to follow, Baltacha had somehow got lost and eventually headed home to Perth as the members of his new club waited expectantly.

The big issue at that AGM was the agenda item entitled "Amalgamation" on which INE Chairman Norman Cordiner and Chief Executive Fiona Larg were invited to speak. They did not get a particularly easy passage from the floor, particularly when Cordiner pointed out that Thistle and Clach could join together, leaving Caley isolated.

It had been clear from the very outset that there would be those within all three clubs who would oppose any merger. There was also no doubt that such opposition would be most vigorous and widespread within Caley but it was difficult early on to gauge its extent or solidity. In general the Committee and the club's Elder Statesmen were in favour with the rank and file much more evenly split.

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Despite an attempt by Alan Douglas and David MacDonald to have the scheme killed off on the spot, two of Caley's senior figures Charlie Gair and Hugh Crout, prompted by suggestions made by David Stewart, then put a motion which was accepted unanimously. Discussions about amalgamation would continue with the door still left open for an independent bid. Attempts to realise the struggling Carse scheme would carry on. August 31st 1993 was fixed for an Extraordinary General Meeting for Caley to decide, and only those in membership at that night's AGM would be allowed to vote, thus guaranteeing a normal cross section of opinion at this watershed gathering.

However negotiations among the three clubs were not proceeding at a pace consistent with a conclusion by August 31st. One sticking point was the position of Clach whose recent past was fundamentally different from the other two. Clach was a Limited Company, the property of Directors who had invested a lot of their own money, and was thus difficult to join with two Members' clubs. There was also the fact that the club was at the beginning of what appeared to be a new dawn following the 1990 rescue.

In March Clach had won the North Cup, beating Thistle 4-2 at Telford Street after extra time, having come back from 2-0 down. During that summer of intense negotiation this was the only trophy held by any of the three Inverness clubs. Coming so soon after Clach's near extinction, this was an emotional time for what was then a large and loyal Lilywhites following. So apart from the practical problems, the Clach directors were reluctant to let their fans down and allow their club to disappear.

Clach were therefore heading in a different direction from the other two clubs and were by now rather less struck by the plan than at first. On August 12th they announced that they were withdrawing from the negotiations and would continue in the Highland League on the understanding that if Caley and Thistle did get together they would not attempt to play a reserve team there.

On the one hand a third of the potential clout of the proposed new club had been lost. On the other, negotiations and the merger process were simplified and accelerated. Those who were left said that they were confident that they could still comfortably make a credible go of it. And because of the voluntary nature of Clach's withdrawal it was still possible for INE to back what was left. Furthermore there would still be Highland League football in the town in which the League was founded a century previously.

So any combined Inverness bid for Scottish League football was now down to Caley and Thistle. Caley - founded in 1886 and the most successful club in Highland League history with seventeen Championships, a host of other honours and many famous Scottish Cup runs. And with Caley came one of the most uncompromising supports in the North which did not endear itself to its rivals. The Caley support was perceived by many as regarding victory and success as a God given right. The club in its famous blue and white was also known as "The Rangers of the North." In like fashion it carried with it more than its fair share of the diehard "here's tae us, wha's like us" following, sometimes verging on the arrogant, which is so often the lot of the biggest club in town.

And then there was Thistle, founded in 1885, the first of whose eight League crowns was the inaugural one in 1894. Thistle's great days had been rather fewer and farther between. But the back to back titles in 1971 - 73 were part of Kingsmills folklore along with the successes of the Fraser and Black era. The Jags' support was always that bit smaller, and so was the intolerant diehard element within it. But it could be just as loyal.

In no way could this be construed as an equal partnership because Caley was significantly the larger entity. At one point when relations between the partners reached rock bottom in the summer of 1994 it was pointed out with some justification by the Caley side that they were contributing 70%

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of the assets, 80% of the membership and 90% of the fundraising capacity. On the other hand these were still no grounds for monopoly. Thistle would have to receive a proportional influence within any new set up, and what was eventually arrived at did reflect an imbalance. But the unequal nature of the union was a fundamental difficulty, the consequences of which would not be resolved for almost two years. On a number of occasions that struggle almost robbed Inverness of Scottish League football.

In rough terms, as things appeared to stand in August 1993, Caley owned Telford Street Park, valued then at around £750,000, while Thistle only leased their ground. Both had good going Social Clubs, although Caley's was by far the larger. The Caley Centenary Club contributed £85,000 in 1992-93 to football activities while the embryonic Jags Premier Club was still trying to get off the ground. Caley had around 180 members while their counterparts mustered about 100.

On the face of it Caley were potentially very much the senior partners. But the other consideration was the "added value" principle making a union much larger and stronger than the straight sum of the two parts. On that basis both clubs were worth much more to the scheme than their paper value.

The first attempt to resolve the imbalance was to give Caley six directors and Thistle four on the new Board, but this was not acceptable to Thistle who feared they could be outvoted at every turn. The next option the Steering Committee explored was for three INE nominees to hold the balance of power between five Caley and three Thistle representatives. This would also be the ratio of voting shares in the Limited Company. The clubs' allocations would be issued to Caley and Thistle Trusts which would also look after the interests of the memberships. To preserve neutrality the first Chairman, to serve for two years, was to come from one of the three INE directors.

This formula was more acceptable to Thistle and was finally put to the members of both clubs. Given that it was not then realised that Thistle owned the significant asset of their ground, it could be argued that they had done rather well in terms of Board members and voting shares. But anything much less than what they got could hardly be called a merger at all.

Consideration of a stadium was also made at this early stage and a study commissioned which would produce interim results by the end of the year.

The next stage was to give the respective memberships a chance to vote on the proposals. In theory a maximum of something like 280 people, and in practice just over half of that number, would decide the future of the game of football in Inverness.

Unlike Ross County and Elgin City, who asked their rank and file fans if they wanted to apply for the Scottish League, Caley and Thistle did not consult theirs. One defence offered was that there was no doubt that Inverness wanted Scottish League football. The issue was whether or not there should be a merger and that was a decision for the club members.

By now the possibility of independent applications appeared to have been obscured by merger talk. But how viable might independent applications have been?

Professional opinion did not become available until almost three months after the clubs had decided to throw in their lot with each other. On the eve of Caley's cliffhanging SGM on December 1st, a leaked report by MacKay Consultants came firmly to the conclusion that going it alone was not a viable economic option.

Tony MacKay was a much respected Inverness financial consultant who had produced several influential reports, especially on the oil industry. He was also a pro merger Caley man. But contrary to some suggestions there was no way he was going to sacrifice his credibility by compiling anything other than a thoroughly professional report. The political timing of its issue late in November was a different matter entirely.

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MacKay's report was not therefore available to members when they voted on whether to join forces, although each group had access to its own uninterpreted figures. The report showed that Caley had spent £252,051 in the financial year to 30th April 1993 and made a loss of £39,136. By far the largest source of revenue was the Centenary Club (£85,000) while gate receipts (a net £22,531) comprised only 10.6% of income.

Thistle's net deficit of £18,768 was much smaller but concealed an even bleaker picture. Income, including Social Club profits, was a mere £56,933, reflecting the absence at the time of the equivalent of the Centenary Club. Of this £16,082 came from gate receipts. Wages and match expenses came to £50,182.

Not included in the MacKay figures were the clubs' liabilities which in Caley's case were £36,876, set to rise to £62,010 in 1994. Thistle's debts have never been revealed although they may have been of the same order. MacKay observed:

"Our interpretation of these figures is that the football club activities in Inverness are currently substantially loss making."

Moving on to the need for Scottish League clubs to meet Taylor Report criteria he further concluded:

"It should be evident from the clubs' accounts that neither Caledonian FC nor Inverness Thistle FC currently have the financial resources to meet Taylor requirements."

The overall conclusion in the final paragraph of the six page report was uncompromising. And with the benefit of hindsight the final sentence can now be seen as prophetic.

"Whilst we can understand the wishes of some Caley supporters to 'go it alone', our objective conclusion is that that could be a financial disaster. It will still be very difficult to achieve the objectives of the merged club, but the economics of that are undoubtedly much more attractive. The merger appears to be the only way of securing substantial financial assistance from Inverness and Nairn Enterprise, and also the local councils, and we believe that that assistance is essential to the long term success of an Inverness club in the Scottish League."

There were no ambiguities at all about that. Other single clubs intending to throw their hats into the ring would presumably view matters differently. Arguments from the Inverness "go it alone" lobby were largely emotional, but at the same time wholly genuine, and came principally from the Caley side. There was a school of thought which declared that the supreme objective was the continuation of Caley, and all other aims were subsidiary. Most of that persuasion would have preferred the club to make the jump up into the Scottish League on its own, whatever the economic implications. But if it could not, Caley continuing in the Highland League was still preferable to a merger of any kind, they believed. This was a perfectly legitimate point of view reflecting a different set of priorities. There were also some on the Thistle side with corresponding beliefs.

The date set for both clubs to vote on the merger was Thursday September 9th. This marginally breached the Caley deadline simply because of the sheer volume of negotiation which had to be got through after Clach's recent withdrawal. September 9th 1993 was to turn out to be an historic night in the annals of the town of Inverness.

Chapter Three

TWO VITAL VOTES

It was ironic in the extreme that just five days before the two clubs were due to decide whether to join forces, they should have the opportunity of denying each other what could be one final, independent appearance in the Scottish Cup. One of just two Qualifying Cup first round ties was Inverness Thistle versus Caledonian - to be played on Saturday 4th September.

Walking up Kingsmills Road about 2:30 that afternoon came a rare pair, one festooned in Thistle's black and red, the other swathed in Caley's blue and white. Their names do not really matter because their views were no more than typical of many other fans at that time. These two lads in their early twenties declared themselves best friends, flatmates, deadly rivals on the subject of Highland League football, and implacably opposed to the merger.

They both rubbished the prospect of the two clubs joining forces and of the loss of their source of rivalry. Both of them saw Scottish League football - the futility of playing the likes of Stenhousemuir was mocked in particular - as of limited value compared with a good Highland League slugging match. It was an interesting insight into the psychology of football support - and by no means a unique viewpoint.

Inevitably emotions ran high on that warm, sunny afternoon at Kingsmills, although the rhetoric of the anti-merger factions had not quite reached the levels of "sophistication" of the months to come.

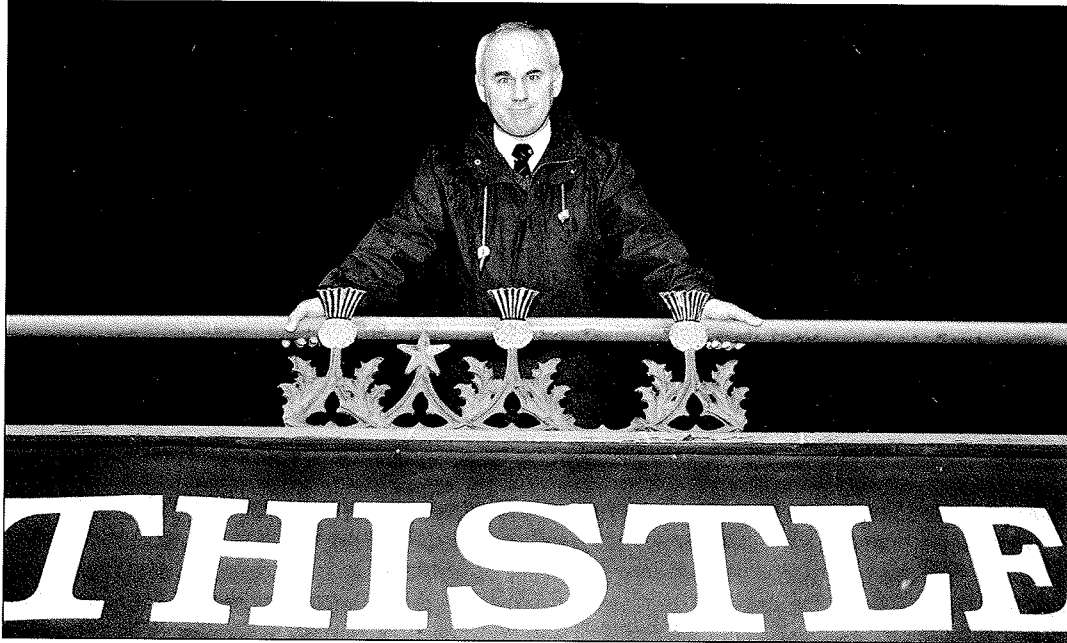
What almost 2000 fans saw was a rough wooing between two potential marriage partners. Charlie Christie was shut down in fairly brutal fashion by Thistle's Martin Bell while Caley's Colin Mitchell was sent off for excessive use of the mouth following a robust tackle from Davie Milroy. Then in the second half came the goals from Calum MacLean and substitute Gary Watt which put Thistle into the second round.

What no one could yet be sure of was whether Caley's famous Scottish Cup days were now over for ever. However there was to be no National Knockout for Thistle that season either - they went out 4-1 to Ross County in a quarter final replay at Kingsmills six weeks later.

Meanwhile what only the Caley inner circle knew was that Norman Miller was still engaged in a titanic battle with his conscience. Even at this late stage the Chairman still felt unable to commit himself categorically to the merger.

Norman Miller in his earlier years had been very much a "Caley Boy". Brought up in the heart of

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Thistle's last manager Henrik Madej surveying Kingsmills Park, scene of their last defeat of Caley in September 1993.

the club's territory in Greig Street, a stone's throw from that Mecca for those of the Blue and White persuasion, Diggar MacGillivray's barber's shop, this was more or less inevitable. For two decades the young Miller had been a regular rank and file Howden Ender, and few were less critical of a poor performance.

One Saturday evening in the early 70s Norman encountered the then President David Birrell under just such circumstances and told him exactly what he thought of that afternoon's annihilation by Ross County. Birrell's response was to invite his critic to stand for Committee at the next AGM which he duly did and rapidly moved up through the ranks of Treasurer and Vice Chairman to aspire to the top job in 1983. He had been at the helm during the glory days which occupied much of the rest of that decade and his whole background in the club made the decision about a merger a very difficult one at a personal level.

The agonising spilled into the Sunday as Miller continued to weigh up the financial and political benefits of a merger with the disappearance of his club. For those firmly in the YES camp these were nervous times, but when Miller finally made up his mind it was to be decisive.

On Monday 6th September three important public figures also threw their weight behind the merger.

Highland Regional Council Convener Duncan MacPherson, Inverness Provost William Fraser and Norman Cordiner issued a signed tripartite statement pledging support for the plan. It read "On the basis of the members of the two clubs agreeing to the above merger and a joint application being made for membership of the Scottish Football League Highland Regional Council, Inverness District Council and Inverness and Nairn Enterprise give a firm commitment to work together to identify a site on the A9/A96 corridors with a view to facilities being available for August 1995."

The sentiment may have been admirable, but the statement publicly linked the proposed new club with a Stadium deadline which was to be a source of considerable anxiety for a long time to come.

On then to simultaneous meetings in two hotels just a stone's throw from the respective grounds

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on Thursday September 9th. This was the night on which the future of football in Inverness was moulded. Just over 100 Caley members filed into the Function Suite at the Muirtown Motel - just less than 50 of Thistle's into the Rannoch Lodge.

No one knew for certain how things would go. But on the basis of recent posturings the most likely outcome appeared to be that Thistle would accept the proposals and Caley would reject them - so the scheme would fall.

The Telford Street diehards - by no means all of them members - had certainly been making their opinions heard. "Nobody messes with the Caley" was not an uncommon sentiment among the Howden Enders. What was going to decide the matter at the Muirtown was how representative the hostile protests were of the views of those who had the votes.

Both meetings considered a six page paper which laid forth the summer's deliberations with INE. This included the 5 Caley, 3 Thistle and 3 INE Board Structure, the creation of Trusts and arrangements for a Stadium. The Trusts, set up by the respective memberships in their own way would, apart from holding the voting shares of the clubs, also nominate merged club Directors.

Some of the contents of this paper deserve critical examination, and in particular two statements which merger opponents later claimed had a significant influence on some voters. One was the continuing notion that forces outside Inverness wanted a merged bid. The paper stated that:

"Indications from the SFL are that a single application from Inverness would be more likely to prove successful."

Although that is a statement of fact and not of any preference on the part of the Scottish League, some who backed a merger were not unhappy that the latter should be believed to be the case.

The paper also expressed the hope that the Stadium would be provided by a property developer or a consortium. It was also envisaged that additional facilities would include "a hotel, fast food outlets, other sporting and leisure facilities and possibly a service station." Such possibilities led to the second controversial statement, which certainly failed the test of time. This was the claim that, given these developments:

"The Football Club would be secure tenants of the stadium meaning that all resources of the existing clubs would be channelled to the footballing aspect of the new club creating significant Working Capital for team building."

A further passage was to become an albatross round the neck of the new club for a long time to come. This stated that "The (feasibility) study would be concluded by the end of 1993 with August 1995 as the target date for completion of the new Stadium."

Neither of these last two hopes about the Stadium was to be realised, and how that came to be will be examined in later chapters. The paper concluded that:

"A merger of Caledonian and Thistle, along the above lines, will considerably enhance the chances of success of an application from Inverness for one of the two vacant places in the SFL. The foregoing structure will help to engender a singleness of purpose for the future while preserving the identities of Caledonian and Thistle within a new club. It will help to maximise support from fans and potential sponsors as well as maximising economic benefit to the community as a whole."

The Steering Committee strongly feel that a merged club represents a virtual guarantee of admission to the Scottish Football League and that to pass up this

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opportunity puts into grave jeopardy the chances of an Inverness application being successful.’

The decisive intervention at Caley's highly charged gathering, where the case was put by Secretary Jim Falconer, was the final and public commitment, just before the vote, of Norman Miller to the merger. His mind now made up irrevocably, Miller told the meeting that he believed that the best way forward into Scottish League football would be through a merger with Inverness Thistle. He left members to go into the vote with the thought that the teams could continue if the new club was called Caledonian Thistle. Despite his difficulty in coming to that decision, it is one to which Miller adhered faithfully thereafter.

A few minutes later the biggest hurdle which the merger then appeared likely to face had been crossed. The verdict was that Caley, very much contrary to expectation, had voted in favour of the proposal by just 55 to 50. Effectively just three people who had voted YES rather than NO had sealed the fate of football in Inverness. However anyone who thought that the battle was over and won was to be sadly mistaken. The tightness of that result would make it extremely vulnerable to a determined campaign of opposition.

Thistle's meeting was, in contrast, a quiet, low key affair where Charlie Cuthbert told members that he believed that their club could be in serious financial trouble within five years. He had examined their various sources of income through the Football Club and the Social Club. The outlook was not good. The Chairman had also contacted each sponsor to assess future support and the indication was that there would be an overall reduction in income from that source. In addition to existing revenues there was the new Jags Premier Club but it had been finding it difficult to penetrate a market in which the Caley Centenary Club was a huge player and the Clach Capital Club was already established. Thistle's future prospects on their own showed little scope for optimism, members were told.

Inevitably Thistle's debate was animated given the enormity of the decision, but there was also a measure of control and dignity. Opposition came from the extreme ends of the age range of the Jags' membership. Leading the campaign to retain the club's independence was veteran former chairman Dave Williamson who, despite being in his eighties, was still sharp as a needle. At the other end of the scale there were younger opponents like Mark Mitchell and teenager Martin Ross.

There was always more than a reasonable chance that Thistle would vote in favour, but few expected it to be by as big a margin as the 33-12 end result.

Night had fallen on Inverness by the time the two meetings broke up. Emotions were very mixed, and building, as the Caley cohorts made their way down the stairs at the Muirtown.

As they departed someone called out "Jags have gone for it by 3 to 1". Inevitably one wit asked if that meant there were only four at the other meeting. But the Inverness football merger was a reality.

Most of the senior Caley figures stayed on in that upstairs room where Norman Miller looked a tired man as he sank into a chair in the centre of the floor. It was relief as opposed to jubilation which permeated the air as he spoke on a mobile phone to his opposite number Charlie Cuthbert - each confirming to the other that both momentous decisions had in fact been taken. Then Miller made his first public statement on the result.

"It was very very tight indeed, but I always felt that at the end of the day the support was going to be for an Inverness United," he said. "I'm quite sure that with a merged side there will be an excellent opportunity of an Inverness side being in Scottish League Football next season."

Meanwhile matters had reached boiling point downstairs as the full fury of the anti-merger faction exploded in a storm of protest. Season tickets were torn up amid rapidly escalating bitterness and

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allegations of irregularities. Two dozen members, reinforced by non card carrying fans who had spent two angry hours in the bar after being refused admission to the meeting, vented their full wrath. The episode, which took place in full view of television cameras, came alarmingly close to getting completely out of hand. However the throng eventually dispersed, far from happy.

In complete contrast the scene in the Rannoch Lodge, where two or three dozen men stood around in knots over a post meeting drink, was more reminiscent of the dying minutes of a wedding. The band had stopped playing, the much loved bride had departed with her new husband for her new life. Left behind were her family contemplating, rather sadly, what it would be like without her. There was an air of gentility which, despite their own protracted battles just over the horizon, was to continue to be the predominant although not quite universal hallmark of Thistle's passage through the new club's lengthy gestation period.

Here it was Vice President and Secretary Scott Byrnes, possibly remembering their own near miss of 1973, who articulated Thistle's feelings.

"With a town this size and with the population we've got and after the commitment that's been shown by the two clubs tonight, then if we don't get in there will be absolutely no justice whatsoever. I sincerely hope that our application will be approved," he said.

However with the benefit of hindsight and of many months' litigation over Thistle's assets it is possible to view their vote in rather different terms. Almost as an aside in his 31 page judgement in May 1995 on the case between Martin Ross and the Committee, Sheriff James Fraser makes an interesting observation about the legal significance of that night's proceedings. The Sheriff said:

"I do not agree that the first (September 9th) meeting produced any resolution at all. There was a proposal for or against a merger with the INE paper being a background for discussion. That meeting did not approve of the paper, and the favourable vote was no more than a declaration of general intent."

This also puts a different slant on one particular revelation made during the meeting itself. Just before the vote, Cuthbert reminded his members that the Constitution demanded a two thirds majority to approve any resolution. As it happened, the notion of such a majority in Thistle's case never emerged in public before the vote. Had it done so in the run up to the meeting it would certainly have sharpened anticipation yet further. But although that two thirds was actually obtained, the Sheriff's judgement all those months later appears to render the fact irrelevant.

So although Thistle's vote in favour had produced the bigger margin, it was Caley's tightly fought poll which at that stage may have had the stronger legal foundation. Caley members voted on the specific motion that "Caledonian FC should amalgamate with Inverness Thistle with a view to obtaining entry into the Scottish Football League." Despite all the opposition which was to persist, none of Caley's actions in direct pursuit of the merger was ever fully contested in a court of law during the merger period. On the other hand Thistle's actions most certainly were, and despite any lack of specificity at their September 9th meeting, Thistle's overall handling of the process ultimately passed the legal test.

What neither club possibly realised at this early stage of the proceedings was the historical dimension of the night's events. Some may argue that football plays no significant part in the serious business of society. But it is the belief of this commentator at least that the events of the night of September 9th 1993 deserve a prominent place in the history of Inverness.

And what of Fiona Larg, the woman who had never been to a football match in her life, but who had done so much to bring about what so many had believed to be the impossible? Just two years into her career as Chief Executive of INE, this 35 year old female Chartered Accountant appeared to

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have achieved what decades of half hearted on and off talking among the clubs had failed to do. She spent the evening quietly at home as the members did their business. And when news of their decisions finally arrived, her relief and joy were evident.

"We are obviously very hopeful that we will get into the Scottish League and all the indications prior to this meeting tonight have been that if we can get a merged bid, we will have every chance of getting in," she said. "They say that on population grounds, that on strength of bid, in terms of finance and resource now, we must have a very good chance."

That statement still conveys the impression that INE continued to look at the whole question purely in business terms without taking account of the underlying emotion and sentiment lying bottled up on both sides of the River Ness.

* * * *

It was Davie Love's mobile phone which brought the first news of organised dissent to Inverness. Less than 48 hours after the meetings broke up - midway through Clach's home game with Fraserburgh on the Saturday in fact - the story hit Grant Street that there had been a pitch invasion at MacKessack Park where Caley were playing Rothes. The Merkinch began to buzz.

Around 20 Caley anti merger fans were involved, the word went, and the invasion had been short lived and peaceful. It was still clearly a protest against the Thursday night vote. At this point the realisation sank in that this one wasn't going to lie down. Having made the decisions, those responsible for running both clubs now simply wanted to get on with the campaign for Scottish League football. However the Caley backlash was almost immediate.

At around 7pm the Caley team bus drew up outside the Social Club in Greig Street and a worried Norman Miller was among the first to alight. Yes, he would confirm the facts of what had happened, but no he would not comment on the incident, preferring instead to make a statement calling for unity within the club.

That particular call was to fall on deaf ears, and the following afternoon around 30 Caley fans, bitterly opposed to the merger, met in Finlays Bar in Young Street, the established HQ of the club's Fanzine "(On A) Life Support Machine". At this early stage all they would do was to pledge their uncompromising opposition although no definite direction or action was yet clear. They were prepared to look at anything and everything they could use against the merger, and were already considering legal action. Aspects like the constitutionality of the meeting, alleged irregularities in the counting of votes and the need for a two thirds majority somewhere along the line were all being examined.

The main outcome of that Sunday afternoon meeting was that the Caley anti merger group - soon to be dubbed the "Caley Rebels" - was born. With it there was also spawned more than a year of bitterness, infighting and controversy which gave rise at times to scenes which many would never have believed possible.

So who were the Caley Rebels? They are not an easy group to define with respect either to who they were or what their objective was. The group was far too diverse to make such an exercise a simple one.

It would be very easy to dismiss the Caley Rebels as a badly behaved rabble intent on the survival intact of Caley at any cost. They have also been accused of creating trouble and trying to destroy the merger with its Scottish League dream at every opportunity. Many did fit that description and certainly the continuing existence of Caley was their biggest unifying force. But this is in no way a universal definition of this particular group - there is no such thing. There were as many individual philosophies as there were Rebels. While some were intent on destruction, others were merely

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(left to right) Caley Secretary Jim Falconer; Caley Chairman Norman Miller; Thistle Chairman Charlie Cuthbert, Caledonian Thistle inaugural Chairman Jock McDonald. They bore much of the political burden of the merger battle.

sceptical about the arrangement but reluctantly accepted that it was even now probably irreversible. Some of them eventually threw their entire weight behind the new club and were among its hardest workers, while there were those who swore they would never watch it and never did. They were more or less all discontented about the way in which they believed the scheme was steamrollered along throughout, but they were not unanimous in their reaction.

Socially they came from all strata of society from the unemployed to professional people, but they were predominantly a working class movement. There were those who were articulate, intelligent and thoughtful. There were several women, some of them deadlier than the male. They were mainly but by no means exclusively drawn from the young diehards whose experience of football had begun in Caley's heady days of the early 1980s and whose only experience of The Enemy was Thistle.

Some were prepared to go much further than others in pursuit of their aims. But for most purposes over the next 15 months this sometimes uneasy federation of sentiment against the merger would muster just less than 50%, as on September 9th. This was never enough to bring the merger down, but they did cause serious delays and problems. Thistle also had their anti merger core, but it never ran to more than a handful of members and a group of fans.

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Opposition to the merger also gave an interesting perspective of the psychology of football support. Many who were against it had perfectly good reasons, given that their priority was the continuation of Caley. Others just wanted to make trouble, but there appeared to be another dimension too. For some, football in general and the Caley-Thistle rivalry in particular allowed the expression of a deep seated need for confrontation. So when The Enemy disappeared - and worse still became The Partner - the vehicle for the articulation of that desire was also removed. Or put more simply, some feared having no one left to shout abuse at on a Saturday afternoon.

Although the Caley Rebels were in existence it would take them the best part of a month - a vital month - to get their campaign going. Meanwhile the calendar moved relentlessly on towards October 1st when applications closed.

This was a busy time too for the Steering Committee who had three weeks after the votes to process the proposed new club's application form. The League wanted all manner of information on attendances, grounds, finance, past performance and the general status of applicants.

Club secretaries in various HQs across the land dotted and crossed various letters of the alphabet and duly sent their submissions to Glasgow. The election was pencilled in for late December or early January. But for Inverness the closing of applications at 5pm on Friday, October 1st was like Caesar crossing the Rubicon. The die was cast. There was no way back now. It was the merger or nothing.

Chapter Four

REBELLIOUS AUTUMN

Within minutes of applications closing, the League revealed that they were five in number. As expected Ross County, Elgin City and Gala Fairydean had thrown their hats into the ring. There was also an unlikely bid by tiny Gretna which was difficult to take seriously from the start. And there was the joint application from Inverness.

Gala had always fancied themselves as strong candidates for any vacancy. They consistently brushed aside suggestions of limited interest in football in a rugby stronghold, preferring to emphasise the geographical advantage of lying within an hour of Edinburgh. They also fought shy of any examination of a Scottish Cup pedigree which was pale and insignificant compared with even middle ranking Highland League clubs. That evening Radio Scotland held a three way discussion on the vacancies in their Glasgow, Selkirk and Inverness studios. Gala Chairman Matt Hall at the Southern end of that link up did not appear over impressed by the suggestion from Inverness that both vacancies should on merit go to the Highland League.

The credentials of the Highland League applicants were outstanding. In 1987 Ross County were almost broke, all amateur and bottom of the table. By 1992 they had won back to back League titles under Bobby Wilson and had recently opened a brand new grandstand at Victoria Park. An ambitious board also had much more in the pipeline if their campaign was successful.

The strength of the joint Inverness bid has already been examined in depth. And anyone asking a Lowlander to name two Highland League clubs was likely to find Elgin City tripping off the tongue only momentarily after Caley. Elgin's Scottish Cup quarter final appearance in 1968 alone was enough to confer immortality upon the club, and there was a lot more. Many existing lower order Scottish League clubs would have been delighted with such positions of strength.

But notwithstanding a proud past and a fine ground, there were weaknesses in Elgin's case too. Geographically the place is more out of the way than Dingwall or Inverness and apart from the facilities under the stand, Borough Briggs was hardly exceptional. Then there was the strong after-taste of the ignominious Teasdale Affair.

Despite this, as applications closed, all of the candidates apart from Gretna were regarded as serious contenders. It was to be a four horse race for two vacancies, but it was beginning to appear that the Inverness situation was far from settled.

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By now the Caley Rebels' campaign was up and running. Within days of the Rothes pitch invasion they were introduced to Dunkeld based solicitor Deryck Beaumont in the Railway Club at a closed doors gathering which attracted about 80 sympathisers. The solicitor had been previously known to one of their number Donnie MacKinnon who was quick to contact him and arrange the meeting. Deryck Beaumont was to play a very significant and at times highly colourful part in what was to follow.

As September ended, the Inverness campaign was rocked by the revelation that Caley's vote on the 9th was not the end of the story. In the euphoria which followed that result, nobody had seen fit to mention or think of how their assets would be transferred to a new club.

It was on the Wednesday before applications closed that the bombshell exploded. It was leaked by the Rebel camp and confirmed by Caley officials that before assets could be transferred a further vote would be needed, requiring a two thirds majority for a constitutional amendment. This had been one of the possible avenues of attack raised at the original Rebel meeting in Finlays Bar on September 12th and after investigation it was the first card to emerge from their hand.

When Charlie Cuthbert was asked if the same could apply at Thistle, he said he believed their 33-12 already constituted a two thirds majority so there was no problem with transfer. As it happened the respective assets were finally transferred - much later - on the basis of neither of these scenarios.

So as Inverness geared itself up for a campaign to win the hearts, minds and votes of 38 Scottish League clubs, a serious doubt arose about whether the larger of the two partners could deliver the goods. Once applications had closed there was no alternative to the merged bid. If Caley could not resolve this problem, Inverness looked destined to depart by default from the contest. And given the narrowness of Caley's original ballot plus the strength of feeling among the anti-merger camp, the prospects of a subsequent two thirds majority seemed remote.

This concept of a two thirds majority was to dominate Caley's internal affairs and their external dealings with Thistle and INE for over a year. It is central to any understanding of the manner in which events developed. It was the one major weapon which the Rebels had because they were always capable of controlling a third of the vote although never as much as half. Those within the club responsible for making the merger scheme a reality had their scope for movement very much restricted as a result.

The Rebels also tried to contest the advertising of Caley's meeting only in the local press, claiming this was inadequate notice. But given that both meetings had been the overwhelming issue in the town for weeks, also percolating nationwide, this was a ridiculous argument. It was inconceivable that any Caley member did not know of the meeting. There were also attempts to claim that proxy voting should have been allowed and that there had been irregularities in the count, but neither came to anything. The Rebels' big weapon was the two thirds majority.

Their first tactic was to requisition a Special General Meeting of Caledonian FC. This in effect was an attempt to force a second vote on the merger proposal in the hope of overturning it. A strange Trojan Horse of an agenda was proposed with the second vote neatly concealed in its interior. It began with a request for information on various aspects of the merger and then went on to table two motions:

- "i) that the club now decide whether they want the proposed merger to go ahead.**
- ii) that the Committee lodge a late application to the League in the name of Caledonian Football Club as an additional application to that lodged by Inverness and Nairn Enterprise in the name of the proposed club."**

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The reason for the second motion was said to be concern that the League might not grant a vacancy to a club not yet formed. In reality it was an incentive for members to vote against the merger at the forthcoming meeting. Any idea of Caley lodging their own late bid was simply pie in the sky. Applications had closed and there was never any chance of the Scottish League accepting a late one.

The real crux of this requisitioned SGM would be the second vote on the merger. In simple terms if that were to be a NO vote, then Inverness could wave goodbye to Scottish League Football. This was what was to be at stake, because if the merger were to fall there was no other option and it was too late now to create one. There were ultimately to be changes and additions to this first proposed agenda, but the demand for the second vote remained unaltered. Given the wafer thin majority first time around, these were anxious days for the Highland Capital's campaign to get into the Scottish Football League.

By this time Deryck Beaumont was very active on the Rebels' behalf and it soon became clear that he was working for well below the market rate. Most of the Rebels were of relatively limited means and they held collections wherever possible to help funds. It was also alleged, but never proved, that they did have at least one financial backer, perhaps with an interest in Telford Street remaining a football ground. But there was no prospect of them paying Beaumont a full fee for his extensive efforts.

Beaumont and Fiona Larg had one important thing in common. Neither had ever attended a football match. Despite being brought up in Glasgow and educated at a Catholic school, the game was a completely closed book to the solicitor. Beaumont had worked in David Watt's office in Inverness before setting up on his own in Dunkeld in 1990 and also in Inverness two years later. He later revealed that he had taken on the Caley Rebels because he was "a sucker for unusual cases".

The Rebels had originally asked for the meeting to be held on Monday, 18th October 1993. But for a variety of reasons there was a delay of more than six weeks, generating an abnormal degree of bad feeling. By the time the meeting finally took place on December 1st, Caledonian FC's internal politics had become infinitely more strained than they already were.

The delay was principally the creation of the Committee who were far from keen to have the meeting in the first place. This led them to seek legal advice from the first of a series of QCs who were to make brief but usually necessary appearances on the Inverness Football Merger stage over the next two years at rates of up to £2000 a day. The merger and its associated activities were to be a goldmine for the legal profession. For a start there was the normal business which might be associated with the process of joining two football clubs, selling their grounds and building a new one. Then, because of the added complexity and controversy of events as they unfolded, Caley, Thistle, Caledonian Thistle, INE and Inverness District Council all required to make extensive use of solicitors at various points. Apart from all that, the opponents of the merger also relied extensively on legal advisers. There can have been few legal firms in Inverness who were not involved in this matter at one point or another with reinforcements brought in from outwith in addition to the procession of eminent QCs. The final bill will probably never be known, but it must have been staggering, consuming a lot of money which might otherwise have gone to develop football.

Returning to Caley's meeting, one requisition had been returned by the Committee because it was not signed by its six proposers while subsequent delays merely got the Rebels more and more annoyed.

The Committee's front man was Secretary Jim Falconer who not only dealt directly with the Rebels ex-officio, but was also the club's spokesman on all merger matters. This was not to be any bed of roses.

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combined with an ongoing reluctance to hold the SGM, gave the Rebels the high ground during that autumn. At the same time the issue of who would fill the two Scottish League vacancies was high on the National agenda. But the Inverness camp was so preoccupied with its own internal problems that it largely failed to cash in. Locally the main criticism was that the heads had disappeared below the parapet, leaving the public completely in the dark about the most important football development Inverness would ever see.

The Rebels then became so impatient at the lack of progress on the SGM that they took the club, or rather Jim Falconer as its representative, to court to try to force the issue. However if there is anything that is slower than a reluctant Committee, it is the legal process. The meeting had taken place before the Sheriff Court could pronounce judgement on the case of "Allan and Others v Falconer". Views on whether the existence of the case speeded up the process depend on which side of the divide they originate from. Nonetheless the case was still to drag on for some months.

The long delay also gave rise to one of the most bizarre episodes ever seen in Scottish football. From the very outset it became clear that the vote on the first of the Rebels' two motions was to be a matter of life and death, with both sides hellbent on victory. There was therefore strong motivation for them both to set about determined recruiting campaigns. The race was on and it soon became clear that Caley's existing membership of around 180 was set to increase considerably. But it was only when the Rose Street Hall finally filled up on December 1st that it became entirely clear how dramatic the increase had been.

Treasurer John Douglas certainly knew how busily both camps were recruiting as batches of applications began to land on his doormat. Others were handed to him in the street or passed on in all conceivable ways. One man appeared on the Treasurer's doorstep at half past seven in the morning and the flood continued unabated until the deadline of 24 hours before the meeting.

It was a simple enough matter to join Caley by purchasing a season ticket for the relatively modest sum of £20 - half price for the unemployed, OAPs and non-voting Juveniles. This meeting would be all about the numbers game. It was that very consideration which made the next development all the more controversial.

On November 1st the Caley Committee, prompted by the SFA, met to consider disciplinary action on as many of the Rothes pitch invaders as could be identified. This led to the following communication to nine club members and one supporter.

"Having previously called for a report on this incident, the Scottish Football Association have now informed the club that they are considering this matter with a degree of seriousness and have requested further information.

At the club's Management Committee Meeting on 1st November, it was considered that this embarrassing incident has been detrimental to the good name and standing of both the Club and the Highland League and could not be condoned or accepted.

Having considered the matter, the members of the Management Committee unanimously agreed that the persons involved should be banned from attending matches at Telford Street Park and, where appropriate, suspended from membership of the Football Club in terms of Rule 13 of the Constitution until such time as the findings of the Scottish Football Association are known, when the matter will be further considered."

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This was what was buzzing round Telford Street at the match on November 6th where the second placed home side took on leaders Huntly. Caley's 3-2 defeat took them seven points off the pace. It was a vital six pointer in Caley's last season and a turning point in Huntly's successful quest for their first League title for 64 years.

On sale that afternoon was the latest edition of the Caley Fanzine which bore on its front page an interesting insight into Rebel thinking, made all the more revealing now by the experience of the years which followed. A photograph of the original 1886 Caley team was captioned "Well boys, what's it to be, do we go ahead and form the most successful Highland League club in history, or do we wait 107 years and build a petrol station instead down the dump with Fiona Larg?"

The vitriol hurled at the Committee and Falconer from the terraces was particularly acidic that day with the "traitors in the stand" chant leading the charge. More worrying still was the throwing of coins and stones at Huntly goalkeeper John Gardner from the Howden End - which Gardner opted not to report to the SFA.

This led to a statement from Caley in response to a number of complaints about foul language from some spectators over the merger debate. Hard on the heels of suspending the Rothes invaders, Caley decided to get tough on all offenders. The statement, which promised a greater Police presence, said:

"This club gives notice that anyone found taking part in abusive behaviour will be banned forthwith and face whatever further sanctions this club can enforce. Venom directed at club officials will be grounds for ejection."

On the same day Caley announced that another pitch invader had been identified and suspended. By now the atmosphere at the Caley Park had become very unpleasant indeed, and certainly a disincentive for ordinary fans to continue to attend matches. Immediately on entering the ground on match days, tension and animosity could be detected, and that was before the chanting, swearing and booing even began. There had been further threats of pitch invasions at Telford Street itself which would have been a much more serious matter than the relatively low key episode far away at Rothes. These never materialised, but Caley's home games did not offer a particularly comforting experience for fans - never mind officials - during that rebellious autumn of 1993.

The controversy over the suspensions raged. The club insisted that they had no alternative but to ban the fans after the SFA demand for a report on the incident. However the Rebels were quick to argue that the Committee were more interested in restricting their vote at the SGM.

It was one of the suspended members, David MacDonald, who expressed the Rebels' indignation. "All they are doing is stopping votes at the meeting," he said. "That is what they wanted to do. It is just another of their dirty tricks that they are playing - to suspend the people that were there so there are less people to vote when they come to the meeting."

MacDonald was fast emerging as the natural leader among the Caley Rebels. Alan Douglas, another of those banned, had been the front man in the early stages, but was regarded by his colleagues as too much of a loose cannon in a highly charged situation.

David MacDonald was completely uncompromising in his opposition to the merger. Some felt intimidated by him, but below what was certainly a tough exterior was a keen mind which thoroughly understood the issues. He was also highly articulate and conveyed his case with confidence. During his short stay on the Caledonian Thistle Board he was frequently a thorn in the flesh at meetings. But at the same time Chairman Jock McDonald recognised his abilities, admired some of his original ideas and regretted that his energies could not be harnessed for the benefit of the new club.

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At this time there also materialised the "Caley 2086 Group" reflecting a desire to see the club in its original form 200 years after its foundation. Although relations at the Caley Park were going from bad to worse there was one moment of pure pantomime which came as a much needed relief.

On the Wednesday after the Huntly game Caley were at home to Clach in the semi finals of the Inverness Cup, and the crowd was due to be ten fans down on normal. However the Suspended Ones had different ideas. Club officials and spectators entering Telford Street Park that night were slightly bemused to see a double decker bus parked parallel with the Away end in the Comet car park. A short time later a huge banner materialised from the top windows reading "SO YOU TRIED TO BAN US MR. FALCONER!"



On the Buses. The Caley Rebels defying the club's ban.

As the game burst into life, so did ten Rebel voices from the top deck of the bus where the atmosphere was electric. Suddenly the cheers stopped when John Seaton put Clach ahead after 21 minutes. Then just before half time the bus could be seen rocking from side to side as Charlie Christie levelled the score direct from a free kick to the ecstasy of the Rebels. However the night had a miserable end for the protesters when a Mark McCulloch penalty and a goal from Graeme Bennett meant that it was Clach who would meet Thistle in the all Inverness final.

Thistle had also been at the centre of a rather amusing incident when they were greeted by rapturous applause on their return to Inverness on the strength of their 4-2 away win over leaders Huntly. However someone at Christie Park had blundered and a reversed version of the real score had escaped to both press and radio.

These were rare items of light relief at a time when tensions and resentment were rising along with the Rebels' frustration at the Committee's continuing reluctance to name a date for the Caley SGM.

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But the Rebels also contributed to the situation with a delay in responding to one particular communication and even a request to delay the proceedings! At long last December 1st was set for the meeting which would decide the future of the sport of football in Inverness for years to come. The choice of the massive Rose Street Hall as the venue gave a hint of the extent to which membership had risen, and Police were to be on duty.

However with other events moving so fast, the time is not yet quite ripe to enter the Hall for what could be called the First Battle of Rose Street. And like the slogging matches at Ypres in World War I, this was also the first of three such encounters.

With the initial presentation to the Scottish League now less than a month away, the time had come to name the man who would lead this new club into the election - and into the League if successful. That particular question was never in doubt.

In Jock McDonald, who by 1993 had completed 21 years as an SFA Councillor, the Inverness campaign had a formidable asset. Apart from a lifetime's experience of how football worked both on and off the park, the Managing Director of Tomatin Distillers was well known and highly respected at all levels within the Scottish game. He had served eleven years on the SFA's prestigious International Committee and chaired the Youth Committee for six. There were few in positions of power in Scottish Football who were unknown to him. There was no doubt that he had clout and influence. It was inconceivable that, unless it patently failed to deliver the goods, Jock McDonald's team would this time miss election to the Scottish League.

Jock had had greatness thrust upon him. A Thistle player for 13 seasons from 1952, he moved into Committee circles when he hung up his boots. Then to his amazement in 1967 he returned to Inverness from one of his several journeyings to be told that he had become Club Chairman.

In his absence he had been nominated and elected to the chair, beating Dave Williamson by a single vote. It was a post he was to hold continuously until his shock resignation at the end of 1991. One of his first actions was to declare his intention to win the Highland League in five years and this was just what Thistle did. As often as not, if Jock wanted something to happen, it happened. This was an admirable credential for the inaugural chairman of Caledonian Thistle.

Soon after Jock had decreed that the title would be coming to Kingsmills, the manager who did it - twice in a row - arrived as a player. Jock persuaded Elgin City to part with the great "King" Willie Grant for £150 which he raised by borrowing £15 from each of ten people, including his father. Willie initially received £3 a week for his services.

Jock McDonald had for a long time enjoyed the reputation of being the hardest man in North football. He could be ruthless when he had to, and often appeared humourless, never suffering fools gladly. There was one fraught occasion - and Jock admitted this freely - that he was downright rude to Beaumont to an extent which even shocked the Caley Rebels' legal representative. However to those who got to know him there was also a completely different side to his personality.

On one famous occasion on an International trip Jock heard an almighty disturbance in the next hotel room. Never a shrinking violet, he shot through and felled with a phenomenal whack on the jaw what could very well have been an intruder. The "intruder" turned out to be none other than Billy Bremner. Now we perhaps know why Jock served seven years on the SFA Disciplinary Committee.

At one of several climaxes of the anti-merger crisis he was preparing to leave Telford Street after a match when he was advised that he should perhaps delay his departure. Apparently there was a bizarre protest going on. Forty dissidents were mooning, no less, in the direction of the grandstand, and there were fears that the atmosphere could turn nasty. But the Chairman would have none of it and swept past forty bare backsides, loudly expressing the sentiment that what they were showing looked a lot better than many of their faces.

REBELLIOUS AUTUMN

Inevitably a man whose name was inextricably linked with Thistle did not go down universally well in some Caley quarters as Chairman designate of the new club. There were some who would not grant Thistle anything, but Jock McDonald's influence was essential to the Inverness campaign. At least as an INE nominee and as a past rather than a current Chairman of Thistle it would be easier for his appointment finally to be accepted. There were also similar objections when the experienced and admirably qualified Thistle Secretary Scott Byrnes took up that position.

Thistle's clout was, all the same, on the increase within the proposed set up. In October it had emerged that, contrary to all expectations, their Kingsmills ground belonged to the club and not to the Church of Scotland.

Thistle had originally hoped to buy the Park from the Church and later to sell it. Then in response to a press article, the Church's solicitor pointed out that his clients didn't own it in the first place - the club did! Meanwhile Charlie Cuthbert had been going through old papers which indeed confirmed that Thistle owned what could be worth around £400,000 in asset value and clout within the new setup.

At the end of October a Scottish League delegation visited the grounds of all five candidates, covering the three North premises in a weekend. At that stage the plan was still for the Inverness team, if successful, to play at Kingsmills for the first season and for Telford Street to be sold to realise assets. So it was Kingsmills which was inspected on the afternoon of Sunday, 31st October 1993.

Kingsmills was never the Jewel in the Crown of Highland League grounds. On the other hand it was only envisaged that it would be a temporary home until the new Stadium came on stream in August 1995. The park had its shortcomings and was generally in decay. The away dressing room in particular was notorious throughout the Highland game. However it was no way as bad as suggested by the scandalous photograph which appeared in one Sunday newspaper, taken from the most disadvantageous angle possible and with the floodlights apparently touched out.

The high powered SFL delegation, which included President Yule Craig and Secretary Peter Donald, left no stone unturned that afternoon. A theodolite and a measuring tape were among the instruments used as the ground got a thorough going over from the experts, who departed with little comment.

They also ran the gauntlet of a small deputation of Caley Rebels who tried to make their case to the officials but were politely ignored. Alan Douglas had with him a petition against the merger containing what he claimed were several hundred signatures, including those of several Caley first team players.

This latter assertion was certainly true because the Rebels had gone round the Social Club one Saturday night using every power of persuasion they had, and some, but not all of the players had signed.

Then, no doubt after some discussions with Committee Members, a letter appeared in the Inverness Courier on 26th November 1993 - just days before the Rose Street meeting. It was signed by fifteen Caley first team pool members - almost the entire squad - expressing unequivocal backing for the merger. At the same time the Committee obtained written support from 18 former Caley officials and all 15 Committee Members in what Norman Miller described as "a remarkable show of unity."

Finally, on the very eve of the meeting there appeared two reports. One by Tony MacKay categorically ruled out the economic viability of single applications and predicted the success of a joint bid. The second, released tactically by INE, identified West Seafield, Inshes and East Longman as the three most advantageous Stadium sites. In a gloves off battle to the finish, the Committee were finally beginning to play some of their Public Relations cards.

But while politics preoccupied Caley in that last week of November 1993, it was football which was still uppermost in Thistle's mind. Having tragically lost the North Cup to Clach back in March,

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they had squeezed through 3-2 after extra time at Brora in the first round of the Inverness Cup that autumn. Then they strode dramatically into the final with a resounding 6-3 defeat of Ross County at Dingwall - the last time the Jags were ever to score six goals. And after that 3-1 ousting of Caley in the other semi final, it was again Clach who were to provide the Jags' opposition. The venue was again Telford Street, the date November 30th - the very eve of Caley's meeting. And this time it was black and red ribbons on the cup when Ian Polworth's only goal of the game six minutes from the end of extra time earned Thistle their last ever trophy.



Jubilant as Thistle win their last trophy, the Inverness Cup. November 1993.

Meanwhile on the Caley side the pro- and anti-merger lobbies were heading on a collision course with massive pressure being applied at all available moments in each camp. The Caley juggernaut was not only moving faster and faster, it was also getting bigger and bigger. And it was heading - almost out of control - in the direction of the Rose Street Hall on December 1st.

Chapter Five

SCOTTISH LEAGUE AT LAST!

The scene outside the Rose Street Hall as 7:30 approached on the evening of Wednesday, December 1st 1993 was straight from the film "Zulu" as wave after wave of card carrying Caley members engulfed the premises. They just kept coming in droves - 476 of them - with all manner of views on the merger.

It was only then that it became fully apparent just how vigorous the recruiting campaigns mounted by both sides had been. Official membership had gone up from around 180 to a phenomenal 576, the vast majority of whom had turned out to determine Inverness football's destiny, creating a potential lottery out of the meeting. On the other hand Committee insiders, who knew the precise breakdown of who had just joined up, appeared confident of getting at least a 50% majority for their point of view.

The pro-merger faction had certainly done a thorough job, as shown by the many stalwarts of the Inverness football community who filed into that hall. The presence of so many people who had put so many years in one way or another into the game in the town could only mean one thing. They were there to vote for what they saw as the way ahead into the Scottish League.

Some pro-merger recruits had no real Caley connections, and there were even one or two others more closely connected with other Highland League clubs at the time. But many had the common goal of preventing the town's Scottish League opportunity from being lost.

Great batches of applications which had been arriving with John Douglas were ample evidence that the Rebels had been doing their lobbying too. The Howden End had been scoured and scoured again and the campaign had gone a lot further than that.

The Rebels were claiming that a number of memberships on the other side had either been "bought" on the holders' behalf or given away free. When Caley's audited accounts for 1993 - 94 appeared the following June the anti-mergerites were quick to pounce on an apparent shortfall in the monies for memberships. However when VAT had been accounted for the Committee were able to show that any discrepancy amounted to around £160.

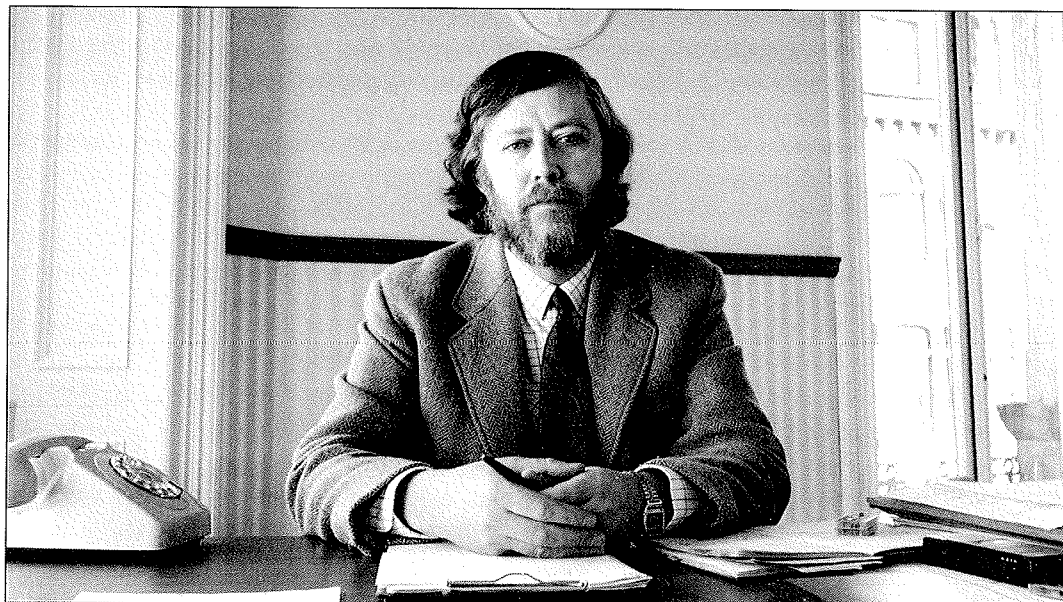
AGAINST ALL ODDS

This was attributed to a miscategorisation of income “due to the hectic situation at the time” when dozens of applications were flooding in daily. And if £160 was the discrepancy, this hardly corresponded to a serious attempt to make a huge difference in a vote among 500 people.

Before the meeting proper got under way the gathering first heard an appeal by the Suspended Ones for reinstatement. Even then the Rebel side of the hall was beginning to boil over as the appeals were rejected by 269 votes to 207. Norman Miller’s pleas for order were frequently drowned out by the commotion which got steadily worse during what turned out to be a marathon three hour session.

Next came the question of the more recent case of Deryck Beaumont who had joined the club but had also been suspended for placing on his own initiative an advert in the Inverness Courier about that evening’s meeting. This had been done in an attempt to draw attention to additional late business which the Committee had refused to accept. “Fraudulent” was the word Norman Miller used to describe the advert, although this was hotly disputed by Beaumont. However Miller’s attempt to sustain Beaumont’s suspension attracted only 62 votes, leaving him free to stay to represent his clients.

This left the other side in difficulties because the club’s solicitor had departed the meeting at the start leaving the field free for Beaumont. Time and again, to the near hysterical delight of his massed supporters, this charismatic, Messianic character, complete with beard and shoulder length hair, swept up to the microphone to make point after point to which there was no legal response. The scene was not unlike the Cleansing of the Temple. Indeed the Biblical comparison was so compelling that in similar circumstances at a later meeting one elderly gentleman was heard to comment “All he’s missing are the holes in his hands!”



Deryck Beaumont.

The requests for information on the original agenda had been replaced by nine questions from the Rebels while the two motions had blossomed to six. The responses to the questions included a confident opinion from Jim Falconer that, with the cooperation of INE, cross funding would be forthcoming through developers to pay for the Stadium. Falconer also clarified that the £5000

SCOTTISH LEAGUE AT LAST

Stadium feasibility study by Percy Johnston-Marshall had been paid for by INE. The Rebel figure was £15,000, paid for by Caley.

There was also yet another question about what had and had not been said by the League or its individual member clubs about a joint application. Falconer told the meeting that he and other officials had been told by "a number of SFL representatives" that a merger would be the most acceptable way forward.

Due to the mounting mayhem in the hall even this straightforward supply of information took over an hour. But it was when it came to the votes that the meeting really boiled over. There were arguments about whether the pre-printed voting cards should be used for a secret ballot, but a public show of hands was eventually settled on. There was further bitter controversy over the nature of the required majority. The Rebels, who knew they could muster at least a third of the vote but probably not a half, held out for a two thirds majority to approve the merger again. However on the basis of QC's advice Miller stuck to his guns and a straight 50%.

The Rebels were delighted at least at the show of hands because some sought to intimidate as many rivals as they could into voting NO. Counting a show of hands on that vital first motion about whether the merger should go ahead was no easy matter and at times became chaotic. It was made all the more difficult on the YES response as dozens of baying Rebels leapt to their feet and gesticulated threateningly in the direction of their opponents, some also attempting to take photographs of those indicating the affirmative.

Another factor contributing to the bad temper of the meeting was the presence of the players. They had been deemed to be members despite their status as paid servants and voted YES almost to a man.

The count eventually revealed that Inverness would live to fight another day in the Scottish League stakes. The official result was declared as 250 for the merger and 226 against. That was certainly a narrow majority in favour. At the same time the votes against may have been overstated because they were arrived at by subtracting the YES figure from the total attendance, thus assuming there had been no abstentions. The crucial factor, though, was that the Inverness dream of Scottish League football had survived - shaken, stirred but still alive.

And intriguingly, while 55-50 on September 9th amounted to 52.4% in favour, 250-226 here was 52.5%. The frantic recruitment of 400 new members had shifted Caley opinion by just 0.1%.

The remaining five motions turned out to be non-events and never - perhaps thankfully at 10pm - reached the voting stage. It was made clear that no late application from Caley would be considered while other motions were abandoned, uncontested, as irrelevant or impractical.

By this stage many of the moderate, respectable YES voters, whose interest was more in football than in internal politics, had had quite enough of the hard core Rebels' behaviour and intimidation. Having suffered it for almost three hours they began to leave the hall. But there was still another meeting to be held! The Committee had decided to attempt to go for an agreement to transfer assets that very same evening, and this would require no less than a two thirds majority.

Even if everyone had stayed on there was never any chance of that. And once the moderates started leaving in scores after the first meeting it was inevitable that the attempt would receive a crushing defeat. It was a serious mistake on the Committee's part even to think about attempting asset transfer at this stage.

That outcome at least sent the Rebels home in slightly better humour with their attention now focused on two things. Although they had been unable to get the club out of the merger, they still had political clout on the vital assets question. And now that the merger appeared to be going ahead, they could at least attempt to build an overwhelming position within it for Caley - at the expense of Thistle.

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The meeting had been a sorry state of affairs. Because of its potential to kill the Inverness campaign it was in a sense more crucial than both September 9th gatherings put together. On the other hand the town was still very far from being able to show the unified face which would be essential when the applicants made their initial presentations in Glasgow in just two weeks time. And the Rebels knew it.

So even as the First Battle of Rose Street stuttered to its conclusion after the main vote, hints of a swift change of tack began to emerge from the Rebels. Several were heard to call out "What about calling it Caledonian?" and "If the club could play in blue?" They had not been long in adopting their fallback position.

As early as the following day similar suggestions began to emerge privately from official Caley sources and very rapidly gained currency in the town. This was the beginning of the Rebels' new strategy of trying to marginalise Thistle within a new set up dominated by Caley.

By the Saturday it was clear that Thistle were already under considerable pressure to accept calling the new club Caley, playing in blue strips. Cuthbert consulted his members and fans at their match at Forres that afternoon, and the predictable response was absolute rejection. Cuthbert said: "There is no way I or any of the members or my fellow Committee members could possibly accept that. We can accept certain things but we cannot lose our identity completely."

All the same Norman Cordiner was prepared to pursue any avenue which gave even the remotest chance of the urgently needed peace. On Wednesday, December 8th he met with both the Caley Committee and the Rebels in their Social Club. What emerged was even less attractive than before to anyone whose sympathies lay on the other side of the water. The proposal involved a first team called Caley playing in blue with reserves called Thistle in black and red. The new park would be called the Thistle Stadium, perhaps with Kingsmills and Howden Ends. The spontaneous Thistle view was that this added insult to injury.

It seemed futile for Thistle even to call a meeting, but this they did at very short notice in the Haughdale Hotel on the freezing cold morning of Saturday, December 11th. Cuthbert was keen to demonstrate to the INE officials that just because Thistle's objections were not being expressed in loud and aggressive terms, they were no less real. With most of the Highland League programme on ice and some of their more fortunate colleagues playing in the first round of the Scottish Cup that day, there was little else happening.

Cordiner again spearheaded the peace mission, accompanied by INE official John Byrne who was also intensively involved in the project. Conspicuous by her absence was Fiona Larg, and for a very good reason! She had been politely informed that since women were not allowed to be members of Inverness Thistle Football Club, they weren't allowed into meetings either. Football was men's business - even to the woman who had got the two sides together in the first place.

Outside the Haughdale that morning stood a small, well mannered but utterly determined group of relatively young Thistle fans who were uncompromisingly against Caley's suggestions. Was this to be the beginnings of a Thistle Rebel movement? Many of these fans were not members but it was decided to allow them all into the meeting all the same. There was no trouble. However the Press were - as with the Caley affair - excluded from a meeting which was this time a lot more difficult to follow through the thickness of a closed door.

Cordiner received a polite hearing as he outlined the benefits of the merged club and fully explained all developments with the assistance of artists' impressions of the proposed new Stadium. His proposals about club name and colours were also listened to, although Dave Williamson and others made their dislike instantly clear. The sentiments expressed throughout were enough to show that no vote would be required. It was an unqualified rebuff.

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Thistle fans were very concerned about the loss of their club's identity.

There were now just five days left before the presentations to the League which would have a major influence on how the member clubs would vote four weeks later. A united front would simply have to be shown but the two sides were still poles apart. Without demonstrable unity and in the wake of the considerable publicity attracted by the wrangling, the Inverness case would be fatally flawed. Worse still there were real and awful fears that the Caley Rebels would stage a demonstration outside the Royal Automobile Club in Glasgow where the League was to meet the following Thursday. Across the land people were mystified as to how Inverness, which apparently had such a strong case for League membership, could be scoring so many own goals at such a critical time. The good folk of Gala, Dingwall, Elgin and Gretna must have been rubbing their hands with glee.

There was never the remotest chance of Cordiner's proposals being accepted that Saturday morning. So his shuttle diplomacy now required further consultations with Caley as an amazing weekend of negotiations developed. Caley officials and the Rebels had been in constant discussions for some days, with Miller and Falconer in the thick of it. Miller in particular was reluctant to upset any faction, preferring compromise or appeasement to confrontation.

On the evening of Monday, December 13th 1993 the Thistle Committee met in the Kingsmills boardroom. Later they were joined by Cordiner who had with him John Byrne and INE Board member Donald Morrison but once again not, by necessity, the Chief Executive. The INE chairman's evening had begun in Greig Street with the Rebels and Caley Officials at the Caley Club and now he had come "Up the Hill" in what was becoming an increasingly desperate attempt to achieve a settlement. After further discussions the INE party left on the three hundred yard trip to the Kingsmills Hotel. Here in one of the conference rooms Cordiner spoke to Caley officials and by telephone to the Rebels who by this time were playing a very prominent part indeed. They in turn were all joined by a Thistle deputation and slowly the vital peace formula emerged.

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It had three components. The first was that the new club would be called Caledonian Thistle - not a new idea but a vital half way house. That title was to take a lot of criticism as a cumbersome compromise, but it saved the situation at this desperate time. In the tense atmosphere of the day this relatively simple combination gave the Caley Rebels what they wanted while still allowing Thistle their share of the action too.

Next came the strip where Thistle made a significant concession by agreeing to the definition "predominantly blue". To many on the Caley side, this meant blue. Thistle, on the other hand, viewed this as scope to get some black and red at a later and less controversial stage. The desired effect was achieved at the time, but this particular ghost - especially the word "predominantly" - would come back to haunt the merger in the months to come.



Inverness and Nairn Enterprise Chairman Norman Cordiner: His intervention saved the merger.

Finally it was agreed that the new park - at the time a relative side issue and a long way along the road - would be called the Caledonian Stadium.

Both partners could say they had derived success from this meeting. The Caley Rebel leaders could claim victory. Meanwhile Thistle, acknowledged as the smaller component of the merger, could claim to have saved face and their identity to a very significant degree.

The real hero of the hour was Norman Cordiner who had salvaged the deal from the jaws of disaster, despite coming close to giving up hope after the Saturday meeting. But he wasn't home and dry yet. All that had been achieved on the Caley side was the approval of the Rebel leaders who still had to go back to their group for their final verdict. That meeting took place the following evening, less than 48 hours before the gathering in Glasgow. And the margins once again were tight. It was only by a narrow majority that this plenary session of the Caley Rebels - still faced with the choice between accepting the formula or forgetting about Scottish League football - agreed. Only then could Cordiner and his INE and club colleagues breathe a sigh of relief.

For the first time since their vote in September an uneasy peace reigned in the Caley camp. It was underlined by a fax sent by Beaumont to the League confirming that the differences had been sorted out. This allowed a five strong delegation to go to Glasgow on December 16th to deliver a polished and impressive presentation.

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Thistle were represented by Charlie Cuthbert and Caley by Vice Chairman Alastair MacKenzie. Bruce Hare of Percy Johnston-Marshall gave details of the Stadium, but most of the talking was done by Norman Cordiner and Jock McDonald.

The combination of the Chairman of the LEC and a man who was a legend in the Scottish game was a formidable one. No stone was left unturned from the joint footballing potential to the business and economic implications in a large and growing community which was still without a Scottish League presence. And of course there was the commitment to a stadium by August 1995.

Elgin, Gala, Gretna and Ross County also staked their claims that day, at a time when there had also been a rather less public crisis in the Dingwall Boardroom. Just before the meeting there had been a strong move to oust County's Chairman Hector MacLennan and the club very nearly came to Glasgow leaderless. However MacLennan survived at a stage where County's challenge had begun to gain a great deal of momentum. With the election now set for Wednesday, January 12th 1994, this upturn of fortunes could not have come at a better time for Ross County.

Lobbying had been intense everywhere and County were no exception, having canvassed every club in the League. Their manager Bobby Wilson was very well known nationwide and he, among others, had exploited his contacts to the full. The word was that a lot of votes were being committed to Dingwall. The progress already made since the days of amateurism and near bankruptcy in 1987 had been impressive. And although short term factors would not be a profound influence, County's Scottish Cup results that season did them no harm at all.

They were already legendary for their 6-2 trouncing of Queen of the South in the third round in 1991. But then, by miraculous fortune, they hammered poor St. Cuthbert's Wanderers 11-0 just five days in advance of the December 16th presentation meeting. Better still they went on to demolish Forfar 4-0 on the Saturday before 38 club representatives gathered to cast their votes to fill the first Scottish League vacancies for 20 years.

However in the Highland League it was Huntly who on that Saturday, January 8th were setting the pace on 42 points from 17 games. Defending champions County stayed fifth despite their other commitment at Forfar. Caley drew 1 all at Peterhead to remain second, nine points behind Huntly. Meanwhile poor Thistle, idle that day and despite their Inverness Cup success, dropped to 15th in the 18 club League. They had a mere 13 points from 15 games with just two victories, against Keith and Nairn. The heart seemed to have gone out of Thistle. Such was the state of the parties on the eve of the vote.

In Roman times Scotland was kept divided by the Antonine Wall which gave security from the warring tribes of the North to inhabitants of the Central Belt. The Scottish League had probably been even more efficient in more recent times at keeping out the Highlander. It was on Wednesday, January 12th 1994 that the bastion finally fell. And how!

The club representatives assembled in Glasgow that afternoon to cast their rather unevenly allocated votes in favour of two of the five candidates. The 12 Premier League clubs had four votes each, the same number in Division 1 had two while 14 Division 2 clubs only had one. This made 86 the maximum for any candidate.

And when the declaration was made it turned out that Caledonian Thistle had amassed the huge total of 68 votes at the top of the poll. This represented overwhelming support for the merged bid - despite all of the troubles. The Inverness dream had become a reality!

The other place went to Ross County who, very sportingly, had been seconded by Scottish Cup victims Forfar. They amassed a fine 57 votes to complete an enormous triumph for the inner Moray Firth area. This therefore brought the bonus of a tremendous, interest enhancing, moneyspinning local rivalry until one club might begin to get the better of the other in the promotion race.

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Well adrift in third place, and bitterly disappointed, were Gala Fairydean with 35 votes. Despite the backing of clubs in the Edinburgh area, the League as a whole clearly had not been impressed by the potential and football pedigree of a club based in Rugby's heartland.

But if Gala's spirits were down, the campaign had been a complete disaster for Elgin City who amassed a mere ten votes. Elgin, despite their proud record of days gone by, had been squeezed by just too many adverse factors in the face of massive opposition from two other Highland League clubs. Gretna came bottom with just two votes.

Although there had been extreme uncertainty right up to the declaration, many in the Highlands were not surprised that both successful applicants had come from that area. There had certainly been fears in Dingwall that a strong merged effort just 15 miles down the road would harm their case. However it is possible to look on this from a different point of view altogether.

Given the sheer power, attraction and compulsion of the Inverness challenge, it could be regarded as a case apart. Amassing 68 votes out of 86 goes a long way to confirm that. So if Inverness was being regarded almost in a separate category, it was less likely to interfere with the Dingwall campaign. In that case it could be said that the second vacancy was a straight and unimpeded fight among the other four and County's claim was by far the strongest. So the uniqueness of the Inverness situation perhaps actually helped Ross County.

Irrespective of rivalries both past and future, Jock McDonald and Hector MacLennan were the men in the limelight that Wednesday. The outcome was hailed spontaneously as a stunning victory for Highland League football. However the longer term conclusion in this respect would be that while it was perhaps stunning for Ross County, Caley and Thistle, the Highland League would not be beneficiaries of the outcome.

No one was more relieved than Jock McDonald who had been hoping upon hope that he would be spared the agonies he went through two decades previously. He told the world: "I still had butterflies in my stomach. After all I had sufficient pledges prior to the vote 20 years ago when my own club lost out by one vote and that was an agony I didn't want to go through again."

Meanwhile back in Inverness the party had started at INE's headquarters where club and Enterprise officials were joined by the press on a joyful occasion not only for Inverness football, but for the entire community. Norman Miller said: "It's been a long road to get this far, but I have every confidence Caledonian Thistle will make rapid progress through the League." It was a road which still had many miles to run.

Everything in the garden, however, seemed rosy that afternoon. It was easy to forget that this was only Associate Membership of the League with the delivery of a Stadium among the attached conditions. The new club was in the Scottish League with the apparently reluctant blessing, if not the encouragement, of those who had opposed it. It should now simply be a case of building on the tremendous progress which had been made over the last month and preparing for Scottish League membership.

Chapter Six

FAREWELL TO THE HIGHLAND LEAGUE

Miller's remarks at that happy gathering contained just a tinge of unease. The Cordiner deal of December 13th 1993 had allowed the Inverness case to be put to the Scottish League in an atmosphere of apparent stability. But although the ensuing Festive Season was trouble free, it was hardly a period of Peace and Goodwill to all men. The Caley Rebels were soon on the march again.

The plot had been hatched in secrecy over the Festive break. But they had decided not to go public until after the election for fear of mortally damaging the Inverness case. That fact alone is significant evidence of a switch of Rebel strategy from the lost cause of trying to kill the merger to a campaign to dominate it.

Their plan extended the ongoing hate campaign against Caley's front man Jim Falconer whom they would now try to have removed from office. Many Rebels believed that they had been steamrollered into the merger and perceived Falconer as the prime mover.

The tactic was to requisition another meeting to attempt a motion of no confidence in Falconer. The Rebels were confident of success despite not yet having won a vote on the merger. As an organised pressure group they reckoned their support was firmer on the more peripheral issues than the pro merger lobby. Their opponents had certainly managed to assemble enough backing for the life threatening votes on the fundamental merger question. However doing so on a matter of internal politics might be less likely - particularly with the threat of another thoroughly unpleasant meeting.

When this news broke less than 24 hours after the triumph in Glasgow had brought about the end of decades of isolation, Invernessians could hardly believe it.

But Jim Falconer could and his response was brief, but specific. "I just hope that they stop all this bickering and let the club go with dignity," he said. That was not to be.

The Rebels' regular Tarry Ile meetings soon broadened their scope beyond Falconer as the plot developed to have all five of Caley's principal officebearers removed. Those others targeted were Chairman Norman Miller, Vice Chairmen Alastair MacKenzie and Willie MacLean and Treasurer John Douglas.

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At this time there was a great deal of complex communication, both written and verbal, between Rebels and Committee with proposed requisitions for meetings to the fore. In the end no motion of no confidence or for the removal of anyone ever materialised at a meeting of Caley. All the same the Rebels, still deeply annoyed about the suspensions, were also intent on having the fans reinstated at the SGM, whenever it took place.

Also continuing was the court case on the original writ about the December 1st 1993 meeting. Here it took until May 26th 1994 for Sheriff James Fraser to rule that the action should have been raised against the entire Committee and not Falconer alone. The expenses of this action had been a further bone of contention. Falconer refused to "call it quits", initially leaving the Rebels with a bill estimated by Beaumont at several hundred pounds. That situation was not defused until the 1994 AGM that June where, in a conciliatory gesture, Falconer agreed not to pursue expenses any further.

Even more litigation was taking place in Elgin Sheriff Court where, three months after the event, proceedings had begun against the Rothes pitch invaders. This stuttered on for some months too, ending in an Absolute Discharge for the accused.

Caley did get limited relief from the various legal and political clouds on the horizon. In their very first game after the League election they recorded a massive club record 15-0 win over poor Golspie Sutherland in the first round of the North Cup at Telford Street. The same day, Thistle were less fortunate, going down 2-0 at home to Clach in a rematch of the previous season's final in what was also Clach's last visit to Kingsmills.

Thistle Park seemed fated. It very quickly became apparent that it simply wasn't going to be adequate to host Scottish League football, even temporarily. Telford Street was then surveyed and found to be suitable with relatively modest cosmetic surgery. This meant that the new club's most valuable asset would be tied up at least until May 1995. But on the other hand there was no sign of it becoming free for disposal anyway.

Then what appeared to be an olive branch arrived on the Caley scene. An informal meeting between Committee and Members was arranged in the Social Club for January 26th 1994 where attempts were to be made to come to some kind of accommodation.

High on the list of priorities was what Caley would do about electing their five members of the Caledonian Thistle Board. The Committee, predictably, wanted three of the places to go to existing Committee members. This would also ensure continuity of experience while the other two would be elected from the membership as a whole. Meanwhile the Rebels wanted an open vote on all five places where they believed they could make serious inroads.

Cordiner, still keeping a watchful eye on Caley, and Miller both informed the predominantly Rebel gathering of about seventy of latest progress. This in itself helped to soothe tempers because by this stage it was not only the Rebels who were beginning to complain about being left in the dark about this new Scottish League club.

Miller in particular was keen to placate as far as possible, emphasising what he saw as the strong position Caley would have in the merger. Apart from the influence he foresaw for Caley people, he stressed the blue strip and even the fact that the proposed away strip of white and red verticals was an old Caley design.

It was at this meeting that the notion of a Unified Members Club first emerged in public. This concept of a single body of membership rather than separate Trusts was rapidly pounced on, perceived instantly as a potential means of the larger component dominating the new set up. Members were also introduced to Caley's new solicitor Allan MacKenzie. From a different firm, he was to have a profound influence on the club's internal business.

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But the real event of the evening was the deal arrived at across a range of contentious issues. The proposal was that in return for the Committee lifting the suspensions, the Rebels would agree to abandon their moves to oust the senior officials and also back the 3:2 split on Directors.

The Committee retired into private session, returning to announce that the suspensions had been lifted. The other components of the deal were reiterated and there was no dissent. Remarkably, here was an outbreak of accord in the Caley camp, a sudden shaft of light at the end of the tunnel - the first since the controversy had begun. The atmosphere was transformed and many believed that peace had at last broken out. The merger wrangle appeared, all of a sudden, to be over. Beaumont certainly seemed to think so. He said that he now believed he no longer had clients and in one of the most remarkable statements of the whole Caledonian Thistle story he added:

“Knowing the people I’ve been acting for I think they always wanted it to happen, deep down, and tonight now seems to have removed a lot of the anxiety that existed and I think things will go through a lot more straightforwardly.”

Miller was also much more optimistic about the future. He said:

“After listening to the meeting tonight I’d like to think that I have to be absolutely optimistic, absolutely certain..... HOPEFULLY certain that it’s going to go through without any problems whatsoever now. I’m delighted that we’ve got it all sorted out tonight.”

Miller’s emphatic mid sentence qualification of his observation was possibly born of bitter experience of the ongoing troubles. It was also thoroughly justified because just a week later the Rebels met in the Tarry Ile to organise a coup which they hoped would land their group all five Caley seats on the new Board.

Their plan was to have the three places for Committee members overturned at the forthcoming Special General Meeting to elect Directors in favour of a straight vote for any five. And with five prearranged candidates, they aimed to focus their voting power to sweep all of the places. They claimed they had never agreed to the 3:2 split at all.

A secret ballot at the Rebels’ meeting identified their five candidates as David MacDonald, Danny Hughes, Rod MacDonald, Deryck Beaumont and Ernie Gardner. In the event of the 3:2 split surviving, they would plump for the first two named in an attempt at least to capture the two places for the general membership.

Thistle elected their three Board members on February 4th. The surprise was that the Chairman had ruled himself out as a candidate. Cuthbert had been taking on extra responsibilities in his managerial role with his firm and as a result felt unable to make the commitment.

The Jags’ trio was Vice Chairman and Secretary Scott Byrnes, Treasurer Craig Maclean and Committee member Ian Gordon with Douglas Riach and Ian MacKenzie the unsuccessful candidates.

Jock McDonald was already INE’s choice as Chairman. The LEC then nominated Norman Cordiner and Ken Matheson, a former Partick Thistle player and now a senior bank manager in the town, as their other two Directors. Caley’s choices would complete the Board.

Caley met on February 16th, again in the Rose Street Hall, to do just that and no chances were taken. Police were on duty to control an attendance of 316, with latecomers turned away.

This Second Battle of Rose Street began with a fierce argument, the Rebels pressing loudly for a simple, open vote. Miller, despite his loathing of controversy, realised that his own and his colleagues’ futures depended on holding his ground. He did so steadfastly in favour of the 3:2

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formula which had been adopted as club policy at the last Committee meeting. A Rebel attempt to achieve a two thirds majority to have the arrangements changed attracted, in line with their previous support, just less than 50%.

They also wanted a show of hands - a completely unrealistic arrangement in an emotional situation where three and then two votes were being cast by each member. Miller held out for a secret ballot against a rising tide of animosity.

The outcome was that Miller topped the Committee category with Alastair MacKenzie and Jock Price the other successful candidates. David MacDonald led the field in the Membership category from local businessman Dougie McGilvray.

Allan MacKenzie must have been confident of success because he had with him copies of a pre-prepared Press Release entitled "Caley Rebels' Board Bid Fails." However the Committee certainly had not achieved a shut out. The Rebels had at least succeeded, by concentration of force, in getting David MacDonald on to the Board, but no more. However the fact that pro-merger member Dougie McGilvray had beaten off their challenge without any stage management perhaps highlighted the extent to which his perceived merits alone had carried the day.

In the Committee category the obvious casualty was Falconer who that evening paid the price for being a front man identified as the bad guy by the opposition. What the Rebels had done was to concentrate their support on Jock Price whom they appeared to identify as the Committee candidate most politically removed from the inner circle.

The meeting, still in turmoil amid choruses of "Cheat, Cheat, Cheat" from the extremists, ended with a discussion of the future format of Caledonian Thistle. Caley's strong feeling was once again in favour of the Unified Members' Club.

Beaumont still wanted to complain about the manner in which the meeting had been held. However Miller declared the proceedings closed - twice, according to the official minute. Still far from satisfied, the Rebels' solicitor then initiated by far the strangest episode in an already strange story.

As on the previous December 1st, most of the moderates quickly left the hall in the possession of about 100 Rebels. Beaumont then mounted the stage, declaring the meeting still in progress and was duly appointed "Chairman", Miller having moved some distance away.

To roars of adulation from his supporters, Beaumont then presided over a gathering which declared the Caley Committee expelled from office. Even more incredibly, they even went on to elect their own group of five which they declared to be the new Committee. Chaos continued to reign as Beaumont defended their actions to the media and MacKenzie dismissed his claims as "a meeting among Mr. Beaumont's own supporters." Meanwhile the crowd departed noisily into Farraline Park leaving a few observers - to revert to the vernacular - gobsmacked.

No Committee member for one moment believed that anything occurring in these crazy ten minutes could ever be made to stick in law. But just to make sure, an Interdict was applied for and obtained the following day, preventing Beaumont from claiming to represent Caley in any way. This did not bar him from continuing to represent his own group. Soon after the meeting, David MacDonald conspicuously distanced himself from Beaumont's stand, saying that he would not be associated with the Rebel "committee" of which he had no knowledge. He also reserved his position even on whether he would take his seat on the Caledonian Thistle Board.

Just three weeks after Miller and Beaumont had apparently declared the controversy over, the Caley situation had plumbed depths of unreality and acrimony which even those attending the December 1st meeting would never have believed possible. It was certainly very difficult to remember that this had anything to do with football.

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With that in mind it should come as light relief to return to the park to see how the two merger partners played out their last three months of independent existence. But even that was not to be free from controversy.

For a start there was a significant change in the direction of the ongoing torrent of abuse at Caley matches. So far Falconer had been the main target, but from now on it was against Miller that the Rebel campaign was principally directed. This was apparently because he had been the one who had stood firm on the election of Directors. However there may also have been the feeling that the damage to Falconer had been done and it was time to turn on somebody else.

North Cup victories over Ross County and Lossiemouth took Caley through to what would be their last final and their last chance to win a trophy. But the silverware was not in the bag yet, at a time when the Inverness Cup, won at Telford Street in November, stood on Thistle's shelf. So at the next Derby at Kingsmills on March 6th - the last Up the Hill - the Jaggies had their reply to the taunts of the opposition. To the Welsh hymn tune Cwm Rhondda, the Caley fans asked their future partners:

**What's it like to,
What's it like to,
What's it like to play in blue?
What's it like to play in blue?**

The Thistle cohorts' response was to the same tune, although rather less repeatable. But in essence they were asking their rivals what it was like not to have won any trophies.

The honours that day went to Caley 2-1, both goals coming from Robertson while Thistle's late consolation came from MacPhee.

Three weeks later Caley were back at Kingsmills, this time to meet Forres in the North Cup Final. A poor game with very limited goalmouth action ended 1-0 for Caley. The goal came from Alan Smart, ironically the man the Rebels loved to hate. So a strange twist of fate, echoing the great days of 1988, dictated that the two clubs won their last ever trophies each at the ground of the other.



Alan Smart, whose goal won Caley their last trophy, pictured with the North Cup.

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Kingsmills made another piece of history on the last day of April 1994 when Huntly's 4-1 win over Thistle took the Highland League Championship to Christie Park for the first time in 64 years.

Thistle ended their days on a very low note indeed winning four, losing 13 and drawing three of their last 20 league matches to end up fifteenth in the table. The high spot was a 5-0 home win over Deveronvale in April. Thistle's last victory in their 109 year history was 2-1 later that month at Fort William from where Henrik Madej had come and to where his managerial skills would soon return. For the record, the last player to score a goal for Inverness Thistle was Stevie Bremner when they lost 2-1 at Keith on May 7th.

It might have been better if the two Inverness clubs could have bowed out of the Highland League with their own last local derby at Telford Street. However that was organised as the penultimate appearance for both on Wednesday May 11th.

It was a beautiful summer evening and the ground buzzed with expectancy from an early hour. The Scottish Tory Party Conference happened to be taking place in Inverness that week. As a result the game attracted not a few members of two professions naturally attracted to any tale of bizarre confrontation - politicians and journalists. Also present, as it happens, were Aberdeen trio Stewart McKimmie, Alex McLeish and Eoin Jess.

But even if one of these three had taken the field in a blue jersey, it would have created rather less of a stir than one man who did. Intimate followers of the Inverness football scene were amazed to see striker supreme Billy Urquhart, the man Caley called "The Legend", warming up with the team. Urquhart had hung up his boots a season ago and was no longer a registered Caley player. However club officials gave very short shrift indeed to queries in that direction.

Urquhart fully deserved that nickname which Peter Corbett had bestowed upon him. Now approaching 37, he had had two periods totalling 17 seasons with his beloved Caley on either side of a spell with Rangers where he had played in the Premier League and in Europe. In a club which had produced battalions of heroes, his goal scoring exploits - 392 in over 600 games - put him into a class of his own.

Caley knew they were breaking the rules by fielding an unregistered player. But apart from adding to the romance of this very special occasion the move might just appease the Rebels a little into the bargain.

The announcement of the team lines confirmed that "The Legend" was to play, to the bewildered consternation of the Thistle camp. No one was more surprised than Davie Milroy who had not expected this last encounter with his great friend, former Inverness Royal Academy team mate and intense rival for almost two decades.

Roy of the Rovers could not have made a better job of the rest of the script. Fifty minutes into a poor, scrappy game it was the head of Urquhart which rose above the Thistle defence to score the only goal - his 393rd and last for Caley. It was a perfect carbon copy of so many earlier Urquhart matchwinning efforts. For the respective sets of diehards this match was also one final occasion for mutual abuse.

**"We'll always hate Thistle,
We'll always hate Thistle,
We'll always hate....
We'll always hate Thiss - ull"**

drifted over from the Howden End in response to ...

**"We hate Caley and we hate Caley.
We hate Caley and we hate Caley.
We hate Caley and we hate Caley.
We're the Caley Haters."**

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The final encounter. Davie Milroy just doesn't want to let No. 9 Billy Urquhart go after 20 years of rivalry.

Hardly the products of a Poet Laureate. The Caley faithful stayed behind for an hour in the Howden End that night chanting their anti-merger chants and singing their songs at the end of their club's final home match. It wasn't a bad tempered episode by any standards at the end of an evening where the decision to play "The Legend" cost Caley a £200 fine. When it was levied by the Highland League Management Committee, Falconer paid it on the spot.

The curtain finally came down on both clubs' playing days on Saturday May 14th 1994 with Caley away to champions Huntly and Thistle at home to Lossiemouth.

Caley's match at Christie Park was an occasion already. This was Huntly's special day. A huge, happy, black and gold Aberdeenshire crowd turned out to soak up the carnival atmosphere, see the presentation of the League trophy and celebrate the rare event of winning it. However much of that was to turn tragically sour at the climax of the afternoon.

The Caley line up on that valedictory occasion was:- Gray, Brennan, Andrew, Noble, Sinclair,

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Skinner, Macdonald, Lisle, Mann, Mitchell, Robertson. All that needs to be said of the match was that it ended 1 all, and Wilson Robertson had the honour of scoring the club's last goal. Given that Urquhart had already had his say, that could not have been more appropriate.

What happened on the terraces was a lot more memorable - for completely the wrong reasons. As the Huntly fans did their best to enjoy the occasion, a group of Caley Rebels could do no more than chant incessant abuse at their Committee. Inevitably tempers rose in the enclosure known as "The Howlin' Shed" which was shared by both sets of fans. Following a violent flurry a small number of Caley supporters were taken out of the ground by Police although none was charged.

When the final whistle blew, some Caley fans ran across the pitch to continue their abuse at closer quarters. A coin was thrown amid howls of "Traitors" and a lot worse. This was Huntly's day of triumph on their own patch and it was sadly disrupted by the behaviour of a minority of visitors. It made for a sad and ignominious end of 108 years of proud achievement on the field of play for Caley.

Things could not have been more different 66 miles away at Kingsmills where only 300 turned out to witness Thistle's, and the park's swansong. Their last lineup was:- Calder, S. MacDonald, Stevenson, Sweeney, Milroy, McLachlan (T. MacDonald), A. MacDonald, Murphy (Bremner), Polworth, Davidson, Moir.



Goodbye to Kingsmills. Thistle manager Henrik Madej on his way to console defender Kevin Sweeney after the last game against Lossiemouth.

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The game ended in a 2-0 victory for Lossiemouth. More than a little anti merger chanting included the usual suggestions about where the arrangement should be placed. Then the final whistle blew and the emotion and the tears began to flow out. Bitterness certainly wasn't the most prominent sentiment as Thistle players, officials and fans shared these final moments of grief mingled with hope for the future as they said goodbye to their club and their ground. But it was still one of the most awkward days of Davie Milroy's long career.

"The whole atmosphere at Kingsmills Park was very difficult. It was unreal, very like going to a funeral," he said. "It was a hard day indeed, but life goes on."

There was another emotional scene there exactly a week later. On a blistering Saturday afternoon Wick Academy officials were finding it hot work loading the floodlights and enclosure they had just purchased from Thistle on to a huge lorry. A radio perched on the wall kept them in touch with Dundee United's 1-0 win over Rangers in the Scottish Cup Final.

When Thistle, Caley and Ross County resigned, the Highland League decided to fill only one of the vacancies, creating a sixteen club competition. Wick beat off a challenge from Inverurie Locos and Aberdeen Bon Accord and the purchase of Thistle's equipment would play a big part in the upgrading of their Harmsworth Park.

As the Academy officials toiled in the heat, along Kingsmills Road came a young man dressed in the green away strip which Thistle had unveiled so proudly less than a year previously. Mark Mitchell, the club's youngest Committee member and uncompromisingly opposed to the merger, stopped and looked sadly into the ground which was already visibly dismembered. With tears in his eyes he turned to the Wickers with the words "the best of luck lads" and was swiftly gone.

Although Caledonian Thistle now existed both merger partners carried on constitutional shells and therefore continued to hold AGMs.

On June 23rd Caley held their AGM in the wake of further concern that no information was forthcoming about the new club which had now been up and running at Board level for four months. A number of Caley members had also expressed doubts about the financial commitment to the Stadium of INE who were being accused of using the project to kickstart the Golden Mile development on the A96.

Caley's meeting took place at a completely new venue, the main hall of the former Inverness Royal Academy premises, now the Midmills annexe of Inverness College. Previous form suggested that proceedings could turn unpleasant which could have been unfortunate in a hall with the three largest plate glass windows in Inverness. A building more used to housing the town's academic elite sitting their Highers and staid morning assemblies was about to enter a new era. Indeed the most violent act hitherto seen there had probably been the Pirates' Chorus in a certain Gilbert and Sullivan Opera.

Out on the lawn before the meeting it was obvious that the Rebels were up to something, standing around in conspiratorial knots with delegates flitting from group to group. Inside it became quite obvious that there was a clear Rebel majority. The turnout at 300 was also smaller than before, many of the moderates apparently having stayed at home. After all there was no vital vote on the future of Inverness football at this largely internal meeting and many were reluctant to suffer more unrest unless it was absolutely necessary.

However the temperature never even got close to that of the two earlier gatherings in Rose Street. Probably the most contentious moment came when one of the Rebels asked why income from Subscriptions, shown in the accounts as £8606, did not appear to square with a membership of 576. This was a resurfacing of old Rebel allegations that memberships had been given out free to those prepared to vote YES the previous December 1st. Treasurer John Douglas was unable to give a definitive answer on the spot, but Norman Miller pledged that an answer would be forthcoming in

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due course and asked the meeting to accept the Treasurer's integrity.

As explained earlier, it was eventually established that the figure of £8606 was net of VAT and while a discrepancy of around £160 was still in evidence, this was put down to the chaotic conditions the previous November which saw over 400 new memberships flood in.

As before, Beaumont fronted the Rebel cause and again he had a formidable opponent in Allan MacKenzie. But this was effectively to be Beaumont's swansong. Since the furore at the end of the February meeting his influence had been on the wane, and after this AGM he played a rapidly less prominent part in the Rebels' affairs.

When it came to the election of five new members of committee, the Rebels struck. The pre-meeting consultations had apparently been a means of concentrating their votes on five selected candidates. A straight vote, combined with organisation which the rest of the club did not have, gave the Caley Rebels the clean sweep they had failed so conspicuously to get in the election of Directors in February.

On to the Committee went David MacDonald, Graham Chisholm, Rod MacDonald, Danny Hughes and Mike Shewan. Dougie McGilvray was this time among the establishment figures who missed out - by one vote. These appointments created a completely different political balance in the Caley Committee although they did not directly affect the operation of Caledonian Thistle. What remains a mystery is why the Rebels did not attempt to oust Falconer as Secretary which they might well have been able to do and which might have had a much more profound influence. For a start, if they had succeeded in getting their own candidate into the Secretary's job, they would immediately have had vital access to all club papers, including QCs' opinions. All the same, Caley would still from now on take a much more aggressive line with Thistle, trying to exploit their internal crisis which came to a head that week.

The AGM also considered a Paper on the proposed structure of the new club which came down strongly in favour of a Unified Members' Club instead of Trusts. The Rebels loved this. The Paper was agreed in principle and the Committee instructed to start talking with Thistle as soon as possible before reporting back. There was even an indication in principle that the assets could be handed over on this basis if all was agreed. Further accord was achieved when Falconer announced that if everything did go through he would forget about the expenses for the wrangle about holding the December meeting.

It was also agreed that the 1993 - 94 memberships would remain in force at least until a conclusion had been reached on the assets. It had been the understanding of many that this meant long enough to hold another meeting to vote on the assets. Much later the Rebels made a legal move to extend the period retrospectively with a claim that it was until the assets had actually been handed over. Apart from the false dawn in the Social Club back in January, Caley had never seemed so united.

However there was never any question of the Rebel threat entirely disappearing. Unless they got exactly what they wanted, they would be back. But just to ram the notion of unity home, Allan MacKenzie made a declamatory statement to the cheering masses that if Thistle wouldn't play ball, Caley would go it alone.

This was received rapturously but smacked rather more of histrionics than spontaneity. It now looked as if the Caley establishment was beginning to react to events and in particular the presence of five Rebel Committee members and appeared at least to be going part of the way with them. This would result in a much harder line with Thistle whose troubles, just as Caley's seemed to be easing, were only beginning to bite.

Chapter Seven

A CLUB IS BORN

Caledonian Thistle's first Board Meeting was held in Balnain House, home of traditional Highland music, on the afternoon of Thursday, 24th February 1994. One week previously, Inverness Thistle and Caledonian F.C. Ltd. had been incorporated as a Private Limited Company although it was not to commence trading until 1st June. If wrangles over the merger had not got in the way, a Board could perhaps have been in operation much sooner after the Scottish League's January 12th meeting, saving precious weeks and days.

Among the first priorities were to set up an administrative structure and to appoint a team manager. Allan MacKenzie as club solicitor was legally Company Secretary. However the Board drew on the experience of Scott Byrnes, who had done the equivalent job for Thistle for over a decade, to fulfil the function of Club Secretary, a full time paid position. Otherwise membership of the Caledonian Thistle Board was, and remained, entirely on a part time, unpaid basis. There were also Committees to be set up and the appointment of their conveners very much reflected individual experience and expertise.

Ken Matheson with his banking background led the Finance Committee. He also had a particular interest in Youth Development and ran that side of the club with ongoing input from long serving Caley Youth coaches John Beaton and Jackie Sutherland. Dougie McGilvray's business pedigree made him a suitable choice as inaugural convener of the Marketing Committee, and later on he would inherit the vital role of chairing the Stadium Committee. Norman Miller had for many years chaired the biggest football club in the Highland League so he was the best choice for the playing side. Ian Gordon's experience in the construction industry made the Ground Committee the ideal place for him, while it still appeared that the first season would be spent at Kingsmills. But when it was decided to use Telford Street instead it made sense for a Caley man Ally MacKenzie, who was also in the construction business, to take this over. Outwith the Board, Caley's own ground supremo Roy Lobban was also very much involved. David MacDonald, very much a man of the terraces, inherited the Supporters' Committee.

On the subject of a home for that first season, it very quickly became apparent that Kingsmills Park simply needed too much done to it to pass muster. Estimates had gone as high as £120,000 whereas Telford Street could be brought up to standard for around a quarter of that. In any case there

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Preparing Telford Street Park for its Scottish League debut in August 1994. Left to right - Jim Falconer, Roy Lobban, Ivan Stuart, George MacRae.

was no immediate prospect of Telford Street being released by Caley for sale, so it would be as well to move there. One urgent requirement was for turnstiles at the Away end and these eventually came from Kingsmills. Terraces had to be improved, as did toilets, while the Public Address system would need upgraded and more accommodation was required for hospitality. The whole place would also need extensively painted. Thistle were keen to have their name added to the large "Caledonian F.C." which had for years been a conspicuous feature on the roof of the stand. However they never took up the suggestion that they could do the job themselves and the stand ended its days in its original form.

Another early priority was to finalise details of a strip, within the requirements of the previous December's agreement which stated "predominantly blue". As far as many on the Caley side, and David MacDonald in particular, were concerned, this really meant "blue". They wanted the new team to play in Caley's normal first team strip. The Thistle contingent were unhappy with this, but attempts to get even black and red socks failed. What was eventually adopted was the First Team playing in blue strips with white flashes - effectively Caley colours. The change strip would be the red and white stripes familiar to Caley fans as one of their former change strips, with which Miller had tried to sweeten his members that January. The reserves would play in Thistle colours.

TWO TEAMS AND A TOWN DIVIDED

The Thistle members on the Board came in for a lot of criticism over these decisions, and none less than Scott Byrnes. What did not help his predicament was an ambiguous, throw away remark he made about the contents of the strip being more important than its colours, seen by some on the Thistle side as capitulation to Caley.

In the case of a manager, it had more or less been assumed by the public, and possibly by Caley, that Baltacha would get the job. There was still concern that he continued to live in Perth. But despite reservations on the part of some Directors, he was also the choice of the Chairman whose will finally prevailed and the Ukrainian was appointed without even an interview. Thistle manager Henrik Madej, who had felt left in the dark for some time, was offered the job of looking after the reserves which he politely declined. Before long he returned to his previous post at the helm at Fort William.

Baltacha tried to drive a hard bargain with regard to terms and conditions, but eventually a salary of around £25,000, plus bonuses, was negotiated. To progress this particular thread of the club's evolution just a little beyond where the rest of the story stands, Baltacha then over the next few months began to gather his player pool and backroom team about him.



Yes, we get snow in Scotland too! Sergei Baltacha (second left) welcomed as manager by Vice Chairman Norman Miller, Chairman Jock McDonald and Board Member Ken Matheson.

There was uncertainty, perhaps originating from linguistic problems, about his assistant. His Caley No. 2 Neil MacKintosh was originally lined up for the job but then departed from the scene amid confusion over whether he had resigned or had been told that he was no longer required. The solution which eventually emerged was to appoint Danny MacDonald as "player coach". At the height of the tension between the two partners and given that his last club had been Caley, this was a more diplomatic term than Assistant Manager, which MacDonald effectively was. Davie Milroy, the only ex-Thistle member of the backroom team, took over the reserves, fulfilling that function

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until he became manager of Forres Mechanics in 1996. Soon after, MacDonald, now recovered from a serious knee injury, became Caledonian Thistle's full time Youth Development Coach inheriting also the player-managership of the reserves.

Alex Young became trainer and Alan Smart Sen. the Chief Scout. John MacAskill of Fort William was appointed club Doctor, soon to be supported by local G.P. Ian Smith, while John King became physiotherapist.

The initial player pool for the start of the first season contained most of the Caley squad and just two from Thistle. Given that the manager was Caley, and also Thistle's poor performance of the previous season, this was not perhaps surprising. The 21 strong squad, as published in The Tartan Special Scottish Football League Review 1994 - 95, comprised:- Mike Andrew, Sergei Baltacha, Dave Brennan, Charlie Christie, Robin Gray, Alan Hercher (Capt), Martin Lisle, Danny MacDonald, Mark McAllister, Mark McRitchie, Colin Mitchell, Mike Noble, Wilson Robertson, Colin Sinclair, Alan Smart (all Caley), Jim Calder, Steven MacDonald (both Thistle) and new signings Graeme Bennett from Clach, Paul McKenzie from Burnley, Norman MacMillan from Nairn County and John Scott from Liverpool. Of these, only five, in addition to Danny MacDonald, would still be there in the club's third season. As things developed during that initial season, Baltacha eventually used a total of 29 first team players.

Where to play the reserves created considerable difficulties. The East Reserve League, which would involve a lot of travelling and expense, was considered but rejected as impractical. What was eventually settled on was the North Caledonian League which provided a handy, but far from adequate level of competition, posing what was to be a longrunning problem.

Back in the Boardroom there was a plethora of matters to be sorted out before eleven men could take the field that August. Attracting sponsorship was vital, and at an early stage there was a shirt deal with Citylink which was finally launched in July. Other smaller sponsorships were also of considerable importance and Norman Miller was particularly active on that front. Banking facilities had to be set up for a club which had no assets and no income while there were also other matters like wages, catering arrangements, programmes and stewarding. The Caledonian Centenary Club - soon to be renamed simply The Centenary Club - was envisaged as the main source of income and continued to flourish.

Admission prices for the inaugural season 1994 - 95, in line with Scottish League requirements, were initially set for the terraces at £4 for adults (£2 concessions) while Season Tickets were £50/£25. Compared with £20/£10 for Caley the previous season it was going to be much more expensive to watch this team than Highland League football.

The diversity and complexity of arrangements needed to set up a new football club, even from the shell of two old ones, was enormous and it was a race against time. But it was all frequently dwarfed in scale by the overwhelming need to deliver, as promised, a new Stadium by August 1995.

Chapter Eight

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Getting a team on to the field for the following season was in practice one of the new club's simpler tasks in the spring of 1994. Troubles over the merger were still very real, but the most urgent priority was to get the Stadium project moving as quickly as possible. The commitment to have the facility up and running by August of the following year - less than 18 months after the inaugural Board meeting - had been well and truly made.

The Stadium promise was an overwhelmingly important part of Caledonian Thistle's successful campaign for Scottish League membership and the League Management Committee would expect it to be honoured. Not for the first time, the good folk of Inverness could be forgiven for wondering if the main purpose of the whole exercise was the creation of a football team or of a Stadium.

INE had certainly been well up to speed on that particular aspect right from the word go, commissioning at a very early stage the £5000 feasibility study by experienced sports facility expert Bruce Hare of Percy Johnston-Marshall and Partners. It was the gist of his interim report which had been released, tactically, 24 hours before Caley's meeting of December 1st 1993. Intriguingly at that stage only three sites - West Seafield, Inshes and East Longman - were publicised as the most favourable of eleven initially examined.

Each site had been assessed initially by rating it on a six point scale against eleven criteria ranging from cost to planning implications and from land availability to likely appeal to the clubs. Of the eleven sites, some like Torvean Quarry, Holm Mains, Drumossie and Cradlehall, although they may have had certain positive features, were fundamentally unsuitable for a Stadium. Others such as Beechwood, Castle Heather and East Seafield might have done, but were still not rated highly enough to reach the final short list.

Hare's interim report came up with a short list of four sites, and not just the three released on 30th November 1993. The Inshes site was behind the Coop Superstore, West Seafield behind the Coach House Hotel while East Longman lay at the South East end of the Kessock Bridge. The fourth site, which was not originally mentioned by INE was Stratton Farm, a further mile out the A96 from West Seafield near the Smithton Junction. This turned out to be the strong choice of the Enterprise Company itself. At least the omission of Stratton, which was so unpopular with the

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fans, on that first occasion may have avoided further bad feeling in a very difficult situation at the end of 1993. In advance of Hare's final report in March 1994, all four sites were then subjected to further examination. In particular the views of the Police were sought on safety and security aspects.

Hare had been at pains to emphasise that at least 20 acres would be needed for the Stadium, car parking, a training ground and other peripheral facilities. Interestingly enough he also stipulated that the pitch would have to be within 12 degrees of a North - South axis which explains the layouts of the sketches he provided.

However it soon became clear that the appeal of Inshes would evaporate, principally because of the cost of the land and probable opposition from local residents. This latter consideration was more than familiar to the Caley members of the Board. West Seafield also departed the contest on the grounds of Police reservations, accessibility for pedestrians and cost of infrastructure. This left a straight fight between Stratton Farm and East Longman - and in consequence between INE and the football members of the Board.

In the three month period between his interim and final reports Stratton appears to have risen sharply in Hare's estimation. The interim report predicted only limited other uses. He initially observed:

"The major difficulty lies with the low potential this site has in terms of attracting alternative high revenue users."

He believed that Stratton would only be capable of attracting additional developments of a non retail nature such as business and industrial premises, an Exhibition Centre, corporate training facilities and possibly a relocated Auction Mart. He concluded that:

"These uses are not likely to generate an overall value that could help contribute significantly to the Stadium proposals."

And if Stratton were to attract more lucrative retail outlets more conducive to cross funding opportunities, which Hare apparently doubted, then he believed these would be likely to require substantial upgrading of the A96 leading to infrastructure costs of upwards of £2 million.

What Stratton Farm had going for it was that the land was available and likely to be modestly priced. It was the only site identified for a Stadium in the Local Plan, so planning should not be a problem. INE were also very conscious that this was one of the few places where the facility could be produced in time. It was in addition at the East end of the so called "Golden Mile" where INE were very keen to get development under way. INE also appear to have believed that Stratton Farm offered the best potential for cross funding of the Stadium which would be provided and leased to the club by a developer whose other activities in the area would in consequence benefit.

This last consideration was the one which had been the received wisdom ever since the discussions between the clubs the previous summer. It was on this basis that it had been hoped that their assets would be freed for team building. It also meant that the Stadium, like Clyde's Broadwood and Livingston's Almondvale, would be the property and therefore the responsibility of an outside body. The alternative would be for Caledonian Thistle, like St. Johnstone at MacDiarmid Park, to own, pay for and be responsible for its playing home.

In Hare's initial assessment of the eleven sites, Stratton Farm received an adverse rating on four of the eleven criteria, East Longman on one. Stratton was completely unacceptable to the merger partners. In particular Caley, who had been asked to look at it three years previously,

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were strongly against it. Situated more than a mile to the East of the existing town boundary, Stratton was a long way from the homes of the current support, particularly the mass of Caley fans who lived on the West side of Inverness. Secondly, and hand in hand with this, there was poor access by public transport. There were also the high infrastructure costs and what Hare appears to have believed to be low potential to attract other developers. East Longman was described by Hare as:

“a high profile site which offers great potential due to its prominence. The site can accommodate a 10,000 seater Stadium but has limited capacity to accommodate other uses.”

But despite this limited capacity he saw it as extremely attractive to other users. He also observed that “Both existing clubs have expressed a marked preference for this site.” East Longman, which was on Inverness Common Good land could, Hare believed, be acquired relatively cheaply. His one criticism, and it was a major one, was one of land availability where he identified the relocation of the Regional Council’s salt store and the Travelling People’s site as essential. Because of the political sensitivity of the latter it would be a lot more difficult to move than the Salt Store. Significantly, Hare also observed:

“No major abnormal (infrastructure) costs are anticipated depending, of course, on whether or not ground conditions are proven favourable after a further investigation has been carried out.”

East Longman was, in fact, an eyesore. Situated right beside the town’s dump it seemed at first sight to be a Godforsaken wilderness, lashed by winds and rain off the Moray Firth. However closer examination showed that this was in fact one of the most prominent sites in the Highlands, placed right beside the main A9 road artery.

When the “matrix scores” for the four short listed sites were added up the draft report ranked East Longman as highest and Stratton bottom. At that stage Hare had estimated that East Longman could attract at best only relatively modest cross funding of around £750,000. However when it came to Hare’s final report there appeared to have been a fundamental change in his stance and in particular he seems to have upwardly revised his opinion of Stratton Farm by a considerable amount. His final recommendation, bearing in mind that there was still a heavy emphasis on the part of many that the commitment to deliver by August 1995 was unavoidable, was:

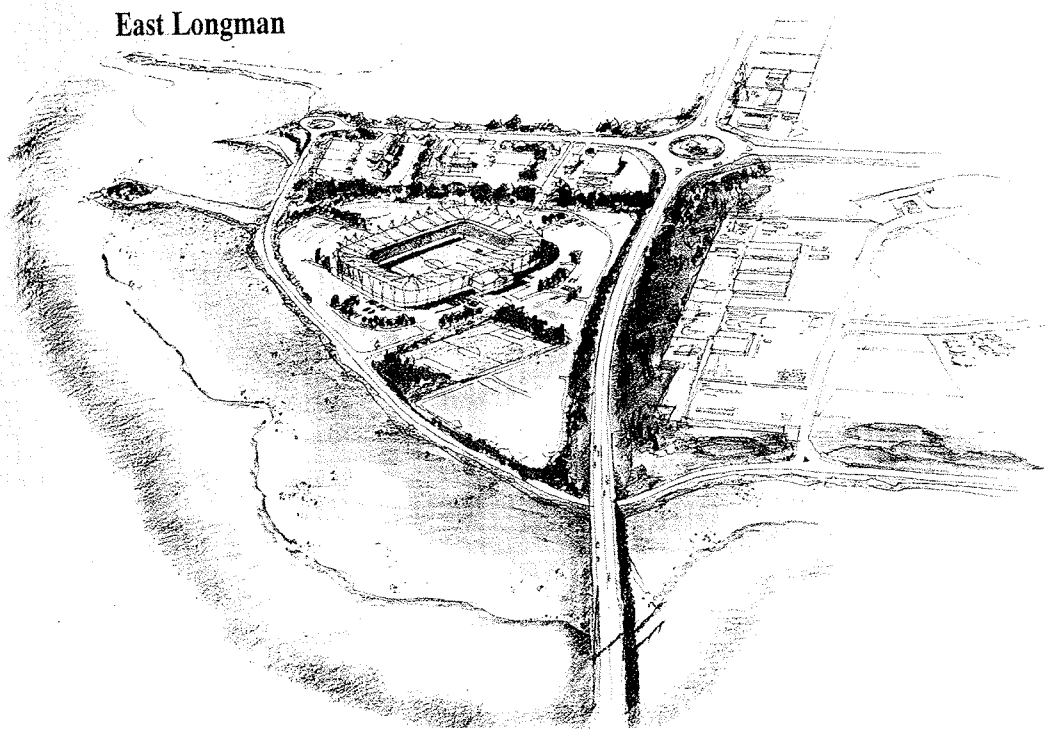
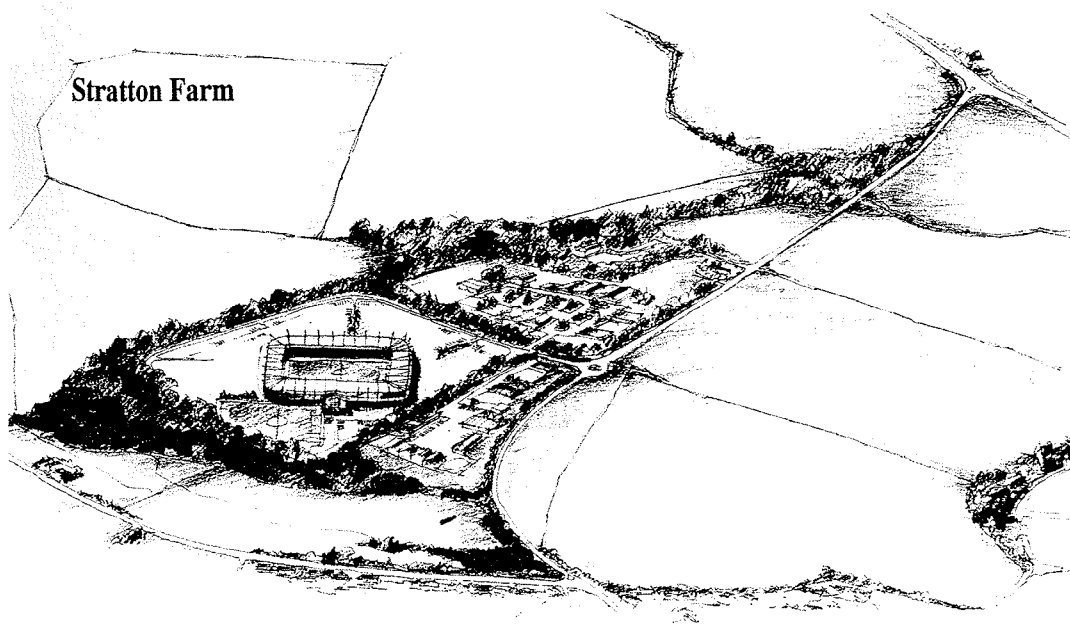
“...that Stratton Farm offers the only viable location for a Stadium complex where private sector cross funding is available within a timescale that suits the enclosed programme.”

The football interests were far from happy with this verdict and Dougie McGilvray even went as far as producing one of those “rabbits out of the hat” for which he became famous throughout the piece. An independently commissioned report claimed that Hare’s final submission did not provide the basis for a decision to be made on the best site. It further observed that:

“The conclusions and recommendations are inconsistent with the texts of the two reports, and the main recommendation is supported by very little evidence.”

This latest piece of work also cast doubt on whether a Stadium could be crossfunded at Stratton and sowed the seeds of the notion that delay beyond August 1995 for the sake of another site might not be fatal.

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Artist's impression of completed stadia at the two rival sites - from the INE commissioned feasibility study.

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So it was Stratton Farm and East Longman which met head to head in the Boardroom in April 1994, backed respectively by the INE and the club nominated directors. There was now considerable pressure on the Board to come up with a site as public and media impatience at apparent lack of progress mounted. The adverse publicity which had continued over the merger after election to the League created further urgency about coming up with some positive news.

It must have been a long and heated meeting with the three INE representatives holding out steadfastly for Stratton and the rest for East Longman. One factor which must have weighed heavily with the Chairman was the claim that Stratton offered the best chance of delivery on time, because it was on the strength of his influence and guarantees that many of the clubs had voted for Inverness. INE also believed that the other occupants of the East Longman site, the Travelling People and the Salt Store, were an insurmountable problem. At the same time they perhaps lost sight of the fact that the prime purpose of the Stadium was to accommodate a football club which expected its fans to come and support it. However it must be stressed that INE were not fundamentally against East Longman, they merely preferred Stratton. If East Longman could be made to work, they could see a lot of benefit there too. But they still resolved to hold out as strongly as they could for their preferred option.

Meanwhile the football lobby, and McGilvray in particular, were just as adamant about East Longman. This was partly on its merits as a site and partly on the strength of the inaccessibility and other perceived adverse features of Stratton.

It was a fundamental split, and it was resolved temporarily by a fudge. In a frantic attempt to show unity, the Board decided to continue to pursue Stratton, but at the same time retain the possibility of going to East Longman. A statement which was released on the morning of Saturday April 16th read:

“The Board’s consultants have identified Stratton as the preferred site and the Board has agreed to approach the owners with a view to obtaining outline plans and costs. However the Board has also emphasised that it is anxious to consider any alternative proposals put forward by other developers within the three week timescale which the Board has set itself.”

This was a case of making a statement which was literally true, but which was designed to give the impression of a much more certain situation than actually existed. A similar device would be used more than a year later when a statement of who had submitted the lowest tenders acted as a smokescreen for the fact that the Stadium and Road contracts had not yet been let for lack of confirmed finance. But in April 1994 the main public reaction was to ask what Stratton was all about. After all, those who remembered INE’s earlier statement would never have heard of it.

These were difficult early days for the Board of the new club, and for INE officials who were continuing to do so much to make it a success. For apart from the ongoing uncertainty over the site, there were also the signs of growing strains between the Enterprise Company and the football people.

Within hours of the statement, Caley’s Honorary President Hugh Crout launched a blistering attack on INE, alleging that they were merely using the Stratton option as a means of “kickstarting” the Golden Mile. Fiona Larg made just as emphatic a denial.

However things moved quickly in the direction of East Longman after that. Rapid interest materialised from local developers, with INE apparently bowing, perhaps reluctantly, to the wishes of the football interests. By the middle of May they were ready to go public on the fact that, despite the earlier statement about Stratton, they were now approaching Highland Region and Inverness District Council about leasing and planning aspects of East Longman.

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This was a major crossroads in the story of the Caledonian Stadium, for there was much more at stake here than a site. The change to East Longman also fundamentally changed the basis of funding and ownership of the facility. It had so far been envisaged that at Stratton the club would be tenants of cross funded premises. Now, with less apparent scope for cross funding, they would more likely be owners of their own Stadium funded, among other sources, by their own assets. So it was at this stage that the proposal to use a million pounds in assets for team building, which had occupied such prominence in the run up to the merger votes, died a death.

It was also here that Inverness District Council became significant players in the story of the Football Club, a role which the Council would retain almost until it went out of existence in April 1996. On that basis it is perhaps appropriate to examine the Council's internal politics with respect to the Club.

The role of Inverness District Council in the creation of a Football Stadium at East Longman has been as immense as it has been complex. It was deeply involved and contributed decisively in the crucial aspects of site provision and finance. Indeed when Inverness District Council was finally succeeded by The Highland Council on April 1st 1996, it had a wide range of Leisure and Recreation provision to its credit. The town's long awaited Sports Centre at the Bught was well established, a huge Aquadome next door was under construction and the Football Club had its Stadium site, although there was still a major hitch with the Council's contribution to the finance. However this was a Council which was deeply divided over this whole issue and that division for a time spread well out into the community.

Much of it boiled down to the principle of whether public assets should be given to what was in effect a private company. Some of the arguments had already been rehearsed at the Council when Caley were pursuing their Carse scheme and this time battle lines were redeployed on a similar basis. One tactic which had already been well used on that previous occasion was that of delay. The spectre of the deferment of a decision would again arise more than once in a situation where time was of the essence. The Council certainly appeared to have difficulty coming to a controversial decision, particularly where football was involved.

Councillors were divided into well defined camps for and against the principle of giving Caledonian Thistle Common Good Land, and later Public money. As time went on these two camps would move further and further apart. There were also a few waverers in the middle whose crucial votes were wooed more and more vigorously as the plot developed.

As for the Senior Officials, they were there to offer advice to Councillors on the basis of their professional expertise and professional judgement. Frequently the tone of that advice did not encourage or expedite any assistance to the club. Indeed one individual was alleged at a later stage to have said that the club would get its £900,000 "over my dead body."

The club had not been up and running for long when it was decided to appoint a Stadium Committee rather than have the Board deal with all aspects of this vital element. It was McGilvray who was chosen to chair this particularly important body and this was the beginning of a meteoric rise through the Caledonian Thistle hierarchy.

A native of Arrochar at the head of Loch Long, Dougie McGilvray came to Inverness in 1966. He had not been in town for long before he was asked to sign for Clach but had to turn the offer down because he couldn't afford the time off work! Unlikely though it may have seemed at the time, that decision may have had a profound influence on the future course of football in Inverness. The Clach connection unmade, McGilvray, who did find time to play at Welfare level, went on to forge strong ties with the other two clubs. His principal allegiance was to Caley where he sat on the Committee for a time, but he was also a Life Member of Thistle. This unusual situation made him more

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acceptable than most senior figures to the rank and file of both clubs at times of crisis. He also had a strong track record as a benefactor of sport. A former rally driver himself, he sponsored both cars and events. Other sports to benefit included athletics and football where he helped all three Inverness clubs at various points.

From an engineering background, McGilvray had worked on a number of projects in the Inverness area. These included the Kessock Bridge where his project manager's office was on the very East Longman site on which he was about to try to have a Stadium built! In 1979 he branched out on his own to found Weldex (International) Offshore Ltd. It began life as a small concern servicing items of plant but steadily grew into Scotland's largest and most modern crawler crane hire company with contracts all over the world. It was the drive, energy, determination and sheer optimism which had been behind the rise of Weldex that was now to be channelled in the direction of Caledonian Thistle. "Dougie Weldex" was in many ways the wheeler dealer par excellence. Never prepared to admit that he was beaten, he would so often come up with the most unexpected eleventh hour changes of tack and often, against the odds, make them work.

The town of Inverness is particularly fortunate in the scale of its Common Good Fund which runs to tens of millions of pounds, principally in shares and in property and land in the area. The Fund is specifically for the benefit of Inverness and income is almost £1 million per annum. In addition, rates collected from Common Good property go to the Rating Fund. Part of the Common Good Fund's lands was the site at East Longman which it was now proposed should be let to Caledonian Thistle. Those in favour argued that the town's Football Club entering the Scottish League certainly contributed to the Common Good. Those against claimed limited interest in the club which they dismissed as a private company and pointed towards the loss of revenue if this land became unavailable for commercial development.

On June 9th 1994 a Special Meeting of the District Council's Policy and Resources Committee agreed unanimously to invite Caledonian Thistle to consider the let of between 9 and 10 acres of land at East Longman for a Football Stadium and car parking. The rental would be determined by the District Valuer, the lease would be a long one and there would be no commercial outlets on the site.

Highland Region's Director of Planning Richard Cameron, who was also present, advised of possible complications over traffic control, proximity of the foreshore and a nearby gas pipeline. That did not prevent a delighted McGilvray from unveiling a draft plan to the meeting.

But by the time the Full Council got down to considering the Committee's recommendation at the end of the month, the goals had been moved. The club was now asking for an extra 5.75 acres for a training pitch and extra car parking which sent the matter back to Policy and Resources.

On a number of occasions throughout the process of agreeing details of a site and latterly funding as well, the club changed its stance. Frequently it ended up asking for something different and often more than had previously been on the table and this continual moving of the goals often exasperated Councillors and Officials alike. Looked at from the club's point of view, once they settled on East Longman as their preferred site, they were working in a very marginal area. Time was tight, so was finance. Planning requirements would turn out to be stringent and in effect they were trying to pass a camel through the eye of a needle. The only way that can be done outwith the Kingdom of Heaven is bit by bit.

At the next Policy and Resources meeting it was observed that leasing the East Longman site to Caledonian Thistle would amount to a very large donation to them from the Common Good Fund, given what could be earned from an industrial or commercial tenant. Enter then Craig Phadrig Councillor Ron Lyon who was to become the most consistent critic of Council assistance to the Football Club.

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Ron Lyon was a local journalist of 40 years' standing and News Editor of The Inverness Courier. He was a man who was not for turning. When he came to a viewpoint he stuck with it through thick and thin for as long as he believed it to be valid. And in this case he believed passionately that no public assets should go to help a private company. He was not impressed by any claims that Caledonian Thistle was a community entity. The general issue of assistance to the club was to appear on and off for almost another two years and when it did so, Councillor Lyon was consistently in the vanguard of the opposition.

In the end, Policy and Resources recommended the original request for 9.03 acres, but not the additional 5.75. However passage through the Full Council on 25th July was still complicated. Director of Finance Alan Imlah said that the pros and cons of such a lease should be examined more closely and also stated.

The club still had to provide the District Council with a Business Plan and no planning application had yet been lodged with the Region. This prompted Lyon to dismiss the proposed lease as "premature and ill advised". However it was also recorded that the proposal to grant the lease was supported by INE and its parent body Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

The conclusion was reached when Provost W.A.E. Fraser proposed that the 9.03 acres should be leased at £10,000 a year for 99 years, provided the club "used its best endeavours" to incorporate "Inverness" into its name and call the new facility "The Longman Stadium." The Council felt that it could not strictly impose these conditions, but they were stressed as important. Provost Fraser's motion was seconded by David Munro while Lyon's amendment, seconded by Alastair Sellar, asked for a deferment pending further details on the club's financial standing.

The Provost's motion was carried by 17 votes to 7 and Caledonian Thistle had somewhere to build a home. It was still



Provost W.A.E. Fraser played a significant part in obtaining the Stadium site and latterly in the question of the £900,000 grant. Pictured here cutting the first sod with Dougie McGilvray.

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rather small and there could be no training pitch. There was also the considerable hurdle of planning as well as the Travelling People and the Salt Store, and finance would be a long term headache. But it was a start.

It would still take some time to negotiate the lease of the East Longman site which was eventually increased to 12.88 acres at a rent of £12,500 to accommodate requirements relating to the gas pipeline. But the next urgent task was to enter what turned out to be a lengthy round of negotiations with and considerations by Highland Region's Planning Department and Committee.

Before that there was a major revelation on the funding of the Stadium. On September 20th McGilvray announced that it could be paid for without the assets of either club if private finance were used and the facility leased by the club. Emerging at a time when neither warring merger partner looked ready to transfer assets, this opened up a complete new can of worms, not only with regard to the Stadium but also with regard to the make up of Caledonian Thistle F.C. It was also possibly a warning to Caley and Thistle that they might both become dispensable.

Around the same time a Planning Application for outline consent had been lodged, and inevitably there were objections. One of the less predictable ones which hit the headlines came from the Inverness Harbour Trust and the Northern Lighthouse Board who were concerned that the glare from the floodlights might interfere with navigation to and from the Harbour. Some more colourful speculation even envisaged blinded mariners crashing into the Kessock Bridge! This was just the kind of bizarre scenario which the media, already sensitised by some of the stranger storylines the club had generated, latched on to with glee. This was the one everyone remembered, but it was in fact sorted out relatively quickly.

The next big milestone was the HRC Planning Committee meeting of 14th December 1994 to decide on whether to grant the club outline permission to build their Stadium at East Longman. From the start it was made clear that this would not be a simple decision and among those who expressed their reservations was the Council's Vice Convener Peter Peacock. It was Director of Planning Richard Cameron who put the whole issue into perspective, echoing Peacock's doubts at the same time. He told the meeting:

"This is a prominent site in terms of the whole of the Highlands. More people will pass this site than anywhere else in the Highlands. I don't think this is the right site for a football Stadium. I would have much preferred the Golden Mile... I have said that if they want to put up a concrete block building with a corrugated roof, that would not be acceptable to this Council. We want something that the area can be proud of. Nothing less will do."

This was confirmation, if any was needed, that there would be no cheap options on the table. The Committee eventually approved the application on the motion of Councillor Tom Mackenzie, seconded by Provost Fraser. Even then a total of 22 conditions were imposed, including aspects of land reclamation, sea defences, parking, landscaping and most importantly an access road. Richard Cameron was intent on reiterating his insistence on a quality structure. Three weeks later he said:

"With such a big building we need something of a very high design quality. We expect that from the applicants and we're not going to accept anything less."

Meanwhile relations between club and future landlords were beginning to deteriorate. Early in 1995 there was a public wrangle between the two about the holding of a meeting, the District Council denying that they were impeding such an encounter with the club. Furthermore, the District's Director of Administration Tom McNeil described progress with Caledonian Thistle over

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the promised business plan as "alarmingly slow." The whole process leading up to the commencement of construction could be similarly described, at a time when, as far as the SFL were concerned, the Stadium was still due to open in August of that year.

But by this time it was becoming perfectly clear that the much publicised commitment of a Stadium in operation by August 1995 was not going to be realised. Even by the previous autumn, McGilvray was talking about something running at just 2000 capacity by the following August, rising to 5000 by December. Then by February 1995 the word was that the club would ask the League for an extension on the whole project to December. The final bombshell burst on March 17th when McGilvray revealed that the previous day they had met the League and asked for an extension of a full year until the beginning of season 1996-97.

The League's response was remarkably positive, Secretary Peter Donald saying that although the Stadium was still a matter of urgency, it was his personal view that his Management Committee would look on the request sympathetically. And so it transpired. A delay of one year was quickly sanctioned by the League.

Given the many hitches, and that the site had not even been confirmed until just 12 months before the proposed opening date, it had been inevitable for some time that the Stadium would never appear on schedule. Furthermore the Planning situation was far from straightforward, creating further lost time, with Full Planning Consent still to be obtained. Coming at a time when the merger situation still had some way to go, their tolerance may be viewed as a commendable act of faith by the League. But by this time the new Inverness club was more than half way through its first season, and performing solidly if not spectacularly. There may have been some at the League who felt inclined not to give Caledonian Thistle the benefit of the doubt. If so they probably came to the same eventual conclusion as Macbeth did once external forces began to overwhelm him, that "returning were as tedious as go o'er."

But by now events in the Boardroom and the Council Chamber concerning the setting up of the new club and the provision of a Stadium have overtaken the individual fortunes of the two merger partners. When we last left these two chapters ago, Caley seemed to be coming to terms with itself just a little. But that was only at the expense of a more aggressive stance towards Thistle on which the spotlight must now fall.

Chapter Nine

SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

It was a highly emotional afternoon at Kingsmills when Thistle played their last game against Lossiemouth on May 14th 1994. Many of the black and red faithful had been in tears, but for a few there was more than a tinge of bitterness too. Some Thistle fans were still far from happy at what they believed to be a balance of power within the new club which was skewed excessively towards the Caley side.

They had been through the trauma of the pre-Christmas wrangles over the name. After that they had had to bear the taunts of Telford Street about what it was going to be like to play in blue. And in May the Caley Rebels were still very much on the march and demanding appeasement. So a faction of Thistle fans always felt they were continually looking over their shoulders for the next move which might threaten to squeeze them out of the equation altogether.

In particular many Jaggies were very wary indeed of the concept of a Unified Members Club with its apparent potential for the larger partner to grab control. Apart from that there was still some unhappiness, albeit far from overwhelming, about Thistle going into the merger at all. That, however, was soon to grow.

Much of the problem was again down to the fact that this was an unequal merger and the precise degree of inequality would take some time to settle. But at this stage there was an increasing feeling among a section of Thistle that the pendulum had swung too far in Caley's direction.

One who subscribed to this view more than most was an 18 year old trainee clerk called Martin Ross. He had been introduced to the Thistle persuasion by his great uncle who took him to matches when he was a youngster. Just too young to have sampled the glorious defeat at Parkhead, his first season on the terraces was the League Championship one of 1986-87. This left a strong enough impression to lead him at the earliest opportunity to become a Life Member and, by his own admission, "a Thistle diehard."

Ross may have been a diehard by philosophy and commitment, but that was where the similarity ended. Quietly spoken, conspicuously polite and mild mannered, Martin Ross was never once heard to raise his voice during a legal campaign which he waged almost single handed for over a year. But although his personal style could not have been more different from that of some of the Caley Rebels, he was just as stubborn in his resolve. His determination not to let go was just as great and he was no less a thorn in the flesh of the Thistle establishment. In his own quiet way this one teenager in some

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respects created just as formidable barriers for the merger process as the entire Caley Rebel movement.

Ross believed passionately that Thistle had lost out on their fair share. He had voted NO the previous September, but said he was prepared to accept the democratic decision of the membership at that point. This may explain why he had remained silent for so many months, only breaking forth when he believed he saw an injustice from outside. He was also completely uncompromising about what he wanted for Thistle. Despite the undeniable features of imbalance, he believed that the merger should be an equal one.

If there was any one episode which goaded Martin Ross into action it was the sight of his team leaving the field for the last time in an atmosphere of such emotion. The effect was compounded by the sale of the lights and enclosure to Wick Academy a few days later. Around the same time he began to wonder how the transfer of Thistle's assets would be decided on, given that Caley couldn't dispose of theirs without another vote. He put that question to Cuthbert who still believed that the 33-12 from the previous September was enough to secure the asset transfer which the teenager was now so keen to stop.

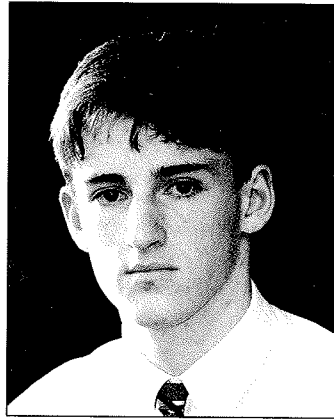
Before long Ross was in the office of Inverness solicitor Ken MacLeod who was no stranger to football, having in 1990 been at the centre of the salvation of Clach, of which he became a director. It was to be a longstanding alliance between the youngster and the man who became the latest member of the legal profession to mount the Caledonian Thistle conveyor belt.

"At first I just wanted to know what my rights were as a member of Thistle and Ken MacLeod explained these to me fully," said Ross. "I had spoken to a number of people and none of us knew the Thistle position. I felt it was all heavily weighted towards Caley and before long I decided that something had to be done. In particular I didn't want Thistle's assets to be handed over just like that."

Towards the end of June 1994 there was the astonishing revelation that an eighteen year old trainee clerk had thrown a massive spanner in the works of the merger process by obtaining an interdict preventing Thistle from handing over their assets to the merged club. The interdict was a complex one covering around a dozen different points, some more important than others.

One essential feature was that it did not forbid sale of Kingsmills Park, it only prevented the handing over of the proceeds to Caledonian Thistle. This was something which Thistle's solicitor Moray Macdonald, who was set for one of the busiest summers of his career, was at pains to emphasise. Over the next several months there were various journeys to Inverness Sheriff Court where the terms of the interdict were debated and fine tuned. The most significant of these was an additional item which prevented even the sale of Kingsmills for anything less than the valuation price which was by then believed to be around £500,000. And by way of further complication, Ross was making the strong contention that Thistle's constitution could not be changed to facilitate asset transfer because its wording prevented alteration unless there was a 100% vote in favour.

This had many of the hallmarks of a one man show, but Ross was not quite alone. He had full support from that ultimate Thistle diehard, former Chairman Dave Williamson. His other main ally was Committee member Mark Mitchell, the young man who had had the emotional encounter with the Wickers as they removed their purchases from Kingsmills Park. A few other Thistle members agreed, along with some fans, but it was never much more than a handful out of a much smaller membership than Caley's, and never enough to win any vote. But for a long time the law achieved their objectives for them.



Martin Ross

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When faced with questions about where his finance was coming from Ross, although hinting that he had backers, always steadfastly refused to reveal their identity. It has been speculated that he was the puppet of an alternative strategy of the Caley Rebels who were helping him when they could. He was certainly seen meeting them on one occasion but he would admit to no more than that. For Caledonian Thistle this was the "Double Whammy". Because Caley had been unable to realise two thirds support, their asset transfer could not take place. And now this youngster had, incredibly, tied up Thistle's worldly goods - possibly for ever. Just as the Caley Rebels were perhaps showing signs of quietening down, although not cooperating, there emerged this formidable new threat.

However Ross was not the first person in the Thistle camp to express dissatisfaction. There had already been unrest at Committee level where there was a growing feeling among some of the ordinary members that the office bearers had been conceding just too much to Caley. As early as May 8th, when Thistle still had two games to play, the ordinary Committee members held their own meeting, called by Douglas Riach and Ian MacKenzie. Here they framed a demand that the Office Bearers should transact no further merger business without the entire Committee present. (This meeting was held in the Mercury Hotel which very soon after was renamed The Inverness Thistle! So with a Caledonian Hotel having existed in the town for decades, the separate names of both clubs have survived in this unexpected way.) This led also to a proposed vote of no confidence in Secretary Scott Byrnes who was perceived as being particularly amenable to Caley's wishes. There was also an amazing attempt by Thistle to move the goals following the watershed agreement of the previous December. In particular they wanted to call the club Inverness F.C. playing in neutral colours. This was quickly rejected.

When Riach later went public on the issue of Thistle's status in the new club, he and his allies were for a time almost as adamant as some of the Ross faction that Thistle should come out of the merger. But once he began to see hope for his club again he used all of his energies to fight for its status, sometimes speaking out despite instructions that public statements should come from Cuthbert alone. Riach believes that he came close to heading off the Martin Ross situation before much of the damage was done. Shortly after the interdict was obtained he met the youngster and his mother at the Ross family home, hopeful that an earlier telephone conversation held the key to a possible solution. Riach was prepared to guarantee that a better deal for Thistle could be obtained in terms of colours, name and the other disputed elements. However the meeting ended in deadlock and the interdict stood.

Here was a new football club with no immediately available assets, requiring to undergo a major unification process and to put a team on the field in the Scottish League in just six weeks time. Sections of both sets of fans were violently at odds with their own establishments. Public confidence was also threatened as some areas of the media became more and more critical of this ever more complicated affair. What also surfaced very rapidly and even more ominously was a threat to the very future of the merger through a split between the two partners. The "go it alone" notion had already been touted from the platform at the Caley AGM and now a number of Thistle fans were clamouring to get their club out of the arrangement.

Inevitably this led to questions from the media to the Scottish League about what would happen if the merger fell apart. Secretary Peter Donald's response left little room for optimism. As far as the League were concerned, they had accepted a merged bid from Inverness and if that was not delivered, his Management Committee would have to examine the situation closely and critically. Once again the town's Scottish League future appeared to be on a knife edge.

The Thistle dissidents were now very much on the warpath. A Special General Meeting was requisitioned for July 7th 1994 to discuss the club's role and status in the new arrangement, amid growing concern.

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The catch phrase in the Thistle camp was "This is not a merger, this is a takeover." There was some justification for such a sentiment too, despite the necessary inequality of the union which was reflected in the agreement brokered by Norman Cordiner the previous December. Since then, Thistle supporters had been dismayed to learn that the Board had agreed that a "predominantly blue" strip meant "blue". Then there were louder and louder calls from the Caley side for the Unified Members Club which carried the potential for Thistle to be voted off the face of the earth. With Telford Street now fixed as the new club's temporary home, there were already rumours that it would be a shrine of blue and white to a far greater extent than when Caley played there. Everything about the new club came over as blue while early signs were that the local community were simply referring to it as "Caley".

But with the appeasement of the Caley Rebels a high priority, there was considerable pressure on the club to come over in this way and inevitably this rubbed off on the media too.

The biggest share of the blame was being laid at the door of Byrnes who in particular stood accused of supporting the new team playing in a plain blue strip. As a result the Secretary was at the receiving end of most of the criticism at the July 7th meeting.

That gathering agreed that the two merger partners, plus the new club and INE, should meet soon so Thistle could try to get a better deal. Failing that, a further SGM would be called to vote on a motion to pull out. What Thistle now wanted was movement away from all blue team colours, a change of name to Inverness Football Club and an extra Director on the Board. But apart from the fact that much of this was contrary to earlier agreements to which both clubs had been party, Caley were hardly in the mood to make such concessions.

Inevitably Thistle got no joy out of their appeal for better terms, but before even that could be established, Scott Byrnes resigned from the club. At a Committee meeting on July 11th, when Cuthbert was on holiday, he put forward three proposals relating to the merger. He failed to receive a seconder and left. The minute of the meeting records that:

"Conceding that he was perceived by the Members as doing a poor job as a representative of Inverness Thistle on the Board of Caledonian Thistle, Mr. Byrnes then formally resigned his positions as Vice Chairman and Secretary of Inverness Thistle and his position as a Director representing Inverness Thistle on the Board of Caledonian Thistle."

However he later told the author that he had not resigned from the Caledonian Thistle Board and that the question had not even arisen at the last Board meeting.

With their partners clearly unwilling to move an inch, Thistle's next step was to call the other SGM for August 11th - this time to vote on a resolution to pull out of the merger altogether. But things were to get a lot worse in the three weeks between the calling and the holding of this meeting.

On the evening of Thursday July 28th, representatives of both clubs met in the Caley Social Club in a twice delayed attempt to sort out some kind of accommodation. Charlie Cuthbert, Ian Mackenzie, Ian Gordon and anti-merger Committee member Mark Mitchell attended for Thistle with Norman Miller, Jim Falconer and Rebel Committee members Danny Hughes and David MacDonald there for Caley. It was a controversial, bad tempered and stormy affair which left the Thistle delegation with very little hope for the survival of the merger. Their opposite numbers, and in particular the Rebel representatives, had taken a very hard line indeed, focusing in on the interdict which froze Thistle's assets.

Caley's position was that Thistle would have to be able to commit their assets to the new club at their forthcoming SGM, otherwise they should get out of the merger and leave Caley to go it alone. Notwithstanding the apparently intractable position into which Thistle had got themselves, this was

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a remarkable attitude to take. Caley's own assets, despite their general statement in principle at their AGM, were still well and truly tied up because they had not raised the two thirds majority to hand them over to the new club. Caley effectively wanted Thistle's assets long before they would be able to deliver their own. More crucially they were presenting Thistle with an ultimatum which they knew perfectly well could not be delivered.

It was Ian Gordon who articulated Thistle's dismay at the outcome. He said:

"The ultimatum of the acceptance of a Unified Members' Club was not acceptable to the Thistle members and we got the option that if this was not complied with then the withdrawal of use by Caledonian Thistle of Telford Street Park would be threatened by the Caley members present. Inverness Thistle have always maintained that this is a merger and not a takeover. If anything is going to save the merger now, people will have to stand up and be counted for the promises they gave in the past and stick their necks out and nail their colours to the wall."

In a Caley Press Release the following day, Friday 29th, Jim Falconer said:

"There is no point in having further talks with Thistle while the Thistle assets are in limbo. If Thistle do not make a decision on 12th (sic) August then Caley will just have to get on with it. However, Thistle members who support the merger can always vote with their feet and come and join the new Club as members of Caledonian Thistle."

Caley's hawkish stance partly reflected a genuine impatience with Thistle but also a need on the part of the moderates to appease the Rebels who were obtaining a much harder line from the club since they got their five committee members. Meanwhile the public could not help but compare the squabbling with the bitter ethnic strife which was going on in the former Yugoslavia that summer.

This created the worst possible atmosphere that Friday morning. It was just 24 hours before the team's very first match, a friendly against St. Mirren at Telford Street. Worse still, Caledonian Thistle's first major sponsorship with Citylink was to be launched that lunchtime. As this important financial backing was unveiled and the players prepared to take the field for the first time, the very future of the club teetered on the abyss.

The Scottish Citylink deal included the provision of team and supporters' buses for the next two seasons. At the launch in the Haughdale Hotel, Jock McDonald was assailed by more questions about the future of the merger and of Inverness in the Scottish League than about the sponsorship. He made as brave a face of it as he could.

"It's vital for the people of Inverness that this gets sorted out," he said. "The new Football Club is in existence. It's registered and will take the field tomorrow as Caledonian Thistle. These problems will hopefully be resolved as the season goes on. The merger has taken place already. We have a new club in the Scottish Football League. (If Thistle pull out) it will still perform in the Scottish Football League this year."

When asked about what would happen in future years if Thistle withdrew, McDonald's response was characteristically blunt. "I'm not a mind reader. If I could tell you that, I would."

It was inevitable that just two weeks before the start of the season, with fixtures drawn up, the new club would have to be left in for a year, whatever happened. Jock McDonald believes that at this stage opinion within the League was beginning to swing in favour of a more tolerant attitude to the

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union disintegrating, but the official policy was still very much "the merger or nothing." The only qualification, and a wise one given the unpredictability of the situation, was that any change of arrangements - and many were possible - would first be referred to the Management Committee.

When 850 fans arrived at Telford Street to see the new team for the first time on the Saturday, they soon realised that the orgy of blue and white around the ground was indeed far more extensive than it had ever been in days gone by. Gallons of Caley colours had been applied throughout and not a few of the willing workforce of painters had been Rebels. It seemed that the only evidence of black and red was on the caps of the employees of the company engaged to steward the matches. That, however, had not quite been the case for a day or two.

Shortly before the ground opened to the public, black and red paint was discovered on one location - the urinals in the gents' toilets! In the nick of time the situation was saved by several coats of a different colour. It was also at this time that a sign appeared above the main entrance to the ground which proclaimed "Welcome to Telford Street Park - Property of Caledonian F.C." That was to remain in place for eight months as a source of considerable embarrassment to the new occupants.

That first friendly produced very little atmosphere. Given the extremely strained circumstances and the fact that this was a completely new team, this is hardly surprising. The Buddies cruised to a 3-0 victory - exactly the same score as at Love Street in 1987 when they beat Caley on their way to winning the Scottish Cup.

At this early stage the team had a predominantly Caley look about it with substitute goalkeeper Jim Calder and right back Steve "Biscuits" MacDonald the only ones to have played in black and red the previous season. The very first Caledonian Thistle lineup was:- MacRitchie (Calder), Brennan (S. MacDonald), McAllister, Andrew, Scott, Noble (Hardie), D. MacDonald, Lisle (Mitchell), Hercher, Presslie (Smart), Robertson.

Meanwhile Caledonian Thistle's crisis had not gone unnoticed 200 miles away in the Borders. On August 3rd Gala Fairydean Chairman Matt Hall launched a counter offensive, claiming that if Inverness couldn't get its act together as promised then his club should be allowed to take up the vacancy instead. He then shot himself in the foot and alienated his cause with an obscure threat of legal action, but not before Fairydean wrote to the Scottish League claiming:

"It is therefore ludicrous that a 'non club' should continue to fill a position in the Third Division. Their application is now void as they are unable to fulfil the criteria for Scottish League membership."

For a day or two there was even the fear that Gala's threat might extend to an interdict preventing the Inverness team from taking part in the League, but all soon went quiet again as Hall perhaps began to realise that he had overstepped the mark. The League Management Committee were quick enough to reject firmly the assertion that Inverness was failing to fulfil its obligations and little more was heard from Gala. All the same there soon followed a shot across the bows of the warring Inverness factions from League Secretary Peter Donald.

"If there were to be a material change in the structure of the club, that is obviously something that the League would be interested in, and if it were to be effectively a one club entity that may well place membership in jeopardy," he told The Inverness Courier. "It is only Caledonian Thistle which is playing football in the Scottish Football League and those allied to the cause of Caley or Thistle are really talking about clubs that no longer exist. In the longer term if there was to be some kind of rift in the club, that is certainly something which would be of concern to our Management Committee."

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So having almost failed to get to the starting line because of the Caley troubles, the new Inverness club, having won the race into the League, was in danger of being disqualified because the two partners could not get on.

The \$64,000 question appeared to be "When is a merger not a merger?" Few seemed to have the answer, including INE who said that they now feared that the club was acquiring a credibility problem which would not help the attraction of sponsorship support. Even Invernessians were becoming bemused, amused and confused at a situation which their local knowledge at least helped them partly to understand. But throughout the rest of Scotland - and the notoriety of the situation had also penetrated South of the Border - Inverness's high profile squabble was not understood in the least and was earning the town much ridicule.

Then a ray of hope for the following week's Thistle SGM emerged through a statement from Charlie Cuthbert that a possible peace formula could be in the offing. He would say very little about it, apart from the fact that it was being negotiated with the Caledonian Thistle Board and INE. The rumour machine said that it had something to do with the colour of the strip, but even if belated progress was being made, the merger arrangement was still in very deep trouble.

It was ironic that Thistle's critical meeting to determine whether the club would go ahead as planned was scheduled for two days after the team first kicked a ball in anger and two days before its debut in the League. Caledonian Thistle played its first match as a Scottish League club away to East Stirling in the first round of the Coca Cola Cup on the evening of Tuesday, August 9th 1994. A lot of people had come through Hell to get the team that far.

It was to be a triumphant baptism. Just as Wilson Robertson had scored Caley's last goal, he also scored Caledonian Thistle's first in the 34th minute of that cup tie at Firs Park. A later own goal sent the Inverness team home 2-0 victors in their first competitive game, their Chairman loudly proclaiming that he was "very, very proud of them."

This certainly didn't look like the performance of a club which in 48 hours time could face constitutional disintegration leading to possible expulsion from the Scottish League.

On Thursday, 11th August, Thistle members expected that they would vote themselves out of the merger. The local community expected the same. But none of them reckoned on the resourcefulness of INE's Business Development Manager John Byrne.



Putting a brave face on it. Thistle Committee members going into the SGM which could have voted their club out of the merger. (left to right) Douglas Riach, Mark Mitchell, Charlie Cuthbert, Ian MacKenzie, Renato Turriani, Craig Maclean, John Falconer, Ian Gordon.

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Earlier that day Byrne framed a letter to Cuthbert which was distributed to members just before the meeting began at the Crown Court. Its contents, which bore more than a passing resemblance to the demands made recently by Thistle, took everyone completely aback. The letter began:

“Inverness and Nairn Enterprise remain committed to the principle of the above merger and, to allay any fears regarding the identity of Inverness Thistle, will seek to implement the following proposals.”

Then, in what looked like a phenomenal U-turn which significantly contradicted the December 1993 agreement, Byrne unveiled a five point plan. The most radical proposal was to adopt the name “Inverness Football Club” for a minimum of 20 years, despite having agreed to “Caledonian Thistle” just eight months before. And guns were put to the heads with the additional statement that this would be a condition of any future INE financial assistance. This effectively killed two birds with one stone. If successful it would get the name Inverness into the title as well as ease the Thistle situation. Both INE and Inverness District Council were keen to get the name of the town included and just over a fortnight previously the Council had asked the club to use their best endeavours to do just that in return for the leasing agreement for the East Longman Stadium site.

Byrne also called for an early acceptance of neutral playing colours as their preferred option, failing which the incorporation of black and red into the existing strip. A further clause opened the way for Thistle’s request for another director, providing for one of the existing INE nominees to step down in favour of a Thistle member who would represent INE.

The remaining two points would allow Thistle to appoint their own three Directors for an extended period to 1st July 2000 and for the appointment of a new Caledonian Thistle legal representative. In the latter case Thistle felt uncomfortable about Allan MacKenzie, who had become Caley’s man at the beginning of the year, acting in addition for the merged club.

Even neutrals were amazed at what appeared to be the most blatant backing of the Thistle position against Caley. But the purpose was to restore the balance within the club to a less extreme position. John Byrne’s letter saved the Inverness football merger.

Stunned Thistle members voted 39-11 to stay in the partnership at least until their AGM in October. This was the club’s biggest majority in any vote on the issue. The proposals may have appeared to have many of the features of a fairytale. But within a year much of what had been asked for was implemented in full or in part - and not in a way which fundamentally dishonoured the previous agreement of December 1993.

Martin Ross and his allies still were not happy. On the face of it, this was a triumph for Douglas Riach and Ian MacKenzie who were the main political victors of the evening. The outcome marked the beginning of Thistle’s fight back into the merger, paving the way for intensive negotiations involving the two partners and the Enterprise Company.

Next day Caley appeared so taken aback that they could do little more than plead ignorance of the existence of the letter - and, with some justification, complain bitterly that parts of it flew in the face of the agreement of the previous December.

When Norman Cordiner faced the television cameras that Thursday night to explain why his organisation appeared to have jumped so firmly in the direction of Thistle, he neatly sidestepped that awkward question. He simply said: “I think when there were problems at Caley a few months ago we got heavily involved there to try to address their problems and we’ve just done the very same thing again with Thistle.” More plausible explanations have doubtless been made of political manoeuvrings, but for the second time in eight months INE had kept Inverness in the Scottish League picture.

Chapter Ten

FIRST STEPS ON THE FIELD

Saturday, August 13th 1994 was a red letter day in the sporting history of Inverness. After a wait which had lasted for decades this was the day that a local team first kicked a ball in the Scottish Football League, and on home ground into the bargain.

The opposition was Arbroath and despite a rather flat atmosphere at the pre-season friendlies there was a definite buzz of expectation among the crowd of 1700 which turned up to witness the opening of a new chapter for Inverness.

That in itself was a significant attendance figure. It was around twice the combined average of recent seasons for Caley and Thistle, suggesting the presence of a large number of neutrals, as already predicted. It was early days yet, but this first indication seemed to give the lie to claims that this was a team that nobody would want to watch. There was no doubt a novelty factor involved too, although counterbalanced by the adverse effect of the club's very negative public image at the time. The next few months would be critical in assessing what regular support would be like, but this was a good start.

How many spectators came from Beauly is not recorded, but one player from the village claimed that match as his own. Team captain Alan Hercher under slightly different circumstances might have been lost to the sport of shinty of which he was also an outstanding practitioner. But here he was spearheading the Caledonian Thistle attack and stamping his indelible authority on this first League game.

It was a dream start for Inverness and a personal triumph for Hercher whose amazing hat trick in just 19 minutes created a 3-0 half time lead. Arbroath manager George Mackie could only lean against the away dugout and shake his head in disbelief. His counterpart Sergei Baltacha could only beam his approval.

Arbroath quickly struck back in the second half to make it 3-2 before Paul McKenzie and Wilson Robertson made the final outcome 5-2 for the newcomers. But the dream start was of Hercher's making. Never the most mobile of players Alan Hercher, once in a scoring position, was always an opportunist supreme in the mould of Urquhart and Robertson.

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The Caley Thistle lineup on that historic occasion was:- MacRitchie, Brennan, McAllister, Noble, Scott, Andrew, Lisle (D. MacDonald), McKenzie, Hercher, Bennett (Smart), Robertson.

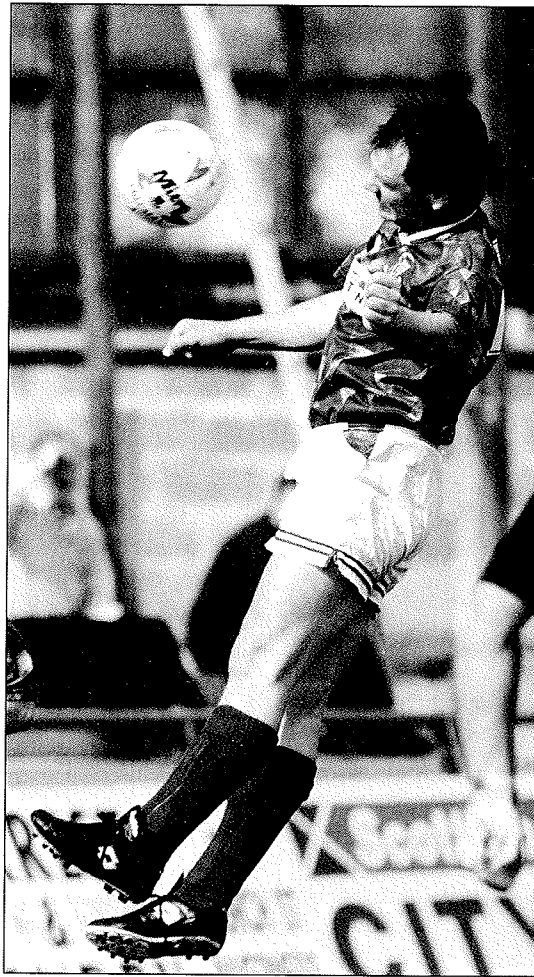
The politics had gone quiet for a time as secret discussions involving the two partners, the new club, the Enterprise Company and the inevitable lawyers on a better deal for Thistle got under way. It was an incredibly complicated situation from the layman's point of view. The uninitiated could be forgiven for completely failing to understand the relationship (or lack of it) between Caledonian, Inverness Thistle and Caledonian Thistle. It was also clear that the merged Board were not yet masters of the new club's destiny and were still partly beholden to the contributing parties which were still very much alive. But at least the players could get on with what they were being paid to do.

On the Wednesday night after the Arbroath game it was no great disappointment to go down 3-0 to First Division Dundee at Dens Park in the second round of the Coca Cola Cup. However a 4-0 reverse at home to Queens Park the following Saturday put Division 3 into its real perspective as a highly competitive League. A week later that was atoned for with a 3-1 beating of Ross County in Dingwall. The robust nature of these classic Highland Derbies, which were soon to attract up to 5000 fans, was established from the very start with two red cards and nine yellow.

And then, amazingly, a year and a day after the clubs voted to merge, the new team found itself top of Division 3 on September 10th 1994! Victories over Albion Rovers and the then leaders Forfar did the trick and now the good folk of Inverness were beginning to talk of promotion. But although they were used to three points for a win from Highland League days, the local fans still had not latched on to the idea that in a competitive ten team Division, fortunes can change very rapidly indeed - in both directions.

The Inverness Courier marked the first anniversary of the merger with a lengthy overview of the year's complex goings on. It concluded "The word now is that Inverness's Scottish League future should be resolved one way or another at meetings within the next few weeks or have we heard all of that before?" With the benefit of hindsight, it was prudent to conclude with that final caveat.

The off the field wranglings re-emerged dramatically on September 28th with a double revelation. INE nominated director Ken Matheson had resigned and in a completely separate development the Board had agreed to 25% black and red in the strip the following season.



Alan Hercher heads home Caledonian Thistle's first ever Scottish League goal v Arbroath. 13th August 1994.

FIRST STEPS ON THE FIELD

Matheson would only say that he was departing because of increased responsibilities in his job as a senior manager with the Royal Bank of Scotland. However there is little doubt that although he was committed to the sport and the concept of Caledonian Thistle, he had no interest in the inter club battle, and was becoming disillusioned with the infighting. His resignation statement at least reveals a hint of this.

"I am disappointed that it hasn't all come together as quickly as it might have. If it had, then being on the Board might by this stage have become less onerous to the extent that I might have been able to stay on," he said. "But I want to emphasise that I am leaving with no hint of rancour whatsoever, and I wish the club all the best in the future. I fervently wish this project to succeed."

The black and red in the strip had been the product of seven weeks of negotiations between clubs and lawyers. To start with, and for several months until the unveiling of the new kit the following summer, it was assumed that this would comprise a six inch black and red hoop after the fashion of Sampdoria.

It may seem incredible that something as simple as the colour of a shirt should go so far towards mending such a deep division. However to football people the jersey is of prime importance and this change was a positive symbol that Thistle were receiving some justice from the merger. The move, however insignificant it may have appeared to outsiders, went a long way towards salvaging Thistle's self respect and helped them to feel that this was indeed a merger and not a takeover.

No vote was taken when the Board agreed this, but the Chairman went round the table asking for assent or otherwise. The only dissenter was David MacDonald. The remaining ten Directors, including Caley's other four, backed the change to a man.

This may have defused part of the Thistle crisis but, as so often in this story, the move still upset factions on the other side. The Caley Rebels were rumoured to be regrouping after the quiet summer following the uneasy peace emerging from their AGM. Predictably their reaction to the strip decision was to fall back on their one position of strength - the threat to withhold Caley's assets.

On the park the team's finest performance to date came also on September 28th 1994 when they held Jim Duffy's Dundee to a 1 all draw after extra time at Telford Street in the then B and Q Cup. They lost the penalty shootout 4-3, but left the park holding their heads high.

After this, performances in the League began to fall away. In an amazing match at Telford Street Mark McAllister, who had already conceded an own goal, and Wilson Robertson both netted in the last minute to snatch a 3 all draw with East Stirling. Then a 3-0 home defeat by Cowdenbeath started a mediocre series of results which in this tight league dropped them to fifth or sixth for much of the rest of 1994. With the half way stage rapidly approaching, the prospect of promotion was beginning to slip away.

Caledonian Thistle's Scottish Cup debut came on December 17th at home to Division 2 side Queen of the South. A lacklustre performance saw the Inverness team go out 2-1, both goals conceded from free kicks in almost identical positions at the edge of the box.

Afterwards Baltacha took a number of observers' breaths away by blaming the goals on keeper Mark MacRitchie. One of the free kicks had even been given away by himself in a position where on a greasy pitch not even a holder of 50 Soviet caps could have been sure of not committing the offence inside the penalty box.

It was also after this match that dissatisfaction among the players with Baltacha's management style emerged for the first time. Two very senior players admitted to the author in private that they simply were not happy with the way the team was being handled, claiming that they were by no means alone.

Misgivings about Sergei's management style came at two levels. Firstly the punter on the terraces

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who had paid his fiver frequently complained about a defensive style of play which was often not at all attractive to watch. The most emotional moments were often those of sheer fright at some of the defensive liberties. This was already beginning to have adverse effects on home gates which had in the main slumped to around 1100 by the end of 1994, with the County game only attracting 2440. The disappearance of the novelty factor was certainly one reason, but not among the main ones which were the lack of success and Baltacha's less than attractive tactics.

The players' problem with their manager was rather more complex. Many shared the misgivings about the style of play. Also, Sergei's background in the Soviet system left little room for sympathy for hurt feelings and he could be absolutely ruthless. Players could find themselves dropped like hot bricks and while this is a regular occupational hazard, it was administered with particular severity under the Baltacha regime. The Eastern European approach left no scope for players' feelings and one practice which was particularly resented was players not knowing until an hour before kick off if they were to be on from the start, on the bench or left out completely. It could be a particularly embarrassing way for a player to find out that he had been dropped.

Baltacha had also failed to fulfil the expectation that he would move home to Inverness. Latterly he bought a house at Culloden, but still spent much of his time in Perth. Once again this was an absentee manager at a time when it was particularly vital for the club's image to be projected locally.

Then there was the communication problem. Sergei's English left a lot to be desired. The technical niceties he managed to convey without too much trouble. But, for example, there was at least one occasion when he called one player over to the dugout only to discover that the wrong man thought he was being summoned. In addition it cannot be at all easy to motivate players - a skill in which the spoken word and its manner of delivery are essential - with the handicap of limited linguistic command. Even with Baltacha long gone it still is difficult to articulate these criticisms of him because he was such a charming person against whom, for that reason, it feels awkward to make negative statements.

Events on the pitch have by now left those of the committee rooms and the law courts well behind. Martin Ross's interdict was still as stubbornly in place as ever, with the youngster still as unimpressed by the Board's approval of 25% black and red in the strip as the Caley Rebels were indignant. As the autumn progressed, relations between the two merger partners got little better, although Thistle's AGM in October agreed again that they stay in the merger at least until votes on the assets could be held. There were also signs that Caledonian Thistle, now on a full operational footing but still starved of assets, was becoming more and more impatient at the impasse. The tension mounted steadily before the entire focus of the story was dramatically shifted in a most tragic manner.

On the afternoon of Friday, 11th November 1994, Norman Miller attended a Centenary Club draw at MacRae and Dick's showroom in Harbour Road. Feeling unwell, he left early and walked the 600 yards to Cordiners where he had to collect his car. On the way home he realised that the problem was getting much worse and drove to his GP's Surgery in nearby Southside Road. That was a decision which saved his life.

Within minutes he was on his way by ambulance to Raigmore Hospital and had only just been admitted to a special Coronary Care bed when his heart stopped beating. It was only the immediate availability of first class medical expertise which saved him. He was told later that had he instead gone home to what would have been an empty house, he would most likely have slipped away there without being able to do anything about it.

There is no doubt that the enormous strain Miller had been under since the summer of the previous year had been a major factor in his illness. The fact that by nature he fundamentally disliked

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confrontation had made the office he had to fulfil all the more difficult. In addition to the extreme mental stress there were also the punishing physical demands, on top of a full time job, of a schedule which had seen him at meetings on four consecutive evenings during that week alone.

This serious heart attack was to keep Miller out of action and well away from football for many months. However by the beginning of the following season, Caledonian Thistle's Vice Chairman was back in a modest way and was enjoying being able to welcome guests at the club's pre-season lunch in the Glenmoriston Hotel. It was the manner in which Norman Miller greeted prominent Inverness undertaker Ian Fraser that best sums up his courage and positive attitude to the whole question of his health.

"Aye, aye Ian," he was heard to say. "Well here's one bit of business you didn't get!"

It was also that November that the Caley Committee, their hand forced by the Rebels, finally rejected the 25% black and red - the product of so many hours of effort on the part of so many contributors to the merger. This was also contrary to the approval given by four of their five Caledonian Thistle Directors.

By now arrangements were in hand for both Caley and Thistle to vote on asset transfer early in December, but as a prelude to these meetings there emerged yet another bizarre twist. A joint meeting was held in the Caledonian Hotel on November 23rd in an atmosphere which more resembled a Wild West poker game. Here both Caley and Thistle incredibly agreed to withdraw their Directors from the merged club's Board if their respective memberships failed to agree to asset transfer at their forthcoming SGMs. Parallels with the Mutually Assured Destruction nuclear doctrine of the Cold War era were compelling. There was also the further complication that the clubs might agree to transfer, but under different conditions - the two options being a gratuitous handing over of assets or the purchase of shares in the new club.

The ultimate consequence of this mutual agreement was absurd. If both memberships refused asset transfer then the only Directors Caledonian Thistle would have left would be INE nominees Norman Cordiner and Chairman Jock McDonald. Furthermore there were already strong rumours that Cordiner was on the point of resigning from the Board as relationships between INE and the football clubs deteriorated during the autumn.

The following day, November 24th, INE's patience finally snapped. They had entered the merger arena 18 months previously hoping to stimulate business, to get Inverness on the Scottish football map and to catalyse a major stadium development. For the last three months they had been preoccupied by bickering about the colour of a football strip, and even their hopes of a settlement had apparently just been dashed.

That afternoon they issued a tersely worded Press Statement which declared that it was up to Caley and Thistle to resolve the issue of the colour of playing strips. Commenting that the Board had already strongly backed 25% black and red, an unnamed spokesman continued:

"INE has already expended considerable time on this topic and will not be taking any further part in discussions relating to choice of football strip. The INE representatives on the Caledonian Thistle Board abide by the decision made by the club's Board on choice of strip colours."

Then came the coup de grace.

"Our principal task in Inverness and Nairn is to stimulate economic development. Neither is INE a United Nations peacekeeper nor consultant on colour schemes. It has to be said that, in most people's minds, it is ludicrous that

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so much time and effort is being expended on deciding a choice of strip. What matters is that the club has a sound financial footing, has viable stadium proposals, and meets its obligations to the Scottish Football League as an associate member. Everything else is secondary. This unseemly wrangle is dragging down the name of Caledonian Thistle, of Inverness and Highland Football in the eyes of local people, the Scottish public and the Scottish footballing establishment."

There followed a note to newsdesks that INE would make no further comment on the statement and that neither officials nor board members would be available for discussion or interview on the topic. It was a stinging and very public rebuke - in every respect a case of "A plague on both your houses."

Shortly after, Norman Cordiner resigned from the Caledonian Thistle Board. Ongoing impatience at much of what he saw as pettiness between the parties may have been a factor. But it had always been understood that his stay as a Director would be a short one. He had recognised from the start that membership of the Board was inconsistent with his position as Chairman of INE and he therefore wanted to step down from the former at the earliest opportunity.

The scene was therefore set for a number of significant Boardroom changes over the next two months. Scott Byrnes had announced that he would be leaving the area for family reasons and would be standing down as Director and Secretary. Thistle quickly replaced him in the former role by Douglas Riach who had finished fourth in their elections and who had commanded such a high profile on the Thistle side of the controversy ever since the summer. Jim Falconer, who had missed out in Caley's elections, was the obvious choice as Secretary, although he would not be a Board member. Craig Maclean, who was a banker by profession, took over as Treasurer.

The departure of Cordiner and Matheson opened the door for a particularly imaginative and productive move on INE's part. Their two replacement nominees were Roy MacLennan and Ken Thomson, members and supporters of Thistle and Caley respectively and these two very able individuals brought a twofold benefit.

Firstly MacLennan effectively became the fourth Board member which Thistle had demanded while that was offset on the other side by the arrival of Thomson. Some Thistle diehards complained that there was now a Caley majority, but Thomson was very much his own man and an INE nominee in any case. Secondly these two men carried with them a great degree of expertise. MacLennan, Managing Director of Highland Office Equipment, made an ideal Finance Director for the Football Club. Meanwhile Thomson ran Moray Firth Finance and had gained a wealth of experience in sports administration during two terms as President of the Camanachd Association. Public Relations had always been the club's Achilles heel and he made Caledonian Thistle so much more accessible when he took over that portfolio.

The one positive point as the clubs steeled themselves for votes on asset transfer early in December 1994 was Thistle's acceptance, after long negotiations, of the principle of a Members' Club. Their fears had been understandable. However the terms under which the Members' Club was to be set up were now such that it was only open to Caledonian Thistle season ticket holders and even then all applications would be strictly vetted by the Board. There would be no chance this time of any attempt to hijack the club for political purposes. The term "Unified", which implied some kind of uneven aggregation of the two previous memberships, was also dropped. Thistle now believed that the Members' Club was no longer the instrument of annihilation which it originally could have been. This turned out to be a correct assessment.

The Members' Club, although pounced on by some in the Caley camp as a possible route to

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power, also made a lot of sense and had the potential to heal the divisions. If the Trusts had survived they would have served to accentuate Caley and Thistle as separate entities whereas this formula could draw them together as one. A Members' Club also allowed the priceless asset of neutral support to flow in.

Although it had originally been intended that the two clubs would meet simultaneously to vote on their assets on December 1st, Thistle's meeting had to be postponed for a further week to allow the 21 days notice required by their constitution. This was bitterly criticised by some on the Caley side for giving Thistle an "advantage" because their members would know what the Caley verdict had been. These same Caley people accused Thistle of further prevarication and their own officials of failing to postpone their own meeting by a week when Thistle delayed theirs. On the other hand news of Thistle's postponement came very late in the day and there had already been enough grief over delays to meetings.

It would be easy to speculate about how things would have turned out had the two clubs met on the same night. Perhaps, not knowing how their hawkish neighbours would vote, Thistle might have declined to transfer their assets. On the other hand Charlie Cuthbert believes that they would still have done so, although with provisos about the strip in particular. But as it eventually turned out, the order in which the two meetings took place probably led to a rather tidier and less complicated outcome.

The specific element of Caley's meeting which was to be so crucial was an amendment to the main resolution. This sought additional approval by Caley of the 25% black and red in the strip. Proposed by Dougie McGilvray and seconded by Hugh Crout and Hamish Munro, the amendment effectively asked for asset transfer on the basis of black and red in the strip. It therefore sought to gain the Caley membership's blessing on what the Caledonian Thistle Board, INE and Thistle all wanted.

This provoked the predictable storm of protest from the Rebels whose response was to slap down a motion of no confidence in McGilvray, also to be discussed on December 1st. That read:

"We the undersigned wish to propose a motion of No Confidence in Mr. D. McGilvray. Mr. McGilvray would not appear to be working in the best interests of Caledonian Football Club."

It was signed by the five Rebel members of Committee - Danny Hughes, David Macdonald, Rod MacDonald, Mike Shewan and Graham Chisholm.

The effect of this attempt to oust the rising star of the Caledonian Thistle Board was dramatic. As 1150 fans filtered out of Telford Street at the end of a 2 all draw with Alloa on November 26th, McGilvray emerged from the stand to make the following statement.

"If folk in the Caley vote against me I will just resign and go away from it all. There's another club, quite local - I've been asked if I'd want to join that. I wouldn't mind doing that if that's the case, if there is no confidence in what I am doing for this club."

What Dougie McGilvray was saying was that if the vote of no confidence went against him, he would be off to Ross County. With him would go the energy and the expertise he was pouring into the ever more complex Stadium project which was vital to the club's survival. But there would be an even more lethal consequence of his departure. Caledonian Thistle was a club with no assets, still only limited income and large outgoings. Someone, somewhere was providing financial guarantees and the widespread belief was that McGilvray was the goose whose supply of golden eggs was now under threat.

It was in addition alleged that McGilvray had privileged knowledge of the main agenda item. The response from the Caley establishment was that media coverage had been so intense for weeks that McGilvray was no better informed than any member of the public.

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The agenda and related issues at the Caley meeting were, as ever, highly complex. The main event was a debate and vote on a two page resolution to transfer assets gratuitously - effectively as a gift - to Caledonian Thistle, subject to eleven conditions. Clemenceau's comment on Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points at the end of the First World War is worth reviving. "Even the Good Lord only had Ten."

Caley's eleven included the formation of a Members' Club and the team playing specifically in blue. There was also a reiteration of the Cordiner accord of the previous December regarding the club and Stadium name and Thistle's agreement to transfer their assets on the same terms and conditions as in the Caley resolution. If Thistle failed to do this, Caley would claim the right to go it alone, without Thistle's directors and under the name of Caley.

This document put the merger into a no win situation. To get Caley to transfer their assets gratuitously, Thistle had to resolve do so as well. And as far as that was concerned, part of Martin Ross's case was that this could not be done without a clearly impossible 100% majority. So it appeared that the cost of the gratuitous handing over of Caley's worldly goods would be the collapse of the merger and all that implied. What McGilvray's amendment did was to take just one of these conditions relating to the blue strip and add the provision of 25% black and red in an attempt to create common ground which might get Thistle on board as well the following week.

Both the original resolution and the McGilvray amendment were marked in the Notice of Meeting as requiring two thirds majorities for acceptance. Once again that familiar albatross hung round Caley's neck. No aspect of this merger had ever received such a majority within Caley, and this seemed to have no better chance.

Hugh Grant and Willie MacLean, both of the more mature school of older members, then intervened to circumvent such an eventuality. It was now their turn to join the list of people whose action at various points in the story saved the Inverness football merger. What they framed was an Ordinary Resolution, requiring only a 50% majority - an entirely different prospect. Their proposal was to invest Caley's assets in shares in the new club, under terms to be determined by the Committee. This only required 50% because the purchase of shares required no change to the Constitution and this was backed by QC's opinion. It was an action deemed to be furthering the interests of football, within the terms of existing provisions. It would only be considered in the increasingly likely event of gratuitous transfer failing.

This was a true stroke of genius. Firstly it cut the Gordian Knot of the two thirds majority which had hung like a spectre over the assets question for more than a year. Secondly it cast off the shackles of a not particularly constructive set of prescribed conditions, passing this matter to the Committee. And thirdly it duplicated the kind of asset transfer which Thistle were most likely to be able to achieve at their meeting, thus providing the consistency which the future of the merger craved. If it could be combined with the McGilvray amendment it had the scope to become a merger saving winner. The only down side was that such a transaction might be liable to Capital Gains Tax, rumoured to be anything up to £200,000. However on the strength of the rules by which such a gain was calculated, supporters of this plan believed that the bill would be relatively modest, and a small price to pay for the future of the club.

Meanwhile Thistle's agenda for December 8th was much simpler. When details became public it was revealed that all they were doing was to debate and vote also on the purchase of shares. In terms of their Constitution this would require a two thirds majority. The consistency of asset transfer which was the key to peace was now possible.

So once again a narrow path was discovered out of the merger gloom. But it was a very narrow one and following it would require considerable balance and foresight, particularly through the undergrowth of Caley resolutions. Missing it could consign the new football club to a further spell in the wilderness, possibly even to the pages of history.

Chapter Eleven

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The Third Battle of Rose Street was fought on December 1st 1994 - the exact anniversary of its ill-fated prototype the First Battle. Attendance was just over 300, indicating that numbers were dropping as these meetings continually rolled up. The question was would either side suffer a disproportionate fall-off in support?

The looks on the rebel leaders' faces soon showed that although many of their people had turned out, they did not believe that the balance had swung in their favour. Already put on the defensive by the prospect of the assets going over on a 50% vote, they could now be seen moving around the hall in advance of the start consulting desperately with each other and seeking some kind of deal with the other side on the issue. There was to be no deal.

Because of Miller's recent incapacity, the chair was taken by his depute Ally MacKenzie with the merger-hardened Falconer riding shotgun at the top table. Fully aware of the problems which disruptions had caused in the past, they arrived with what came over as a carefully prepared script and the strong will to proceed with it whatever the Rebels (literally) threw at them. Club solicitor Allan MacKenzie had played a major part in preparing both men for this meeting. The tone of the Chairmanship also represented a complete U turn from the kind of anti-Thistle rhetoric which had appeased the Rebel hard liners during the summer and autumn. This was replaced by an apparently strong will to get Caley's assets transferred in such a way as to keep Thistle in the merger.

The three necessary votes were taken in what was record time by Rose Street standards, but not before the Motion of No Confidence in McGilvray was withdrawn. Both internal and external public reaction, even to the revelation that it had been lodged, made that more or less inevitable. Then the main resolution for the gratuitous transfer received 167 votes for and 143 against. This was not a two thirds majority and one had not been expected. However what it told the meeting was that there was very likely going to be 50% support for pro-merger items on the agenda.

Next up was the McGilvray amendment supporting 25% black and red in the strip and by 166 votes to 141 Caley's membership opted to include their former rivals' colours. This again was not

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two thirds, but a solution to this problem was soon to be at hand. Then came the crucial question of asset transfer on the basis of shares. Despite strongly expressed fears that it might cost up to £200,000 in Capital Gains Tax, it realised 167 votes against 141. This represented a 54.2% approval rate and was the biggest majority ever expressed by Caley's members in any vote directly concerning the merger. The tightest had been the 55-50 of September 1993 representing 52.4%. Caley opinion was as consistent as ever.

The icing on the cake for those seeking an accommodation with Thistle was a point of order made by Charlie Gair that since the McGilvray amendment was no more than an amendment it should only require 50%. This it had achieved, so it should therefore stand. When this was agreed the way was then also open for Thistle to accept the Caley outcome and agree to transfer their assets on the same terms. A bright shaft of light had emerged at the end of the tunnel.

But despite the persistence of MacKenzie and Falconer, this Caley meeting was as badly behaved and noisy as the rest. The constant foul mouthed heckling was but a start. Along with other missiles, a firework was thrown and exploded in the aisle. Ally Mackenzie's papers were strewn on the floor and at the conclusion the fire alarm was set off, automatically summoning the Fire Brigade. But the Vice Chairman stuck to his guns and his plan, and closed the meeting with firm authority immediately the stated business was over. It had been another rough ride, but a successful one for the moderates.

One week later Thistle met in their Social Club to vote on their asset transfer. Such was the difference in the tone of the gathering that anyone outside the door could genuinely not even be sure if a meeting was still going on. It had not been a completely uncontested affair and disagreements remained, but the outcome was 38-16 in favour of investing in shares on exactly the same terms as Caley. Given that a two thirds majority was required under Thistle's constitution, the outcome - just as Caley's in September 1993 - hung on the decision of just three men.

This was still effectively a decision in principle because Martin Ross showed no signs of lifting his interdict. However for the first time since the Caley Rebels began their campaign in the autumn of the previous year, both clubs were democratically committed to staying in the merger and investing their worldly goods in it. Dougie Riach articulated the relief of those on his side of the dispute.

"Everyone from both clubs should now get behind the new club," he said. "That is what Inverness wants and I am sure that local businesses who may have held back until they knew what was happening will come forward with promises of sponsorship." This last point was desperately important because Caledonian Thistle's cash flow situation was far from ideal. The arguments of the last fifteen months had done a lot of damage to the image and credibility of the new club and it was now time for these to be laid to rest in a new atmosphere of understanding between Caley and Thistle.

Caley's agreement to invest in shares had come subject to conditions to be set down by their Committee. At the AGM the previous June there had been an agreement, the gist of which was that the existing Caley memberships for season 1993 - 94 would be kept in force until the asset question had been sorted out. However exactly what this meant developed into yet another controversy.

As far as the club officials were concerned, the purpose of keeping the memberships open was to retain an electoral college for a final vote on the assets. Since this had taken place on December 1st 1994 they believed these memberships, which would normally have ended seven months previously, had now lapsed completely. As it happened, in this war of manoeuvre and counter manoeuvre by the opposing factions, this also meant that Caley's affairs then would rest with half a dozen or so Life Members and others who had taken the trouble to renew their memberships. And this was how

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Caley's internal business, including the conditions, mechanism and execution of asset transfer, was run for some months.

The Rebels, who found themselves outflanked at this juncture, viewed things differently and believed that membership should stay in force at least until the conditions and transfer had been completed. However it was not until August 1995 that they held a meeting to discuss the matter before announcing that November that they were taking legal action. Further delays meant that the legal process did not get under way until November 1996, over three years after many of the 576 season tickets in question had been bought.

The first news of the Rebels' legal action was leaked in November 1995 to "Scotland on Sunday" which in January of that year had carried a story which alleged that Caledonian Thistle was in serious financial trouble and was failing to meet its liabilities to creditors and players. A strong formal denial of this by the club was accompanied by a threat of legal action. Charlie Christie, one of the players due signing on fees which it was alleged had not been paid, confirmed that he had in fact received his money early.

The reliability of the story was perhaps reflected in the speed with which a retraction was obtained, but it looked likely that the source had been someone with access to Board level information. Inevitably the finger was pointed at David MacDonald who strongly denied any suggestion. This was by no means the first time that leaks detrimental to the club's interests had occurred in this way. When Gala Fairydean were watching the Inverness situation with critical interest, a Thistle source had allegedly been passing information in that direction.

Although the Martin Ross interdict still had to be heard in court, Thistle were still able in February 1995 to apply for planning permission for residential development of Kingsmills Park. When that was obtained the interdict also did not prevent them from selling the ground. With Hugh MacRae and Company acting as agents, planning permission was duly granted and in the end it was MacRae who bought the site for £486,000 for a residential and nursing home development. This was rather more than had been expected, although Thistle's overdraft and a settlement with the Feudal Superiors the Church of Scotland still had to be met. What the interdict still prevented the club from doing was to hand the proceeds over to Caledonian Thistle who by now desperately needed the money as Telford Street would be tied up as a football ground for some time to come.

The Thistle Committee certainly were leaving no stone unturned in this action by Martin Ross and he wheeled in the biggest gun available in the form of eminent Edinburgh Q.C. Colin Sutherland. But although Mr. Sutherland stole much of the limelight in the proceedings which were now imminent, Thistle had also been ably represented on a day to day basis by their Inverness solicitor Moray Macdonald and his colleague John MacLeod. The engagement of Mr. Sutherland also upped the stakes as far as Martin Ross was concerned because an 18 year old trainee clerk was now involved in an action which was going to be very expensive for the losers.

Three earlier hearings had set the scene for the main two day hearing of "Martin Charles Fraser Ross against Charles E. Cuthbert, Scott Byrnes, Craig Maclean, Ian Gordon, Douglas Riach, R. Turriani, J. Falconer and I. MacKenzie, all members and Committee of Inverness Thistle Football Club." which began in front of Sheriff James Fraser at Inverness Sheriff Court on March 28th 1995. The three witnesses called by Ross's solicitor Ken MacLeod were the Pursuer himself and fellow anti-merger fans Mark Mitchell and Dave Williamson. Mitchell, as a Committee member, had originally been named as a Defender but had resigned and had been removed from the list.

Most of the first day was spent hearing evidence from the three witnesses, dwelling mainly on the events since September 9th 1993. They were in turn cross examined vigorously by Sutherland who himself called no witnesses at all, although the Defenders stood by in case they were required. As it

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happens none of the evidence appears to have been necessary since Sheriff Fraser later found that he could detect no disputed fact between the parties who, he said, could instead have agreed their evidence.

The hearing then proceeded to legal arguments which were highly technical and in some cases obscure. Suffice it to say that they centred round conflicting opinions of what Thistle were and were not entitled to do. It seems unnecessary at this point to delve into the niceties of "Kelso School Board v Hunter (1874)", "Bailey's Executor v Upper Crathes Fishing Limited (1987)" or "The lluson Insurance Company Ltd. v Fraser, Owen and Company Ltd. (1937)" among other cases used as precedents. After two days of evidence and arguments, Sheriff Fraser retired to consider his verdict and to write his judgement.

Because of technical delays, that judgement was not delivered until May 4th and we must now leave the Sheriff to consider it while we pick up other threads of the story which were also ultimately to converge almost simultaneously, making May 1995 a watershed month for Caledonian Thistle Football Club.

Despite the bright start to that first season, the decline which had begun early in the winter continued into 1995. A Mike Andrew penalty gave the team a 1-0 half time lead in the New Year derby in Dingwall which only went ahead after strenuous snow clearing efforts. But Brian Grant twice and Jamie MacPherson came storming back to make the final score 3-1 for Ross County.

There was also a humiliating 4-1 defeat by Queens Park at Hampden and the next win - in fact the first since 19th November - did not come until 11th February. On that occasion Norman MacMillan and Martin Lisle conspired to snatch a 2-1 away scoreline over those perpetual whipping boys Albion Rovers. Three days later there was a notorious 4-0 midweek defeat - a real St. Valentine's Night Massacre - by promotion chasing Montrose at Telford Street. By now Caledonian Thistle's promotion hopes were in terminal decline along with crowd figures which had dropped more or less permanently below 1000.

It was when the attendance at the 3-1 home win over Cowdenbeath on March 4th 1995 (McAllister, MacMillan and Mitchell one each) was reported in the Press as 424 that alarm bells really began to ring. Further checks revealed that the true figure was 680 - hardly a major comfort, but enough to precipitate a tightening up of procedures and the setting up of an official half time announcement.

But even the faithful few who were turning up were far from happy about what they were paying to see. The players on the field were looking less and less inspired as time went on and five at the back wasn't indicative of a style of play which would send fans rushing through the turnstiles. More and more, the talk on the terraces was that Sergei would have to go. Certainly the way the team were performing wasn't pleasing the players themselves, the Board, the Press, the punters nor indeed the Bank Manager. Although attendances were still well above every other Division 3 club apart from Ross County and most of Division 2 as well, this was a poor yardstick. Much more had been expected and indeed was required to balance the books.

Although pressures on Baltacha had been building, it appears to have been only relatively late in the season before the Board began to take the view that he might have to go. They had met him on a number of occasions and the impression had been given that it was the players - of whom he once proposed to transfer list up to eleven - and even some of the backroom staff who were not up to it. At one point he also proposed the appointment of Alan Smart Sen., Perth based like himself, as his assistant.

In reality Sergei Baltacha had not delivered what had been expected and in particular there was concern that he was not fully resident in Inverness. Although he had acquired the house at Culloden,

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his family still lived in Perth and it was there that he still spent much of his time. He certainly was not adopting the high local profile expected of a manager of a club newly elected to Division 3 of the Scottish League. In contrast Bobby Wilson at Ross County had lived in Dingwall ever since he was appointed in 1987 and was an integral part of the community which he went about regularly in various capacities. But even if he did not present an attractive brand of football, it has to be said in Baltacha's defence that his results were not helped by a succession of injuries which frequently saw up to six players sidelined.

It appears to have been following a meeting between Directors and Manager just after yet another defeat by Montrose late in April that opinions quite suddenly began to be expressed in the open that Baltacha should go. By now he had quite clearly lost the confidence of the Board. They held him in the highest regard as an individual, but now saw the next priority as an amicable means for him to depart.

That was achieved at a meeting on the evening of Tuesday, 2nd May 1995 between Baltacha and Dougie McGilvray, Ken Thomson and Norman Miller in McGilvray's office. The Board's unease was made quite clear to the manager who in turn appeared to realise that he needed to go. Apart from his performance, his continuing failure to take up permanent residence in Inverness again emerged as an issue. What emerged as a mutually agreeable solution was that at the end of the season a week the following Saturday, Sergei Baltacha would stand down and in return he would get a year's salary, some £25,000. In addition the club would take over his house and sell it for him. By noon the following day the deal was signed, sealed and delivered.

News that Baltacha would be leaving emerged, just as suddenly as the event itself, via McGilvray on May 3rd. The official communique stressed the family side of the situation, which might also have been a useful metaphor for the supreme concern that he had never completely moved to Inverness. It said:

“Sergei Baltacha has requested to be released early from his contract with Caledonian Thistle F.C. because of family reasons. The Board have been very sympathetic to his situation but have asked Sergei to stay in charge for the remainder of the season and he has agreed.”

There can be few instances in the history of football where a manager has had his contract terminated in such a civilised manner and with so little fuss and acrimony. However it was only right that a gentleman should be shown the door in such a gentlemanly manner, and in any case the club certainly didn't need another controversy.

Sergei did, however, go out with a flourish particularly in his penultimate game, the last derby of the season at home to Ross County. The visitors' game got off to a bad start when Andy MacLeod was sent off after just seven minutes for fouling Mark MacRitchie whose retaliation remarkably only resulted in a yellow card for him. MacMillan and Hercher cashed in with goals on either side of half time before County's Billy Ferries was also red carded and Charlie Christie rounded off a fine Inverness performance when he made the final score 3-0.

Fans were left wondering why the team couldn't play like this every week, and the result also left an important legacy. County's defeat ended their promotion prospects which in turn guaranteed the continuation of the lucrative Highland derbies and their attendant excitement. This was a “bonus” which the Dingwall side could no doubt have lived without for the sake of advancement. But it was a big benefit for Caledonian Thistle whose prospects of a move up had disappeared a long time ago. Sergei's spell at Telford Street, which he said would always have a place in his heart, and Caledonian Thistle's first season in Scottish League football then ended on May 13th with a 1 all draw at home to Queens Park. This was also a final farewell to senior football for The Legend. Billy Urquhart, who

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had signed for the new club earlier in the season, became its oldest ever player when he came on as substitute at the age of 38 years 172 days.

That first season saw the Inverness team finish sixth of the ten sides in Division 3 on 45 points, well behind promoted Forfar and Montrose on 80 and 67, with Ross County third on 60. Albion Rovers were well adrift on 18, but with Cowdenbeath ninth on 40 points, that inaugural season did not come far from becoming a mild embarrassment.

Speculation that Baltacha's successor would be Huntly's Steve "Pele" Paterson was instant. And although the club may have had no thoughts about a change until relatively recently the talk of the terraces since as long ago as February was that Moray based Paterson would be the man for the job if it were to become vacant. And now that it had, it did not take the Board long to look in the direction of Huntly.

Thirty seven year old Paterson had begun his football career with Nairn County before going to Manchester United as a 17 year old. He made a dozen first team appearances for The Reds, including two in Europe against Ajax and Juventus, before going to Sheffield United in 1980 for £80,000. A serious ankle injury forced him out after just six months and in three spells abroad he played in the Far East and Australia. A period at Forres under Harry McFadden included that club's Highland League title season of 1985-86 and then in 1988 Paterson went into management at Elgin City.

This was an instant success. Two seasons as player manager catapulted Elgin back up to the top of the Highland game amid a flurry of honours and for a brief period every single trophy in the Highland game resided at Borough Briggs. Then in 1990 Paterson went to Huntly, initially as a player under Joe Harper, but within weeks Harper had been sacked and the man with the Midas touch was in charge. This continued at Christie Park where he landed that elusive Highland League title in 1994 and a great deal more. Between his Elgin and Huntly years Paterson won a stupendous 14 trophies and took his team to the Scottish Cup on all six occasions. Very much laid back in his outward approach to the game, he once told a reporter that he didn't get uptight because there were more important things in his life than football. However he was known as a supreme motivator and achiever. Just as importantly, players actively wanted to play for him which was to be a big asset when it then came to attracting men of quality to Inverness.

However despite his success, Steve Paterson was no flamboyant extrovert. He was a deeply thoughtful manager who quietly and clinically analysed each situation before responding to it, not with any crisis measure but with a solution which had long term success as its final goal. In the dugout he was always more content to contemplate the situation quietly and impassively, preferring to delegate verbal communication to the players on the field to his assistant. This was a man who would never be seen screaming at the extremity of the technical area. Even when he won that famous Highland League title for Huntly in 1994 he almost seemed to have to be dragged into the scenes of celebration which ensued. Features such as these were the hallmark of his entire personality. "Laid back" was a very easy term to use to describe Steve Paterson.

The job was also advertised and the names of Tommy Craig and Welshman Leighton James had been mentioned while two unnamed players currently under contract had shown an interest. But with only minor reservations on the part of a few directors, Paterson remained the preferred candidate.

The first priority was to get Huntly Chairman Forbes Shand's permission to speak to Paterson and this could not be obtained until the R.B. Farquhar Managing Director had returned from a business trip. Ironically Caledonian Thistle met a Highland League select managed by Paterson in a friendly at Huntly on May 9th and it was there - with a heavy heart - that Shand gave his permission. Paterson himself was taking the view that it would be foolish not to listen to what a club with such potential had to say to him. It did not take McGilvray long to convince him that his future lay in Inverness.

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“When the initial approach was made I felt I had to speak to the Directors to get their side of the story and once I had done that my decision was virtually made,” he said after deciding to take the post. “I had to accept the opportunity that was offered. I felt I had to expose myself to a bigger challenge and there is no other part time club in Scotland I would have left Huntly for except this one.”

The next stage was to negotiate compensation with Huntly for the remaining year of Paterson’s contract. Shand was understandably out to get as much as he could from a club which was obviously very keen to get their man, but having initially held out for £50,000 he eventually settled for half of that.

Neither the club nor Paterson himself, who had qualified as a Social Worker while at Huntly and who still wanted to pursue that career, sought a full time arrangement. The job for the moment was definitely part time - there was little point in anything else with part time players.

McGilvray, Shand and Paterson met in Fochabers on May 18th and agreement was amicably reached over compensation and conditions. Huntly’s loss was Caledonian Thistle’s gain, but the team that Steve Paterson built there went on under Doug Rougvie to further successes in the years to come. Shand parted with Paterson with great regrets, but made a point of publicly wishing him the very best of luck.

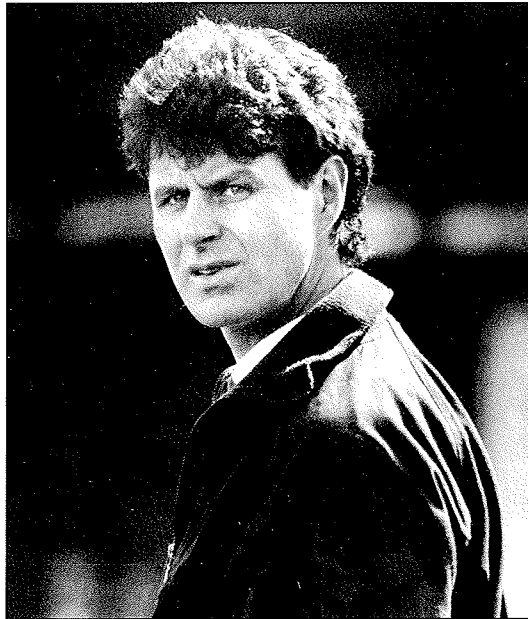
Returning to the legal process, on May 4th 1995, the day after Baltacha’s departure was announced, Sheriff James Fraser at last delivered his long awaited judgement on Martin Ross’s interdict and it turned out to be a crushing victory for the Committee.

The thirty one page judgement went into intimate detail on every facet of the case, but the essential outcome was contained in four Finds-In-Law. The first makes the interesting observation that the historic meeting of September 9th 1993 produced no Resolution in terms of Thistle’s rules. However that in no way prevented the implementation of the merger from Thistle’s point of view. The other three Finds categorically came down against Ross, questioning at the same time the manner in which he had gone about challenging the club’s actions. These read:-

“2. The Resolution of the second meeting (ie the decision of December 1st 1994 to transfer assets) was *intra vires* of the members and amounted neither to (a) an alteration of or an inconsistency with the objects of Thistle in the rules, Rule 1. (b) an alienation of the assets of Thistle.”

“3. The Resolution of the second meeting, being *intra vires* of the members, is not competently challenged by way of interdict or declarator alone.”

“4. There is no legal wrong disclosed which may properly be challenged by way of interdict.”



Steve Paterson. Thoughtful, and seldom given to excesses of emotion.

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Sheriff Fraser also expressed the opinion that:

“The Pursuer is therefore in the wrong forum with the wrong craves.”

The implication was that Interdict, which is for the purpose of preventing a legal wrong, was not appropriate here and an Action of Reduction might have been a more appropriate course. This was briefly considered by Ross, but never pursued.

The Sheriff also reserved the question of expenses until a hearing on May 16th and sanctioned the use of a Q.C. on the grounds that:

“this is an action of major importance to the Defenders.”

His judgement ended:

“My decision in this case is that the challenge to the validity of the approval of the merger is unfounded and that the Committee may properly proceed with negotiations of the detailed terms of that merger, on the basis of the approval of the members of Thistle, as expressed by a two thirds majority of the appropriate resolution properly put to a meeting of the members which was properly constituted.”

It was now a race against time for Thistle to get their assets physically transferred by the deadline of May 31st. This was one of the conditions set by the Caley Committee who had towards the end of January defeated a Rebel move to give Thistle less than a week by imposing an impossible deadline of the end of that month.

But now this was Game and Set to Thistle's Committee and became Match as well when they were awarded expenses on May 16th, upheld on appeal by Ross on July 4th 1995. Despite a heavy and costly defeat the teenager was unrepentant.

Emerging from Inverness Sheriff Court that July morning he said:

“Obviously it's been an ordeal for me but I feel I've achieved something, only if it was just sticking up for my club. Regrets?... a year on, a legal bill later - not at all. Action had to be taken and as far as I'm concerned if it hadn't been for the Court action, Thistle simply would no longer exist.”

This was the last legal threat to the merger itself. The battle for Caledonian Thistle in the Courts was over. There was still the matter of the Rebel fans who wanted to pursue their memberships of Caley, but the existence of Caledonian Thistle was no longer subject to legal challenge.

Since September 1993 some members and fans of both clubs had waged determined campaigns against the merger of Caley and Thistle but after a number of desperately close run things it had survived. These movements were predominantly working class in origin and nature. Their defeat could also be regarded as an additional local symptom of the significant socio-economic shift of modern football away from its working class origins towards a more middle class clientele. This has been quite marked in Inverness since the creation of this new club.

May 1995 was an incredible month for Caledonian Thistle. The first week alone had seen the settlement of the Thistle court case and the news of Baltacha's impending departure. Soon after, his replacement was named and then Caley's and Thistle's assets were finally committed to the new club, Thistle reinforcing their commitment by additionally signing over their Social Club.

Agreement was also arrived at about the previously controversial new strip which would not after

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all simply be blue with a "Sampdoria" black and red band. Instead there would be vertical red stripes and black pin stripes on a blue background. Someone, somewhere had carefully and cleverly chosen a design which fulfilled the political requirements but which at the same time managed to convey an image far removed from the controversy of the recent past.

Full Planning Permission for the new Stadium was also obtained during May 1995 which therefore saw major advances in the club's three principal areas of business, the Merger, the Playing Side and the Stadium. The difficulties in all these departments had been many and formidable but during this month the club had spectacularly and suddenly broken free of almost all of them. This was not only light at the end of the tunnel - the entire train suddenly emerged into a bright sunlit landscape of blue, black and red harmony. With the complications over, Caledonian Thistle could behave far more like a normal club now. And with Ken Thomson now established on the Public Relations side the positive news which was being generated could be dispensed to a public which was becoming rapidly less suspicious and cynical. So with the conspicuous exception of funding of the Stadium, this narrative can now proceed much more rapidly and simply towards its triumphant conclusion.

However May 1995 ended on a sad note with the departure of the club's inaugural President Jock McDonald. Early the previous month he had announced his intention to stand down at the end of the season, revealing later that he never intended doing more than two years from the time merger negotiations began in May 1993. He was immediately declared Honorary Life President. Jock McDonald's contribution to Caledonian Thistle F.C. may have been relatively short lived, but it was a vital one. As has already been shown, his influence in getting the club into the Scottish League was invaluable and this will be his eternal legacy. He also bore the brunt at Board level of the club's controversial birth pangs and it was acutely ironic that he should be standing down just at a time when so many of these problems had been suddenly ironed out.

But standing down he was, and given that the main unresolved difficulty was the Stadium, this would be the principal worry of his successor. Normally his Vice President would have been a strong



Chairman Dougie McGilvray in the Caledonian Stadium boardroom.

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candidate to replace him, but Norman Miller was barely back in harness after his serious illness just six months previously. Although he declined to stand for that reason, Miller did continue in the Vice Presidential role. The other obvious name in the frame was Stadium Convener McGilvray whose contribution to all aspects of club life, and in particular the Stadium, had been increasing rapidly in recent months. His immediate response was to rule himself out, but before long he admitted that he was reserving his position. However it was only after lunch with some fellow Directors at Eden Court on the day of the election, May 29th, that he was finally persuaded to take up what was a huge commitment in addition to running a substantial business. The only other conceivable candidate was Ally MacKenzie who declined to stand due to pressure of business, leaving McGilvray to inherit one of the most demanding but potentially rewarding jobs in Scottish football. Although many of the difficulties were now over, the Chairmanship of this club would still be no bed of roses, particularly when it came to what was still outstanding on the Stadium agenda.

One of McGilvray's earlier tasks was to chair the inaugural AGM of the Caledonian Thistle Members' Club on June 29th 1995. Once agreement between the two partners had been reached, this was not long in the setting up, membership being open to Season Ticket holders prepared to pay a small additional fee. But it was subject to a strict vetting process by the Board who, in the light of earlier experiences, wanted to make sure that no subversive elements were admitted. Indeed to this end a small number of applicants were rejected in view of their past behaviour during the days of controversy. Initial membership was around 200, with a solid core of moderate fans truly committed to the aims and future of the Football Club.

Hand in hand with the Members' Club went the Management Committee which undertook much of the "on the ground" day to day running of Caledonian Thistle and included a large number of willing helpers which were needed more and more as time went on.

Help was forthcoming from a diversity of sources. Ex-Thistle people who made a large contribution to running Caledonian Thistle both on match days and at other times included the likes of secretary Ian MacKenzie who was proud now to wear the blue and red tie along other former Jags workers like John Falconer. More remarkable still was Mike Shewan, known universally as "Gemmell" and formerly one of the harder line Caley Rebels - indeed one of the five who forced themselves on to the Caley Committee in June 1994. Once the new club became a reality Gemmell rapidly came to accept the fact and soon became a valuable member of the establishment.

When Caledonian Thistle was first formed, it was predicted that it would have a strong pull for neutral people, and perhaps the classic example was someone like Ian Broadfoot. A Queens Park supporter almost from birth, he came to Inverness from Glasgow with no interest in Caley, Thistle or Highland League football. However from an early stage he saw the new enterprise as one to be encouraged and joined the Management Committee in 1995, becoming Statistician and manager of the Club Shop.

Returning to what transpired to be an historic inaugural AGM of the Members' Club, by an overwhelming majority it agreed in principle to the radical and important step of including the word "Inverness" in the club's title from season 1996-97. The details would still have to be hammered out and a change in the Articles of Association made since this would be put into effect before the Members' Club's third AGM. But from the District Council's point of view alone, the decision was essential as the main request, albeit not requirement, of the lease of the Stadium site. Ex-Thistle people were particularly happy because they felt that it took them a further step away from the old adversarial days which were still less than a year in the past.

By now the new season was just over a month away and it would see a completely new atmosphere sweep through the club - for more reasons than one.

Chapter Twelve

ENTER PELE PATERSON

Caledonian Thistle's new blue, black and red strip was unveiled publicly at an Open Day at Telford Street on the blistering hot afternoon of Saturday, July 22nd 1995. Due to a production delay just one jersey was available, but it was enough to convey the desired message. In many ways this event was the beginning of a new era for a club which would very quickly acquire a central place in the hearts and minds of the people of Inverness and much further afield than that too.

Coming hard on the heels of such profound internal changes and the agreement to incorporate Inverness into the name, this public display of the new jersey went a long way towards exorcising the ghost of the age of strife in which the club had been created. What took place that Saturday afternoon in effect symbolised the public rebirth of Caledonian Thistle F.C.

From here onwards the club would rapidly establish itself as a fundamental part of the fabric of Inverness. This relationship would be further cemented in forthcoming months as a difficult birth gave way to further developments in a fruitful and increasingly peaceful adolescence. A stormy year of preparation had been followed by a tense and troubled first season. Now, with a new Stadium to look forward to in the near future, the signs were much more positive.

This new credibility was also enhanced by a sponsorship deal with The Inverness Courier, the town's biggest selling newspaper whose words had been taken as Gospel by Invernessians since 1817.

In the late afternoon of Sunday, July 30th smoke was seen pouring from Thistle's former grandstand at Kingsmills Park. The place had been derelict for over a year now, frozen in limbo by the recently lifted interdict. For a while there had been hopes that the Kingsmills turf, which in 1979 entered the record books with 29 postponements before one Scottish Cup tie could go ahead, might be transferred to become the playing surface at East Longman. But by now it was a jungle, far beyond redemption. Nor was there anything of value in the stand and the fire, which was quickly put out, was put down to a casual act of teenage vandalism.

Meanwhile the new manager was beginning to make his presence felt. He very quickly brought in former St. Johnstone defender Alec Caldwell as his assistant. The two had known each other for years and Caldwell already had a proud reputation in Highland League management, including the working of wonders at Lossiemouth in the mid 80s when they were bottom of the League. As player/manager, Caldwell had taken Lossie to two North Cup Finals but had been unable to prevent

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A sad end to an overgrown Kingsmills Park as the flames take hold.

the man he was about to join from scoring the winner for Forres in one of them.

Paterson was very soon given a player budget for the season. And with his previous background very much in Moray and Aberdeenshire it was there that he looked first in his attempt to give the fans the attacking football they wanted and to get the team up the League. With his enormous Highland League reputation, he also had a huge advantage that players actively wanted to come and play for him wherever he was.

His prime target very soon emerged as Lossiemouth's diminutive goal machine Iain Stewart who the previous season had put away over 40 for the Moray club. "An Iain Stewart hat trick" had become an integral term in Highland League vocabulary and now Paterson wanted this to become the case in Inverness.

Stewart's contract at Grant Park had just ended but the two clubs were poles apart in terms of a fee. Stewart was seemingly as keen as the rest to go with Paterson and duly signed on June 9th, leaving the finances to a tribunal. That eventually came up with a figure of £30,000, making Stewart the most expensive player to have joined a club in the North.

Next on Paterson's shopping list was Elgin City defender Iain MacArthur whose start was delayed and later disrupted again by injury, so it was early in 1996 before he made a real beginning. But from then on his steadiness at right back and later as sweeper would make him one of the most respected players at the club - and excellent value for £20,000. The defence was further boosted by the arrival of Robbie Benson as part of an exchange deal for three players who went to Clach, but a serious knee injury sidelined him long term after just five games. Paterson also brought in all rounder Dave McGinlay who had been with him at Huntly, but the brother of the Scotland striker found it difficult to hold down a regular first team berth. Similarly in came Doug Green from New Elgin Juniors, but despite a few flashes of brilliance, he never really flourished, starting only six games.

New pace on the wing was injected with the acquisition of Davie Ross from Brora Rangers who

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thought nothing of regular trips from Kinlochbervie for training. And Pele wasn't finished yet because there were further exciting signings just over the horizon.

Inevitably with so many new arrivals there would also have to be departures, given that Baltacha had used as many as 29 players in that first season. In contrast, Paterson made do with 22 in 1995 - 96. In the middle of June, seven players were named for transfer, the shock being the inclusion of Colin Mitchell. Paterson explained that he simply had a surplus of attacking midfielders, but before arrangements could be made, Mitchell's form improved so much that he survived another season. The deals which were done for these departing players also went some way to offset what had been paid out.

One other big change came in the Number One jersey. After four games the oldest man on the squad, 35 year old Jim Calder, took the position from Mark MacRitchie and held on to it with some spectacular performances, his colleague later moving to Lossiemouth.

And the Chairman did not waste much time before setting out his stall in a way which certainly put instant pressure on both players and management. Speaking in The Inverness Courier's pre-season football supplement, McGilvray announced that his hope was for Premier League football in the town in the foreseeable future.

"I would like to think that within 5 years we'll be in the First Division and within 8 to 10 years I would like to see us in the Premier League," he said. "There is no doubt that we have the catchment area and I feel that if we were in the Premier League we would have bigger attendances than some of the clubs there just now."

The new season opened with the long trip to Berwick in the Coca Cola Cup on August 5th, 1995 where Caledonian Thistle went ahead just after half time through an own goal, but allowed the Division 2 team an equaliser. That was how it stayed throughout extra time and the hammer blow came when McGinlay's fourth penalty was saved, putting Berwick through. Paterson's debut lineup was McRitchie, McGinlay, McAllister, Noble, Benson, Ross, Mitchell (Hastings), Lisle (Bennett), Stewart, Christie, Green.

Caledonian Thistle's first League game of season 1995-96 on August 12th was at home to Livingston where Jim Leishman looked poised to do a lot with a squad which included several full timers. There was to be no winning start for Steve Paterson when his side, well outclassed, went down 3-0.

Ten days later the team showed the beginnings of an alarming tendency to get a lead and then lose it when they went down 2-1 at home to Alloa in the B and Q Cup. This happened again the following Saturday with the same scoreline at home to Brechin, sending Caledonian Thistle to the bottom of the table. Then the week after that they grabbed their first point at Cliftonhill, but only after allowing Albion Rovers to level matters twice after Hercher twice put them ahead.

It was certainly a hesitant start, but not perhaps surprising given the extent of the personnel changes and also the complete overhaul of the style of play. Paterson needed time to find the right blend and by the end of September 1995, it suddenly became evident that he had done just that.

It began with a 5-0 annihilation of Alloa at Recreation Park on the 23rd. After that came a pause for the first derby of the season at Telford Street where again Hercher put the Inverness team ahead, only for his effort to be neutralised by Jamie MacPherson on the half hour. Then shortly after half time, three minutes of madness saw referee Mr. Freeland red card Christie, Bennett and County's MacPherson.

There was no further scoring and Caledonian Thistle then remained unbeaten in their next six games, indeed until the next derby at Dingwall. During this particular purple patch their only slip up was a goalless draw away to emerging promotion favourites Brechin. Five wins included 5-0 away to East Stirling, a club record 6-1 at home to Albion Rovers (it was an amazing 6-0 at half time), and

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5-1 at home to Arbroath. Twenty points from a possible twenty four in eight games was a formidable run in this League. By November 11th they were second, splitting leaders Livingston and Ross County, and there was talk once again of promotion. By this time, in terms of goals per game, they were the fastest scoring team in British football.

With Livingston looking very much the Champions in waiting, it now appeared as if the two North clubs could end up fighting out the second promotion spot. This therefore put a sharp focus on the derby at Dingwall on November 18th in front of a Division 3 record 4288 fans where MacPherson scored one in each half to give Ross County all three points. It was here that the Inverness bandwagon faltered just a little because after this the last three League games of 1995 ended as draws. However the match that really caught the imagination that December was in Inverness - but at Clach Park, not Telford Street. The occasion was the H.O.E. Inverness Cup Final where the two Scottish League sides clashed head to head on December 9th 1995.

Just 24 hours before the game, Caledonian Thistle announced that they had pulled off a spectacular double signing coup. It had been known for some time that Paterson had been chasing Mike Teasdale, formerly Elgin but now with Dundee, Brian Thomson who had been one of his key players at Huntly and Brora boy Gary Farquhar of St. Johnstone. Then on the afternoon of December 8th, a visibly excited Chairman Dougie McGilvray announced that they had got Teasdale and Thomson. There was not much change from £30,000 for these two key players.

Not surprisingly there was an atmosphere of intense anticipation the following day among 2495 fans - certainly the biggest crowd Grant Street Park had hosted for many a long year. And while Baltacha had declined to field much more than a reserve side for cup ties of this calibre, Paterson appeared to take a rather different view. Anticipating - correctly as it happened - that Bobby Wilson would do likewise, he produced more or less his current first team squad. Indeed the main changes were putting Thomson and Teasdale on from the start - hardly a weakening of the side!

The Caledonian Thistle lineup was:- McRitchie, MacArthur (McGinlay), Hastings, Bennett, Noble, Ross, Teasdale, Scott, Stewart, Christie, Thomson (Hercher). However County, once again through MacPherson, were first to score before Iain Stewart equalised. Colin Milne restored the Ross County lead and once more Stewart squared things just before half time.

After the interval it was all Caley Thistle. Christie put them ahead for the first time before Teasdale scored on his debut and Stewart completed his hat trick to seal the tie at 5-2 in 63 minutes. That treble made Stewart Man of the Match, but many will remember this game as "Daisy" Ross's finest hour, given the chances he created and the havoc he stirred up in the County defence. Players, fans and directors alike were ecstatic at Caledonian Thistle's first piece of silverware. It may not have been the most prestigious trophy in the land, but such a comprehensive victory over the Old Enemy made it all the sweeter.

With the exception of the financing of the Stadium, dealt with in the next chapter, this was an unprecedentedly peaceful period, with only one other issue really threatening to rock the boat. The Members Club's approval of putting Inverness into the name was endorsed by 95% of fans in a poll, but there was disagreement about how this could be achieved.

The difference was along predictable lines. Thistle people still held out for a complete break with something like Inverness F.C. or Inverness United. They believed that support was not getting behind the club simply because fans didn't know what to shout. On the other hand the firm December 1993 agreement was to call the club Caledonian Thistle and Caley wanted any addition to accommodate this.

Whatever happened, the residual membership of both Caley and Thistle would still have to approve it. But it was here that a simple addition of the town's name to the current title began to

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emerge as the front runner. Although a final decision was some time away, it was during the autumn of 1995 that Inverness Caledonian Thistle became the most probable name for the following season. The Chairman certainly led from the front. His strident cries of "Come on Inverness" had been a very audible feature of both home and away games for some time.

There was a mid season Boardroom change when Jim Jarvie succeeded David MacDonald as one of Caley's five members. The former Rebel leader had not attended meetings for some time and Caley now replaced him with local insurance consultant Jarvie, whose particular interest was in youth development. When Danny MacDonald eventually began as Community Development Officer, they made a formidable partnership. INE still had not replaced Jock McDonald and showed no inclination to do so, perhaps because even a ten strong Board was verging towards the large side.

The 1995-96 Festive break produced some of the coldest weather on record, with temperatures often below minus 20. This played havoc with fixtures, effectively forcing a three week shut down. On the afternoon of Wednesday, 3rd January 1996 that looked set to rise to four weeks because the Telford Street pitch looked like an Arctic wasteland. But intensive efforts by a huge battalion of Directors, Management Committee and fans miraculously made it playable for the second round of the Scottish Cup against Livingston on the Saturday.

Leishman's previous visit to Inverness ended in a comfortable 3-0 victory. But the extent to which that was turned round this time was a measure of how much progress Paterson had achieved in five months. David Ross and Mike Teasdale gave Caley Thistle a priceless 2-0 lead in just 24 minutes, but in the second half Livingston fought back to level terms. Then, straight from the kick-off after Livingston's second, Hercher ran on to a long through ball from MacArthur to net the winner. Never the fastest thing on two legs, Hercher displayed pace which even those who knew him as a callow youth could scarcely believe. Ten days on, late goals from Christie and Teasdale produced an even more spectacular 2-0 midweek League win at Livingston.

On Tuesday, January 23rd Ross County came to Inverness for the rescheduled New Year Derby in front of another new Division 3 record of 4931 fans. Once again Caledonian Thistle scored first through Stewart, only to be pegged back in the second half by Milne. Just two points from three Derbies established County as that season's bogey team without a doubt.

Almost the same thing happened on the Saturday. An early Stewart goal produced a lead over Division 1 bound East Fife in the third round of the Cup, but an equaliser with 12 minutes left sent the Inverness team on the road to Methil on February 12th.

Failure to hold on to a lead must have been frustrating for Paterson in that opening season. In a total of 43 League and Cup games Caledonian Thistle had 22 defeats or score draws. Of these, seven draws and three defeats came after they had opened the scoring.

But it was the other way round at that replay at Methil where East Fife drew first blood before a dramatic equaliser three minutes into injury time. It may have been an own goal, but Hercher got and deserved the credit. With no further progress in extra time, it was down to penalties where the Bayview side went to pieces, converting only one to send Caley Thistle to Stenhousemuir the following Saturday in round four. This would not be an easy tie against Terry Christie's Warriors who had already created a sensation by winning the League Challenge Cup earlier in the season.

One of the main reasons for signing Brian Thomson had been the scoring of goals, but his opening spell had not been particularly prolific. Indeed he had only got one in eight games. However what he did at Stenhousemuir on February 17th 1996 will alone earn him a place in club history. With 15 minutes left and the match goalless, the cross came from Teasdale and Thomson's shot into the corner of the net was unstoppable. Caley Thistle held on to become only the second club from the North to win through to the quarter finals of the Scottish Cup. The first had been Elgin City in 1968, supported

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by a local youngster called Steve Paterson who stood on the Borough Briggs terracing dreaming of managing his own team into the last eight of the National knockout. He had now done it.

On the final whistle they trooped, jubilant, into the dressing room which fifteen minutes later erupted as the BBC broadcast the immortal words:

“Caledonian Thistle..... will play..... Rangers.”

The term “Cup Fever” is most frequently perceived to apply to small towns with non-League teams which earn a glorious day in the sun. However that was what swept Inverness in the three week run-up to what was to be an historic day for Caledonian Thistle. “The Rangers Game” was the talk of the clubs, pubs and terracings - and indeed the supermarkets and the hairdressers too. Getting a hold of tickets soon became a local obsession and those connected with the club instantly found a rapid increase in their popularity ratings.

But there could be no talk of tickets until a venue could be fixed. There was a definite will within the club to hold the game at Telford Street. However given the enormity of the occasion, huge difficulties quickly emerged. In particular the traffic situation on Telford Street could become chaotic, and other major problems included the possibility of North based Rangers supporters getting tickets for the home end, creating a potential flashpoint. The SFA considered the situation, and eventually declared that the match would go ahead at a neutral venue. In terms of accommodating an event of this magnitude at a purpose built Stadium in Inverness, the draw had come a year too soon. With Telford Street excluded, the Directors would have loved to have given up home rights and gone to Ibrox for a massive pay day. However this was expressly forbidden by the SFA who, at the third round stage, had refused Keith permission to do just that. So Caley Thistle would also have to go to a neutral venue, and the SFA chose Tannadice Park, Dundee.

But although public anticipation was enormous, Paterson - never the most excitable of men at the best of times - refused to go overboard about the tie. Indeed on one occasion, perhaps remembering his Chairman’s primary aim of moving up the League, he commented,

“Obviously it’s going to be the highlight of the season, but if you asked me would I rather play Rangers in the quarter final and lose out on promotion, or get promotion and get knocked out in the first round of the Scottish Cup, I’d rather get knocked out in the first round of the Scottish Cup.”

Meanwhile McGilvray’s eye was on the turnstile revenues - and maybe, supreme optimist that he was, he still hadn’t entirely given up hope of a big Ibrox pay day!

“We had to buy a lot of players and bring a new manager in and this year alone we’ve spent over £100,000 on transfer fees and we have to get that money back. I would say to the players ‘go out there, enjoy yourselves..... and get us a draw, please!’”

Meanwhile Iain Stewart, bluenosed Rangers fan that he was, just had to admit that if he had the chance to slip one by Goram, he would snap it up with relish.

It was probably the 300 mile round trip rather than the £12 and £14 ticket prices that eventually took the edge off the size of the Inverness support. In the end around 2000 Inverness tickets were transferred to Rangers, but there were still over 5000 Caley Thistle fans inside Tannadice on March 9th 1996. The A9 had been thick with cars and buses, the popular roadside eating place at Ballinluig seldom so busy. This was the Highlanders’ great day out and the atmosphere among the 12,500 fans inside Tannadice was electric. No one could understand why the Rangers supporters kept singing the English rugby anthem “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”, but no one from Inverness exactly cared.

Pre-match opinions from the fans about the result had varied from “We’ll get hammered,like...” to

ENTER PELE PATERSON

"They won't put that many past us you know." Nobody expected anything other than defeat and the manager's main hope was "to come out of the match with dignity." He would not be disappointed.

Certainly Grassa Bennett's prediction that they might even get more time on the ball than in a Third Division match was quickly verified, and it also became apparent that the Caley Thistle midfield was vital. As long as these players remained mobile enough to supplement both attack and defence, Rangers could at least be restrained. The other prediction that keeping a clean slate for the first quarter hour was the best way to avoid annihilation also stood the test of time - but just. It was exactly on the quarter hour that poor Brian Thomson's attempted clearance of a pass from Van Vossen to Laudrup slid past Calder.



Richard Hastings successfully circumnavigating Brian Laudrup at Tannadice.

But Caley Thistle still attacked again and again. On several occasions they came desperately close to their dream of scoring against Rangers - the bluenosed Stewart closer than most. It was not to be, however, but it took a Gascoigne double in 35 and 52 minutes to seal the tie for the Ibrox side. His first only came when he elbowed McCoist aside, a sin for which he immediately atoned with a "kiss better".

It was an afternoon of high drama and emotion - the roar when Hercher dispossessed Gazza was unforgettable. And at the end of it all the Caledonian Thistle players could hold their heads high at restricting the score to 3-0 - something already beyond a number of Premier League clubs. The Highland convoy went back up the packed A9 in high spirits. Less than 24 hours later almost the entire first team squad turned out to take part in the Inverness Fun Run in aid of charity.

But as the Scottish Cup fairytale was being acted out, League form began to disintegrate. It is perhaps impossible to say with certainty that the distraction of the Cup run was the major factor, but it must have had some effect. From the ten games following the Cup tie at Stenhousemuir, the team took only fourteen points out of a possible thirty.

This was hardly promotion form, and by early April any last chance had gone, the goal glut apparently having disappeared almost completely. In 25 League and Cup games up to the end of January they had scored 53 goals, 20 of them from Iain Stewart. In the remaining 18 games the net was found on just 19 occasions. Stewart's confidence in particular seemed to have gone with just four strikes in that period. On the other hand, the previous season's top scorers had been Hercher (7) and Christie (6), who grabbed 12 apiece this time around.

The Saturday after the Rangers game, after a dismal 2-1 defeat at Dingwall in the final Derby, Paterson's patience showed rare signs of cracking. His usual post-match form was to emerge at leisure from the dressing room and give journalists his thoughts. This time he took much longer even than normal, by which time the rest of the team had gone. Then, unusually, he invited four waiting reporters back into the dressing room before launching an unprecedented attack on the very players who had done so well in Dundee just a week earlier.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

"I haven't got much confidence for the games coming up. Basically I've lost confidence in my team and realistically on current form we have no chance of promotion," he said. "The players with Caledonian Thistle are the best paid in the Third Division and quite simply if they can't do the job I'll get rid of them."

Exactly a year later, after a much more satisfying derby result which put the club within three points of promotion, Paterson admitted that with the benefit of hindsight it was to the longer term good that Division 2 was not reached in 1996. The club was not ready for it at this stage, he believed. But at the time his outburst created a sensation.

Paterson's words also gave very early intimation of an impending clearout. He later admitted that giving this early warning was probably a mistake because the Press were never off his back until he finally announced who were to go.

When seven players were named on April 18th, it came as something of an anticlimax following the sensational build up. They included Dave McGinlay who simply never seemed to fit into the team, Mark MacRitchie who appeared happy enough to return to first team football at Lossiemouth and the highly respected midfielder Martin Lisle who was given a free transfer in recognition of 17 years valued service at Telford Street Park. Lisle ended his Scottish League career when he led the team out as captain in the final match against Livingston.

And so season 1995 - 96 ended with Caledonian Thistle third with 57 points, behind Livingston and Brechin on 72 and 63. Promotion had not been all that far away. And even although the goals had dried up towards the end their 64, well up on the previous season's 48, made them top scorers in Division 3. With the benefit of hindsight, it could be said that in football terms a further delay of a season before promotion was in the Club's longer term interest.

Behind the scenes there were some important but uncontroversial matters to be sorted out. Firstly the long awaited change of name to Inverness Caledonian Thistle was straightforwardly agreed upon. It was cumbersome - certainly a television caption writer's nightmare - but it satisfied more brands of Political Correctness than anything else. Then, early in August 1996, the Members Club met and in less than five minutes agreed unanimously to a Share Issue of up to £900,000. These were changed days. This idea had initially been floated over a year previously and even at this ambitious level it would still guarantee over half the equity staying in the hands of the merger partners. Nobody really expected the whole thing to be taken up, but £400,000 would be enough to ensure finance of the Stadium, which by now had been given another extension from the League and was set to open in November 1996. Anything more than £400,000 would begin to eat into the overdraft, while full subscription would wipe it out altogether.

That same evening Members were shown the accounts for 1995-96 which showed a dramatic turnaround from the previous year. A loss of £156,927 had been converted this time into a profit of £207,608, although this was a false figure because it included the extra money gained on Telford Street which had finally been sold for £1 million rather than the expected £750,000. Kingsmills, meanwhile, had realised £486,000. Turnover for 1995-95 had been £510,196, a figure well outwith the imagination of most Division 3 clubs - and certainly of Caley and Thistle.

There was equally good news on the attendance front where League gates were up 25%, closing the gap on Ross County. In their first season Caledonian Thistle had averaged 1275 per game with Ross County on 1566. This time it was up to 1579 at Telford Street with 1749 at Dingwall. Livingston actually topped the Division 3 standings on this occasion with 2105, but that was mainly due to the momentum generated by their new Stadium - something from which Inverness Caledonian Thistle was still to benefit in a big way.

Chapter Thirteen

ONE TEAM, BUT A COUNCIL DIVIDED

The delay of the Stadium, initially until August 1996, approved by the Scottish League, gave a huge extra breathing space. The complexities of the project and its funding were such that all of this, and more, would be needed. When we last left this thread of the story in the spring of 1995, the pressing issue was Planning Consent involving extensive negotiations between Club and Regional Council.

Outline Planning Consent, obtained in December 1994, came with no less than twenty two conditions, including five matters on which a decision was reserved. Several conditions took the club completely by surprise and none less than a demand for a 7.3 metre wide access road with a 3 metre combined footpath and cycle track. This loop would offer access to home supporters from West Longman under the abutment of the Kessock Bridge and away supporters from the Longman Roundabout. In addition, car parking requirements were stringent, amounting to one space for every four spectators - 1250 spaces for this 5000 capacity stadium.

Requirements for the Stadium building itself were also severe on this high profile site. One condition stated "The Planning Authority will expect a high standard of design and finish for the football stadium. Samples of all proposed external finishes shall require the prior approval of the Director of Planning." Others included the planting of trees and shrubs to create a visual barrier between Stadium and A9 and no direct pedestrian access to the trunk road between the Longman Roundabout and the Kessock Bridge. Protection of all existing water, sewerage and other infrastructure features was demanded. Also, just for good measure, "64 cycle racks (Sheffield Style)".

As these conditions rained down on the club it rapidly became evident that this Stadium was going to be very expensive indeed, and a good deal more costly than original estimates. Furthermore, the decision to go to East Longman had eliminated the immediate possibility of cross funding. The crushing item was the high specification road which there was no prospect of the Council providing. (It did appear, however, that they would be prepared to "adopt" it as their own on completion.) Negotiations with the planners were extensive but attempts to get them to relax conditions on the road and agree to a simpler access fell on deaf ears.

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Bruce Hare's feasibility study had not anticipated any extraordinary infrastructure costs, but that was blown out of the water by the Region's planners. There were also costs for the reclamation of over 3 acres of land which soon began to rise too in what was a rapidly escalating financial nightmare for Caledonian Thistle.

Full Planning Consent was finally obtained on May 24th 1995. Despite the gathering financial clouds, this was just the latest of a series of pieces of good news that month, with huge progress also being made on the merger and football fronts. However it was not plain sailing at the Planning Committee meeting when Black Isle councillor Bryan Beattie began by expressing concern about the design and the materials used. He even proposed an amendment on the not unfamiliar subject of a deferral - on this occasion pending further information on colours and seat finishings. But that failed against Provost Fraser's motion to give consent which was carried 13 - 10.

The massive planning hurdle overcome, the equally crucial issues of tenders and finance could now be addressed. It was a busy time for the Stadium Committee and especially for McGilvray who, as well as being front man for the Stadium, was also in the process of coming to terms with becoming Club Chairman. He was ably supported by a number of people, with the two newly nominated INE directors Roy MacLennan, who had the particularly onerous task of finance and cash flow, and Ken Thomson particularly involved. And these three were not the only club officials who, over a long period of time, gave rather less time than normal to their own businesses in the name of football. Also on that Committee were prominent local accountant Alan Nelson and the then ex-Provost Allan Sellar. It was on these five men that much of the onus was to fall for the next year and more, and in particular over the coming winter. Apart from the search for funding there was a huge amount of liaison with professional advisers to be done and documentation to be processed.

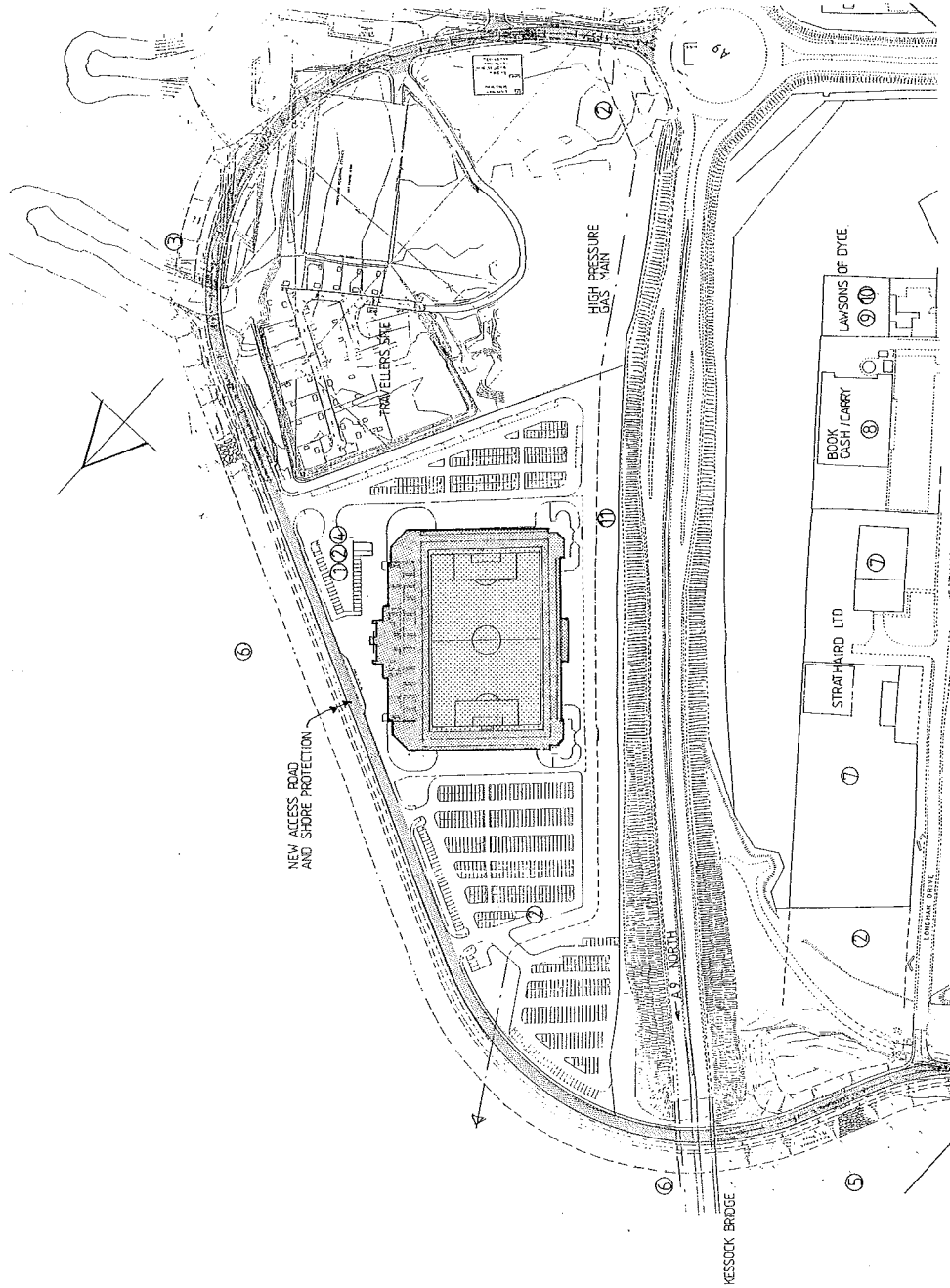
On the professional side the architect for the project was Alister Allan of Baxter, Clark and Paul and the consulting engineer was Alan Cruden of A.F. Cruden Associates while McLeod and Aitken were the Quantity Surveyors.

When the tenders were opened in July 1995 it became quickly evident that the scale of the project would have to be reduced significantly. The lowest tender for the main Stadium under the initial plan for a stand with almost 3000 seats was around £3.5 million from MacGregors, and this before a yard of road was built or a square inch of land reclaimed. This was well outwith what could conceivably be afforded. It led to an urgent reduction in many features of the main building and other changes including the relocation of turnstiles to the centre line of the pitch - a total of 19 changes saving just over £1 million. In hurried consultation with planners, seating capacity also came down to 1732 under cover and 500 in uncovered wings. However this would still be by far the biggest sporting structure in the North, a title which at the time was held by Ross County's 1200 seater East Stand which opened that summer.

Even cutting everything to the bone, the costs which finally had to be accepted were £2,532,150 for the main Stadium, £1,387,121 for the road and £427,996 for the pitch and ground stabilisation. This made a grand total of £4,347,267. When professional fees and other costs were added, the total bill would ultimately be a massive £4,843,674. And the sums still didn't add up. Taking into account all sources of money, including assets, the Football Trust and borrowings, the budget was still about a million pounds short.

This was the desperate scenario which faced Caledonian Thistle in July 1995. A pledge had been made to the Scottish League to provide a Stadium in just over a year's time and the cash to build it was still seriously short. The main reason may have been the stringent Planning conditions, but that knowledge brought the balancing of the books no closer.

ONE TEAM, BUT A COUNCIL DIVIDED



Baxter, Clark and Paul's site plan of the Caledonian Stadium.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

There was perhaps a modest window of a few weeks to try to obtain the necessary funding. Failing this the Stadium would at best be subject to further delays or at worst the plan would collapse. Just as the club was escaping from the merger minefield, another equally deadly threat had materialised. This was the beginning of a particularly busy period for the Stadium Committee which had already been working hard to ensure that a facility would be in place.

The opening gambit was to approach the District Council for more land, development of which would create revenue to close the funding gap. The aim was to acquire all 35 acres to be encompassed by the proposed road - land valued at £1.8 million. The club's proposal was that this could be achieved by donation, sale, lease or the Council acquiring a shareholding in the Stadium by way of the creation of the Inverness Burgh Stadium Company Ltd.

Brief consideration by the Full Council on August 2nd merely deferred the matter for three weeks pending reports from Director of Finance Alan Imlah and Director of Legal Services Donald Somerville. When these appeared on August 15th, Imlah's report on what options there were to help the club came over as a very negative document indeed.

It outlined four separate possibilities. Option A was the purchase of shares as originally suggested. Option B involved financial support from normal Council sources if it were to be deemed in the best interests of Inverness to do so. Option C was to use Section 15 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1982 which gave Councils powers to take action to provide

“anything necessary or expedient for the purpose of ensuring that there are available..... such facilities for recreational, sporting, cultural or social activities as they consider appropriate.”

It was on this basis that the town's new Aquadome had recently become feasible. Then there was Option D which was for the club to go away and raise, and pay for, its own money on the private market.

Imlah's report remarked:

“I have to say briefly and unequivocally that I am strongly against Options A,B or C.”

What he was in effect telling the Council was that the club should raise its own money, which McGilvray claimed would put their already severely stretched finances into serious debt.

Somerville's report was rather less swingeing but reiterated the opinion that in the case of a lease even of the original site, the revenue lost to the Council over a 99 year term would be £5.4 million. The Council's Legal Chief also called for Senior Counsel's opinion and consultation with the Highland Council.

With the handover of Local Government to the Highland Council due the following April 1st, those favouring assistance were aware of an steadily closing window of opportunity and an intensifying race against time. Whatever the District Council's final verdict, it would certainly be a lot more favourable than the full Highland Council, many of whose outlying members were traditionally hostile to the allocation of major assets to Inverness. So in parallel with attempts to secure a knockout at District Council level, opponents of assistance also attempted prevarication so the final decision would in addition require approval of the Highland Council which they believed it would fail to get. Whether or not any District assistance would be subject to Highland Council approval was, in August 1995, very much a grey area, or as District Chief Executive Brian Wilson put it “dependent on interpretation of Statute.” But the longer the delay, the greater the chance that this would be required.

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When the District Council reconvened on August 22nd, letters both for and against assistance had been received. These included one from Councillor Lyon claiming that it would be a misuse of public funds to help a private concern. Lyon also successfully moved for the issue to be discussed in future in public. In the ensuing debate, opponents of further aid made a vigorous case that the lease of the Stadium site had been generosity enough. The minute of that meeting also mentions

“strong advice from various Officials that the rate of return on the investment as referred to by the Director of Finance was likely to be very poor.”

However those for assistance had begun to focus in on cash aid of £1.2 million under Section 15 of the Act - Imlah's Option C - in lieu of transfer of land to the club. This was the difference between the value of the whole site and the £600,000 worth which the club already leased. In a political climate of ever tightening constraints on the Public Purse, this was a huge amount of money to go to a single, independent body.

It was being suggested that this could largely be covered by the sale of commercial sites. But when it became apparent that the Council also had other commitments, Councillor David Stewart amended his motion to £900,000. This seemed the maximum sum the Council could conceivably depend on producing, and “900,000” rapidly became the most talked about number in the history of Inverness.

Councillor Stewart's motion was seconded by Donald Fraser and opponents insisted on a roll call vote which would ensure a record of who had voted in which direction. Already there was scaremongering about the possibility of Councillors being surcharged if it were later to be established that this was misuse of public funds. Behind the scenes this, and other acrimonious exchanges, soon soured the atmosphere in what had previously been a happy District Council.

It took the best part of a minute for the names of all 25 Councillors present to be called out and for their responses to be recorded in favour either of the Motion to give the money or Councillor Lyon's Amendment not to. It must have been the longest minute in the lives of many of the Club officials present - not unlike a penalty shootout when one side then the other gets the upper hand. In the end the Motion to give this vital money prevailed by 14 votes to 11, with Provost Fraser at that time voting against.

But although this was a huge step forward towards the guarantee of long term Scottish League football in Inverness, the campaign wasn't home and dry yet. No one, particularly with threats of a surcharge, was prepared to risk handing over anything without the highest of legal opinion. So the Motion would only be put into effect subject to the various provisos in the officials' reports - and possibly also consultation with the Highland Council.

This was still a major victory for Caledonian Thistle. However McGilvray - aware that all was not signed and sealed - was relatively tight lipped as he emerged, triumphant, from the Council Chamber.

“I am delighted with the Council's motion,” was his reaction. “We just have to wait and see what the Q.C. says.”

Legal examination of the award was made by the most senior Queen's Counsel in Scotland, Andrew Hardie. Apart from being Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, he was also a renowned expert on Local Government. On October 23rd 1995 Inverness eagerly awaited the outcome of the Full Council meeting which followed the circulation of his findings to Members.

The key phrase in the 1982 Act was “necessary and expedient.” In other words, did Inverness need a Stadium, did paying for it depend on Council assistance and would such assistance speed up its

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creation? Andrew Hardie's view was essentially that this scenario could potentially meet these criteria, but it wasn't there yet by any means. He observed:

"...it will be noted that before the Council can contribute towards the provision of a football stadium the Council must be satisfied that it is necessary or expedient to do so to ensure the availability of such a Stadium. On the basis of the information presently before me, I do not consider that there is sufficient information to enable the Council to take such a step. There is no business plan or other financial documentation which discloses that it is necessary or expedient for this project that a grant should be made, far less a grant of £900,000".

The clock was ticking on towards the handover to the Highland Council and also towards a time when work would have to be started on site in order to meet the Scottish League's deadline. And here was another delay - potentially a lengthy one. What in effect was required was proof that the town needed the Stadium and the financial evidence that the club could not afford it without Council help.

By now it had been decided, although not made public, that MacGregor Construction would build the Stadium with Morrison Construction responsible for road and infrastructure. However until full funding was absolutely confirmed these contracts could not be finally let. Hardie had made the point that the letting of contracts could indicate an ability to pay without assistance, but the club was never in a position to let contracts ahead of the necessary finance becoming available.



The pitch came first. Careful watering in front of the steel skeleton of the stand. May 1996.

ONE TEAM, BUT A COUNCIL DIVIDED

What did have to get under way was work on the pitch so it could be ready for play in a year's time. In a considerable act of faith the Board sanctioned the commencement of that part of the work which they could pay for. At worst, if the whole project collapsed for lack of funding, this would be the only liability. By the autumn of 1995 this looked rather less likely although by no means certain. This was a risk worth taking. Otherwise it was into 1996 before contracts relating to major parts of the project could be let.

On October 23rd the Council had resolved to go back to the club for a great deal more information and also "a clear and unequivocal statement of what would happen if the Council did not make the Grant." They received their answer in no uncertain terms in a letter early in November from McGilvray to Imlah who had now become Chief Executive, Brian Wilson having taken up the post of Depute Chief Executive of the new Highland Council. McGilvray's letter soon became public and created a sensation in the town. The Chairman simply said that if the money was not forthcoming he would recommend to his Board to resign from the Scottish League, because without the cash they could not deliver the Stadium which was a condition of membership.

At the time this was regarded as a high risk strategy and a supreme example of brinkmanship. However it also reflects the club's desperate situation. It certainly put pressure on the Councillors. Few, whatever their opinions on the Grant, would have wanted the town to lose its League place - particularly when they might be regarded as responsible. Further leverage came from a statement from INE that their assistance, totalling over half a million pounds, would be dependent on the Council coming up with the money. In addition there was the strong possibility of getting almost £400,000 of European Objective 1 cash which in turn would be dependent on the Council and INE contributions. This created a complex web of mutually dependent funding totalling £1.8 million without which the Stadium project would almost certainly collapse. The only apparent road to survival was approval of the £900,000 grant by the Councillors who were in consequence put under enormous pressure.

One ace up the club's sleeve was what they could claim the realisation of the Stadium project would mean to Inverness. Once the Stadium was completed, along with retail accommodation at Telford Street and domestic units at Kingsmills, they contended that rateable value in excess of £450,000 per annum would be generated. The club also believed that these three developments, with a total value of around £9 million, would generate 130 permanent jobs and 200 construction jobs. This, they suggested, should mean that the Council would actually be in profit quite soon after the grant had been paid.

The District Council Chamber was packed with an expectant throng on the evening of 14th November 1995 when the full Council next met. In the public area downstairs the company included almost the entire Caledonian Thistle Board and Management Committee in club blazers and ties. But the intense expectation was all to no avail. What was being increasingly billed as the last great decision in the history of Inverness District Council would have to wait for another day.

The meeting took just ten minutes to decide to defer its decision again. During the autumn the club had been asked for more and more information and had patiently provided everything from financial material to a wide range of other sporting and non-sporting uses the development could catalyse. That very day no less than 41 pages worth, including the Directors' CVs, had arrived at the Town Hall and time was needed to digest it. In addition the club's new solicitors Innes and MacKay, whose Calum Duncan was particularly experienced in Local Government, said they wanted a couple of weeks to get themselves up to speed on what was a very complex situation. On the other hand, time was of the essence if the grant was to be paid and one of its staunchest supporters Councillor Bill McAllister asked for an assurance that there would be no further delay of the proceedings.

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In the end the Council received a mountain of financial and other information from the club. There was also a thick file of letters, some supporting the grant and others the principle of a Stadium in Inverness. Between July 1995 and March 1996, letters came from sources as diverse as local MPs Charles Kennedy and Sir Russell Johnston, the Chamber of Commerce, the Scottish Rugby Union and other sporting bodies - and even an eight year old supporter. There were also letters from the SFA and the SFL on the consequences of the non-delivery or the late delivery of the stadium. At the same time the Council also received representations from members of the public opposing the grant.

By this time relations between Club officials and those of the Council were becoming distinctly strained. In particular the former were beginning to accuse the latter of asking for more and more in order to complicate the situation and even delay a decision until the Highland Council might be able to veto it. Meanwhile Council officials were also soon to become impatient at the club firing off letters in all directions which Somerville claimed "obfuscated the consideration of this matter." It would certainly require at least one further meeting of the Full Council to resolve the question.

On emerging from the Town Hall after the November 14th meeting, the author chanced upon one particularly notorious Caley Rebel who happened to be passing. The Rebel asked: "Did they get their money then?" The only part of the answer he wanted to hear was the initial "No, but....." before he went on his way, rejoicing.

One positive aspect which did follow that meeting was a revelation by Harbour Trust Vice Chairman Clive Goodman, in attendance as an observing shadow Highland Councillor. He disclosed that the Trust had been looking with great interest at the Stadium road and was firmly of the view that it greatly enhanced the development potential of the entire area.

In particular they were interested in developing West Longman on the other side of the Kessock Bridge abutment and a link through to East Longman via the Stadium road would be of enormous value. This reinforced the club's contention that their access was of use for far more than football. It also strengthened the case for the grant, nudging the debate away from the Stadium and towards the greater good of Inverness.

The next round took place back in the Council Chamber on December 18th 1995 and this time there was the confident expectation of a verdict. There was also intense speculation that the Provost was undergoing a change of heart. It had been put very strongly to him that even if he did not approve of assistance for the Stadium, the road was of huge benefit to the town. Meanwhile, senior officials were to contend that the project was a single, indivisible entity.

The two hour debate examined every facet of the case in the context of Andrew Hardie's requirements. First there was the question of whether there were currently adequate facilities for Scottish League football in Inverness. Director of Leisure and Recreation Alan Jones had not been heavily involved so far but had been asked to report on that issue. He told the meeting that he believed that the facilities were inadequate for Scottish League purposes although the town was fairly well provided for in the wider context. Somerville tried to build in a further delay, but the Council agreed that facilities were, in fact, inadequate.

On the subject of Necessity and Expediency, Somerville and Imlah came up with a number of potential legal and practical obstacles, including the question of whether £900,000 could physically be raised by the changeover date of March 31st. It was also commented that Andrew Hardie had observed that Councillors would require to justify any grant to the Accounts Commission.

Amid an atmosphere of mounting tension, numerous Councillors spoke for and against assistance before David Stewart, seconded by Donald Fraser, moved that the grant be made:

"subject to Objective One and INE funding being payable".

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Janet Home seconded by John Cole moved an amendment not to give the cash. The final statement before the vote came from Imlah who said he believed that the conditions had not been met and the grant should fall. This was endorsed by Somerville.

On a roll call vote Councillor Stewart's Motion was carried by 14 votes to 12. The money, it seemed, was on its way and the Stadium project was safe. Among the absentees that evening was Ron Lyon because of family bereavement while Councillor Ally MacLean, who had been in favour in August, changed his mind this time. But the telling change was on the part of Provost Fraser who jumped the other way - strictly on the strength of the benefit of the road, he was at pains to emphasise afterwards. Had he remained opposed there would have been a 13 - 13 tie, resolved by his casting vote against giving the grant. It was all as close as that.

Public interest had been intense with both sides of the argument featuring on several papers' letters pages. So the Inverness Courier took the extremely rare step of delaying its Monday afternoon deadline to cover the outcome. A team of two reporters alternated between sitting in on the meeting and sending copy right through to 8 pm. The Tuesday paper carried its biggest headline in living memory which read "OVER THE MOON!" Editor John MacDonald later admitted that they had two headlines ready that night and if things had gone the other way it was going to be "SICK AS A PARROT!"

The Inverness Courier

HIGHLAND NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

No. 15,583 (Established December 4, 1817)

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1995

35p

OVER THE MOON

Caley Thistle joy at £900,000 grant

THE long running Inverness football stadium saga drew to a dramatic close last night when council councillors narrowly voted to grant £900,000 for the project.

The £12.2 million loan in favour of former club Caley Thistle, East Lothian, stadium project came after a fierce two-hour special meeting - and against the advice of legal and finance officials.

Over 100 people, many of whom were from the Moray area, also

By Duncan Ross and Hector Mackenzie

attended the meeting. The council's decision was a landmark in the history of the club, which has been in existence for over 100 years. The club needs the money to do the job properly.

However, Councillor Janet Home's motion was very well received for it

But Mr Imlah pointed out that conditions still had to be taken on other parts of the package including the funding. This was one of the reasons he was opposing it was not appropriate to give the grant at the present time.

The full project would also go ahead if all the grant negotiations were successful and that was still uncertain. He suggested the club could raise the money by making a share issue but Councillor Stewart said



INSIDE

BUILDING BOOM ALERT

Natural features in and around Inverness could be at risk from a potential explosion of housebuilding, according to a conservation body

3

FIONA IS BACK IN ACTION

Scots singer Fiona Kennedy has resumed

A jubilant McGilvray announced that they would be letting the contracts very soon and early in 1996 work began on the main stadium. By now it was clear that the August 1996 deadline would not be met, and a further extension until November was allowed by the League. But the people of Inverness were now looking forward with relish to the prospect of a brand new £4.8 million football stadium. It was a very Merry Christmas indeed for Caledonian Thistle F.C., but opponents of the grant were not yet finally defeated. The controversy and uncertainty were set to continue.

On 17th January 1996, the matter came up again at the Policy and Resources Committee where, incredibly, there was a query about the wording of Councillor Stewart's motion. A District Council minute states that:

"After the (December 18th) meeting and on scrutiny of the draft minute, it had become clear to the Chief Executive and Director of Legal Services that the wording which had been agreed by the Council had included 'subject to Objective One and INE funding being payable'."

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The suggestion now was that the word "PAYABLE" meant that the Council cash could not be released until these other monies had actually been handed over. This was not to take place for several months and certainly well past the handover to the Highland Council. If this were to stick, it would mean that the District Council could, in practice, never make the grant. At best it would be up to the Highland Council which was a very different political animal and appeared very unlikely to do so.

David Stewart insisted that the spirit of what he had meant was that the Council would hand over their share as soon as the other two bodies agreed to give theirs. But when the Council met on January 29th, 1996, members were informed that the Dean of the Faculty's opinion was that what Stewart's motion really meant was that the £900,000 could not be handed over until the other two contributions had actually been received. The club's Q.C. Matthew Clarke believed otherwise, but the Council had to go with their own man.

Councillor Fraser asked for a guarantee that the money would be paid by the Highland Council, but Somerville told him that neither he nor Imlah could give assurances about what the Highland Council would do.

The club, by now forging ahead with the Stadium, was devastated. Unless its supporters in the Council could get the wording of the motion changed, it faced an impossible situation. And no change could be made without a two thirds majority of the Council to suspend Standing Orders to discuss the matter again within six months.

This always looked like an uphill struggle, but it was very nearly achieved on February 26th when 17 out of 26 members present voted for Suspension. Two thirds of 26 is 17.33, but a plea from Councillor McAllister that 17 was the nearest whole number was rejected by the Provost who ruled that at least the full two thirds had to be obtained. They were one vote short.

The club now changed its tack and began to talk about threats of legal action because there was an imminent danger of work having to stop on the Stadium for lack of funding. On the face of it, such action appeared to have a good chance of succeeding because the Council had intimated in writing to Caledonian Thistle that the money would be paid. Now it seemed it could not deliver.

McGilvray first issued an olive branch offering a delay until the European and INE contributions were, as the law read it, "payable" - in other words "paid." If the Highland Council would agree to hand the money over then, they would in return drop all question of legal action. To do this, he estimated, would cost the club £80 - 90,000 in interest charges.

But when this apparently fell on deaf ears, and with an Accounts Commission probe pending, the heavy hand was used once again in the form of a letter to Highland Council which said:

"If the club finds itself in a position to establish that there has been bad faith on the part of any officer resulting in the loss of the huge gains which the development has placed within the grasp of the town and its citizens, the club will not hesitate to seek to recover its losses from any such individuals as well as, should it consider it appropriate and if so advised by its lawyers, from Highland Council."

This made it quite clear that the club was intensely unhappy with the role of some District Council officials. From that point of view it had all been rather like an episode of the 1980s political sitcom "Yes Minister", but without the laughs.

By now the Highland Council, and in particular its Chief Executive Arthur McCourt, was taking the whole situation very seriously indeed. Apart from any recognition that the club had a strong case,

ONE TEAM, BUT A COUNCIL DIVIDED

McCourt was also concerned that if the Council did vote to pay up before 31st March it would create a serious deficit for the new Authority. Because of the rearguard campaign against payment it was now too late to sell properties to find the cash which would therefore have to come out of the revenue account. On March 18th, while on business in Los Angeles, McGilvray received a message to telephone McCourt, if possible at 11am British time the following day. This was 3am in Los Angeles, but the loss of sleep was a small price to pay if progress on this crucial issue could be made.

What McCourt was now proposing was that payment should be left to the Highland Council which he would advise to produce the money out of the Inverness Common Good Fund which it was about to control. This, in fact, was what several District Councillors had wanted to do in any case for some time. McGilvray then set up a meeting between McCourt and Caledonian Thistle Finance Director Roy MacLennan. But after a number of consultations the club were still not sure how confident they could be that McCourt could deliver. The conventional wisdom was that the Highland Councillors opposed the grant - there had even been an erroneous press report that they had rejected it. However given the legal realities, McCourt was rightly confident that they would support him. Meanwhile, the club also had to take into account that it was becoming more likely that when Inverness District Council met for the very last time towards the end of March they would this time suspend Standing Orders and then vote to release the money.

And so Inverness District Council met for the last time in its 21 year history in the Council Chamber on Monday, 25th March 1996. This was just six days before it passed into the history books and its "last great decision" was still unmade.

It remained unmade. During the meeting Councillor Ella MacRae, who was expected to move suspension, dramatically left the Chamber to telephone what she referred to as an "adviser". She returned to announce that she would no longer be putting the motion. There is little doubt that the "adviser" was Arthur McCourt who would now make arrangements for the money to be paid from the Common Good Fund, avoiding lengthy and costly legal action. The final ironic twist was that the final motion was one not to proceed with payment after all and it was not even framed from within the Council but by Caledonian Thistle's own solicitors.

So Inverness District Council ended its days with the burning question of the Stadium grant still unresolved. At the time it looked as if McCourt had waved a magic wand and sorted out at a stroke what the Council had failed to resolve in seven months. But Inverness District Council had twice democratically voted to give the money and it was only a determined rearguard action against these decisions which had manoeuvred it into this impossible situation.

This was a question which had sadly split that Council, creating tensions which meant that it did not bow out in as cordial a fashion as might normally have been hoped. Soon after, Highland Councillors agreed to pay the money from Common Good revenues which as a result were temporarily milked dry. Even so, they could only come up with £500,000 on the nail and the remaining £400,000 in April 1997. This did cause the club some cash flow difficulties, but these were negligible compared with the nightmare which might otherwise have become reality.

The Objective One money for the road was also approved, with the Harbour Trust's effort getting a substantial slice as well. In the application for this ERDF funding, the club had been greatly assisted by Highland Regional Council official Chris Claridge who was introduced to the club by Council Convener Duncan MacPherson and who saw to it that the application was rapidly processed. INE's cash came in and the only minor hitch which remained was over a few tens of thousands of pounds which caused a slight flurry with the Trust in the summer of 1996.

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You see.... we did it! Dougie McGilvray with Scottish League Secretary Peter Donald at the safety inspection.

The final line up of sources of finance was:-

Assets	£1,225,300
Highland Council Grants - Inverness Common Good Fund	£900,000
- Roads and Transport Department	£87,500
European Regional Development Fund Grant	£373,410
INE Grants	£511,298
Football Trust Grant	£618,600
Football Trust Loan	£200,000
Bank Borrowings	£927,566
TOTAL	£4,843,674

The additional cost of the Harbour Trust's West Longman Road brought the total value of the development to £5.6 million. The full Roads and Transport grant was £100,000 of which it had been agreed that £12,500 would go to the Harbour Trust. The subsequent Share Issue reduced borrowings to less than half the figure stated here.

And so the funding for the Stadium was complete. The last of so many obstacles over the previous three years was finally removed from the path of Caledonian Thistle F.C. But while money was pumping into East Longman, there was a financial haemorrhage in the opposite direction over at Grant Street Park.

Chapter Fourteen

AND CLACH TOO!

The three years which followed Clach's decision in the summer of 1993 not to join the merger were incredibly difficult for the Grant Street club, although they might initially have felt glad to be out of it as their two former town rivals almost destroyed each other. After the North Cup victory in March 1993, the Highland League title appeared a reasonable next target. Initially being the only Highland team in Inverness and with three major rivals out of the picture might have seemed an attractive position. Such illusions did not last for long.

Highland League clubs soon realised the implications of the elevation of Ross County and Caledonian Thistle. An early warning came on the night in March 1994 when Wick Academy grabbed the single vacancy in the new 16 club set up. Alan MacRae of Cove Rangers, who was set to take over the League Presidency from Ross County's departing Donnie MacBean, was particularly quick to predict that "it's going to be very, very difficult in that North West corner."

However Clach's initial view was that they would be looking for sponsorship at a different level from their neighbours and that there would be room in a wide market for everybody. At that time no one anticipated the crushing conspiracy of circumstances which would very soon assail Clach from all conceivable angles.

Everything started to go wrong at once around the time Scottish League football came to the North in the autumn of 1994. First of all there were the direct effects of the two bigger clubs departing. At a stroke this wiped out three local derbies which brought over 3000 pairs of feet through the turnstiles. Worse still it became very quickly apparent that many punters were now going to watch their football only at Telford Street and Victoria Park.

After the first season, the Highland League arranged Clach's fixtures so they were only at home when Caledonian Thistle were away. But this meant that County were also at home and the evidence was that many were going over the Kessock Bridge to Dingwall. The Scottish League game, it seemed, was the only one in town. In the minds of the Inverness public - and business community - the Highland League was marginalised with alarming speed. Before long, home gates at Grant Street were down to an average of around 100 and not much more when Clach had the area to themselves. One wintry Saturday they hosted the only game North of Livingston - attended by around 150. At one League Cup tie, after the referee and linesmen had been paid, there was only £86 left from takings.

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Worse still, revenue from the Capital Club slumped as the low wage area of the Merkinch, for so long Clach's heartland, began to pump an estimated £7000 a week into the National Lottery. Going into the Big League fundraising scheme with five other Highland clubs scarcely improved matters and the Scoreline Cards became a major tax liability. Sponsorship dried up and in the summer of 1996 a last ditch attempt by General Manager Peter Corbett to canvass every business in town by telephone generated insufficient interest even to sponsor the 15 home games. Social Club takings began to fall slightly in line with national trends.

A number of quality players also left the club - generally for perfectly good reasons. For instance Graeme Bennett and then Robbie Benson went to Caledonian Thistle while Jamie MacPherson headed for Dingwall, followed some time later by Stuart Golabeck. At least this brought in some money, but it didn't help manager Roshie Fraser's attempts to emerge from stagnation in the middle to lower reaches of the League. The Directors tried their best to reverse these trends wherever they could, but they were in the main battling against external factors not of their making and over which they had no control.

Set against running costs of £87,000 a year, problems like these quickly translated into losses of over £500 a week. In order to get Grant Street Park back into a credible state in 1990 a considerable debt had to be borne. But by the Financial Year ending 31st May 1995, Clach's total liabilities had increased to a massive £370,000, and were rising every week.

The principal creditors were the Bank (£108,000) and Alloa Breweries (£98,000). There were also tax bills and much of the £73,000 to "other creditors" were in fact Directors' loans. The Board themselves were making regular payments just to keep Clach alive and by mid 1996 it was estimated that in cash and kind, Directors had pumped over £200,000 of their own money into the club. But there was a limit. "My name is David Dowling - not David Murray," wrote the Chairman in a letter to The Inverness Courier in May 1995.

In February 1996 the true gravity of Clach's difficulties began to emerge - along with rumours that the Directors were talking to Caledonian Thistle about some kind of accommodation. At this very early stage speculation ranged from a simple groundshare, selling Grant Street to offset debts, to a complete merger. Dowling denied any formal meeting, but when pressed he did admit, "I'm not saying it will never happen."

Meanwhile McGilvray, while also denying any formal talks, said, "If Clach were in trouble then we would want to do what we could to ensure that a Highland League club continues to operate in Inverness." It was fairly evident that something was on the go, however tentative.

There was certainly a lot of potential here for Caledonian Thistle as well, because one of their problems had been finding competition of a suitable level for fringe players. The North Caledonian League was inadequate and an ideal situation would be if some of these players could get Highland League exposure with Clach. However there was a mass of unknowns and in particular a potentially complex player registration situation. So far it had been possible to put a player over to Clach for a minimum of one year, but something much more flexible was needed. Player registration rules preoccupied Caledonian Thistle for months, generating extensive correspondence with the SFA and the SFL.

With the matter now public, the seriousness of Clach's plight was spelled out to over 100 fans and shareholders at a meeting in the Social Club on February 22nd 1996. This gathering was as light on ideas to improve the situation as it was heavily against any groundshare or merger. In general the punters didn't appear to understand that the fundamental problem was Clach's complete lack of financial viability in the Merkinch at that time.

"We have been forced into this," Financial Director James MacDonald told the meeting. "We

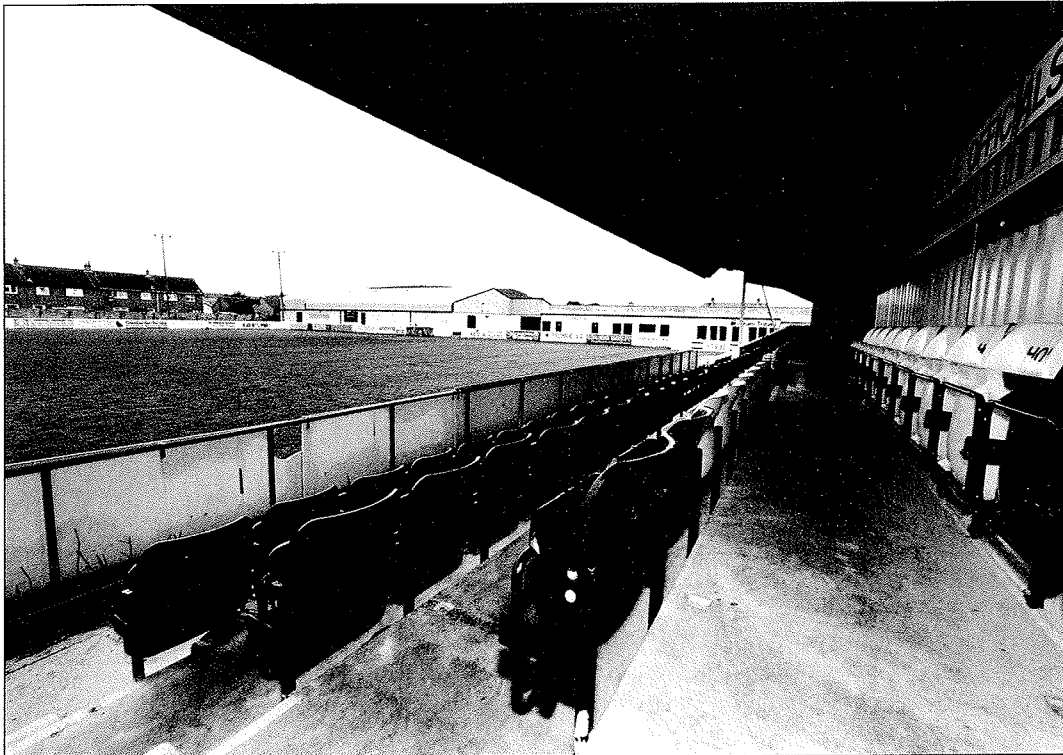
AND CLACH TOO!

didn't think we would be in this situation - we thought Inverness could sustain a Highland League team as well as a Division 3 team. The Directors have maintained the club for three years out of their own pockets."

Given the strength of feeling, what the Board effectively did was to soldier on for a little longer, cutting costs - particularly player costs - where possible. Predictably the situation got no better and mid June, McGilvray admitted that formal talks had begun.

"There have now been formal discussions to see if some kind of amalgamation might be possible, but for Caley Thistle and Clach to remain as separate clubs and boards but working together," he said. "We'll be doing everything we can to help Clach and we would be keen to get involved in playing fringe players in the Highland League although arrangements for that would have to be sorted out with the League."

In a rapidly deteriorating situation, Clach's AGM on July 4th 1996 was told that pressure from the Bank was now such that the Park would have to be sold, and soon. The meeting agreed almost unanimously, one dissenter being the Board's arch critic Billy Corbett, brother of the General Manager. Billy Corbett was one of two members of the Football Committee sacked following a campaign of criticism in May 1995 and he was adamant that Clach should stay in the Merkinch, preferably at Grant Street.



Grant Street Park.

Relocation to the nearby Carse or West Field were examined and quickly rejected, principally on economic grounds. However Billy Corbett held out for a long time in a forlorn attempt to make the West Field a reality.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

Meanwhile it appeared that Inverness Caledonian Thistle's interest had cooled, which was certainly Dowling's impression for a time. On the other hand, at a period when preparations to occupy their new Stadium were intense, they had much else to think about.

Then on August 15th, another public meeting - this time in the Merkinch Community Centre but with a completely different atmosphere from the euphoric gathering there six years previously when it was announced that Clach had been saved. This latest meeting was told that things had got so bad that the ground was now on the point of being sold. Few details could be given, but it soon emerged that sale would be to Morrisons Developments with the proposed end use a Bingo Hall and housing. The hammer blow was that the Social Club would have to go too, although it was anticipated that the total selling price might be as high as £450,000.

Dowling also admitted - incredible though it may have seemed - that Ross County were interested in a merger with Clach which would take them lock, stock and barrel to Dingwall. All was doom and gloom in the Merkinch, and the later suggestion that it may be possible to retain some kind of Social Club in the area did little to help. Clach looked more and more set for Dingwall where County were also interested in acquiring a Highland League outlet for their fringe players. They would contribute to Clach's running costs and there would be a Clach presence on the revamped Board of what would now approach some kind of pan-Highland club.

What was never mentioned at the time was how difficult it might be for both clubs to share County's Victoria Park, sometimes not the most playable surface in the North. Certainly, joint use of the Caledonian Stadium looked impossible because it could not even accommodate all of its owners' requirements, as the next development showed.

On October 23rd 1996, another of McGilvray's "rabbits" popped out of the hat. It was revealed that, after a period of quiet and possibly spurred on by County's mounting challenge, he was talking to Clach again. The word was that Morrisons' interest in Grant Street may have been cooling because of a rival Bingo development at Inshes. In practice Morrisons always remained willing to buy, but were not now prepared to pay so much. What McGilvray wanted was to purchase the Clach Park as a training ground and somewhere to play Reserve games, at the same time fostering closer inter-club links. This would then allow Clach to dispose of most of their debts. So it looked like a straight fight for Clach between the two Scottish League concerns.

On November 13th, Clach's Board met and failed to decide which way to jump. Before their next meeting on Monday 18th, there were two important developments. On the 14th it became public that, given the Morrisons situation, County were now prepared to buy Grant Street themselves and sell it to a developer while Clach went to Dingwall. Then at 4pm on the 18th - just hours before Clach's decisive meeting - McGilvray finalised his bid.

Inverness Caledonian Thistle, or rather a Property Company set up for the purpose, would buy Grant Street for £280,000. Clach would be allowed to stay there for 2 to 3 years and call themselves Inverness Clachnacuddin. Meanwhile both Inverness clubs would seek accommodation in the town to satisfy their joint longer term needs. Clach would pay Grant Street's operating costs and get all revenue, including advertising, and there would be an approach to the Highland League to create conditions to allow the interchange of players between the clubs.

Apart from the immediate aim to keep Clach in Inverness, the longer term strategy was the creation of a Unified Football Policy for the whole of Inverness. This would result in every level of football coming under the same umbrella "from Primary Schools to the Premier League" as McGilvray put it. At senior level promising young players could begin their careers with Clach before moving up to the Scottish League when ready. And those reaching the end of their Scottish League days could look forward to further seasons in the Highland League with a vastly enhanced Clach.

AND CLACH TOO!

What this still did not address was Clach's fundamental lack of viability in the Merkinch. So although most people now expected them to stay in Inverness, they decided by 5 votes to 3 after a difficult 5 hour meeting to do what Invernessians believed was the unthinkable. They were going to Dingwall. Those voting for the Ross County option were David Dowling, Calum Grant, Wilma Forbes, Colin Morgan and James MacDonald. Meanwhile David Love, Alastair Dowling and Bill Reid voted for Inverness.

Reaction was intense and predictable. At an extremely unhappy meeting on Monday, November 25th 1996 there was virtually unanimous condemnation of the decision. Former manager Jim Oliver's comments possibly summed up the feeling.

"What you are doing is taking all these assets to develop football in Dingwall. You should be keeping them here in Inverness. I don't think you should be allowed to sell Clach F.C. down the river," he said.

The Directors, who had been through a very difficult time, stood by each other steadfastly, despite the split decision, and Dowling said there could be no change of mind. Then on Thursday, November 28th, a Press Conference was called to announce that this was just what had happened. Clach would after all be staying in Inverness with Caledonian Thistle, but remaining as a completely independent entity.

Apart from the strength of public feeling, two other factors had come into play. On the Wednesday night the players, who had been playing for nothing all season, had expressed their intense unhappiness. In addition, the crucial question of future viability was addressed when McGilvray came in with a further offer of joint sponsorship. For example, anyone taking an advertising board at the Caledonian Stadium would be offered a composite deal to take one at Clach Park too. This came as a particular comfort to the Clach Directors. Their main concern about the Inverness option so far had been what they saw as a lack of specificity about how Clach could be helped to become more viable. The Merkinch was jubilant and many a dram was drunk to Clach's future in Inverness in the Social Club that night.

Meanwhile Dowling was at pains to emphasise that Clach was now as much representative of the whole of Inverness as its new Scottish League partner had been since 1994.

"It is disappointing that we had to go over the edge to make the town realise our true predicament," he said "But we have demonstrated that we are, and always have been, willing to react to public opinion, hence our decision. Clach will retain its independence and, with the united support of Inverness, can once again be a force in Highland League football."

It was a phenomenal U turn but one which Ross County Chief Executive Roy MacGregor took with very good grace. Although Clach had decided in 1993, for the best of reasons, to go it alone, circumstances now dictated that Inverness football was at last under a single umbrella. In the best Caley Thistle tradition, it had been a desperately close run thing, achieved at the last minute, but all was at last as one.

Before long there were Boardroom changes when Calum Grant, James MacDonald, Alastair Dowling and David Love all stood down. Sadly, Bill Reid died in May 1997 and never saw the shape of new set up of which he had been an architect. In February 1997 Peter Corbett became a Director and had been expected to be followed on to the Board by Caley Thistle defender Graeme Bennett. But instead, on March 3rd it was announced that Bennett, once his task at the Caledonian Stadium was over at the end of the season, would take over as player manager. Roshie Fraser would be

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The firm hand chosen to guide Clach getting to grips with an opponent. Graeme Bennett in action.

standing down after almost seven years of outstanding service. A lifelong Clach supporter at heart, Bennett had been captain of the side which had won the North Cup in 1993 under Fraser. This, like Corbett in 1991, was a case of another Clacher come home.

Clach's future was at least clearer now, and more secure. The way ahead would still be difficult but at least football in Inverness was now to a large extent a single entity. The concept of a three way merger had quickly fallen by the wayside in the summer of 1993, but this new setup went a considerable distance towards such an arrangement. How much closer these ties would later become would only be revealed as the years and subsequent events unfolded.

Chapter Fifteen

CHAMPIONS!!

Once again a chapter in the history of Inverness Caledonian Thistle begins with an Open Day. On July 30th 1996 more people came to see a kickabout on a building site than on average turned up to watch Caley and Thistle put together in their Highland League days. Around 1000 fans streamed into the half built Stadium to see the team and to satisfy a curiosity which had burned hotter and hotter as the new structure rapidly took shape during the first half of the year. Richard Cameron had been right. A great number of people did pass that site and most of them, it seemed, wanted an early look at close quarters.

As before, the new signings were on show and this season they had a different flavour to them. Paterson had now decided that the most fruitful hunting ground would no longer be the Highland League. That source of talent, he believed, had been more or less exhausted, with some clubs looking on ICT as a bottomless money pit. Now he looked to ex-Scottish League players, but still largely with a Highland past, many of them free agents and of at least as high a calibre.

As a result the vastly experienced 32 year old midfielder/defender Paul Cherry arrived from St. Johnstone along with young striker Scott MacLean. Barry Wilson, son of recently sacked Ross County manager Bobby, came back North on a free transfer from Raith Rovers. At an earlier stage in his career a "Let's all laugh at Caley" teeshirt had not endeared Wilson to some Inverness fans, but that was quickly forgotten.

The Highland League was not entirely ignored. Paterson's main target here was Huntly winger Marco de-Barros who was the only player he had to pay for this time. Then there were two outstanding 17 year olds, Huntly Amateur Ross Tokely who came free and Wayne Addicoat from Burghead who was called to the attention of Danny MacDonald who took up his Community Coach post that August. This was the ideal blend. Apart from Cherry and MacLean the entire squad were Highland players, having either come directly from Highland League clubs or with valuable added Scottish League experience. Tommy Campbell, then manager of Forfar but about to move on to Arbroath, was soon to say that a squad of Highland League players could not win promotion. By the end of this season he would eat his words.

Bruce Graham also joined the club at that point as General Manager. His early experience in sport had been in rugby and he also had administrative experience with the Black Isle Show. He would

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now run the club on a day to day basis, eventually from the new Stadium.

One major leap forward in the summer of 1996 was the creation of an official Inverness Caledonian Thistle Supporters' Club. This was another significant step towards the unity which had been lacking in the first season and a vitally important part of a rapidly developing football club.

Local hotelier Ann Nicoll began as a Caley supporter just after the war and 27 years of absence following the arrival of her family were ended in 1994 when she suddenly found herself recaptivated by the Scottish League atmosphere at Telford Street. She soon became a Caley Thistle fanatic and her enthusiasm for the club made her the ideal chairperson. George MacRae, who already organised supporters' buses, became Vice Chairman. Iain Kennedy, more or less a neutral but with previous Thistle leanings, became Secretary and Gordon Munro, such a hard worker in the Caley days, the Treasurer.

Another particularly active member was Ken MacDonald who had earlier been associated with the Caley Rebels, although he always defined himself as a "merger sceptic". A regular critic of the manner in which Caley officials had handled the merger affair, he engaged in a long and detailed correspondence of protest with Caley when the Life Members took over the running of the club's shell after December 1994. However he was now prepared to commit himself in this significant way to the furtherance of Inverness Caledonian Thistle.

The season started well under that new name with good friendly results against clubs from higher Divisions. Then it was straight into the first round of the Coca Cola Cup with another massive prize - a second round tie at "home" to Celtic, wherever that would have been after the Rangers experience. However it was not to be when Clyde's Eddie Annand scored the only goal of the game in extra time at Broadwood.

So as the League campaign got under way at home to Cowdenbeath on August 17th, Paterson was able to claim that in a series of encounters with Division 2 clubs over the last year, they had never lost within the 90 minutes. This was a comforting thought at the beginning of the club's third season by which time pressure to win promotion was, as the manager admitted, mounting fast.

Further access to Football Trust funds, when they became available after a Lottery-enforced freeze, would depend on making the jump at least to Division 2. There was also the Chairman's publicly stated ambition of Premier League football early in the new millenium. And the fans also now expected the progress made over such a wide front to continue on the field. In its sheer scale, and with the Stadium now just round the corner, Inverness Caledonian Thistle had in every way outgrown Division 3. Although failing to gain advancement the previous season was beginning to be looked on as no bad thing, staying there any longer might seriously threaten the momentum which had been gained so spectacularly after such a difficult start.

So there was something of a shock when the League campaign began with a 3-1 home defeat by Cowdenbeath, the poorest supported team in Scotland. Then a week later the same scoreline was conceded at Forfar.

Paterson assured everyone that he wasn't panicking. But all at Telford Street could sense the intense relief on the last day of August when an 87th minute Mike Teasdale header grabbed the only goal of the game against Alloa to give the first points of the season. The following Saturday it was away to much improved Albion Rovers, the new leaders, and few were disappointed with a goalless draw. The team was beginning to come on to a bit of a game now and steady progress up the League included a 3-1 win in Dingwall on September 28th where an Iain Stewart brace confirmed that the wee man was very much back in scoring form.

This was the first encounter between Paterson and Neale Cooper who had taken over the managerial reins at Dingwall during the summer following the controversial sacking of Bobby

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Wilson. This all followed the setting up of a new regime at Victoria Park under Invergordon businessman Roy MacGregor after the marginalisation and more or less enforced resignation of Chairman Hector MacLennan who happened to be particularly close to Wilson.

The following Saturday, October 5th 1996, saw the last ever Scottish League game at Telford Street where - as in the first in 1994 - Arbroath were the visitors. And again the home side emerged well on top with a 2-0 win. There then followed a series of four away matches, by arrangement with the League to allow time for a move to the new Stadium. These were not as productive as had been hoped, yielding only five points out of twelve, and including a 2-0 defeat at Forfar on October 26th. However no one at the time would have guessed how far away the next League reverse would be.

The only victory during this autumn period came in sensational style at Cowdenbeath. Hercher in 76 minutes, then an 89th minute Thomson penalty, then a Stewart winner in stoppage time dramatically brought the score back from 1-3 to 4-3.

The last game ever at Telford Street took place the following day - Sunday, October 20th - appropriately against a Highland League Select. The park, built on the clay excavations of the Caledonian Canal and home of football for a century, was about to go into the history books. It was a strange mixture of an occasion where the sadness which might have dominated the proceedings appeared to be cast aside by mounting enthusiasm about the now imminent opening of the Caledonian Stadium.



Goodbye to all that. The final friendly at Telford Street Park - 20th October 1996.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

However this was an event which was certainly worth marking. It was lighter than expected on emotion, but the afternoon provided a dignified farewell to a place which had given many thousands of people a great deal of happiness over a long period of time. It was certainly a significant event for the ex-Caley people and a large number of old Caley players were among the day's guests. This farewell perhaps also marked another departure with any last vestiges of "Highland League" thinking among fans now gone forever. The game itself was won 3-0 by the Select.

The following morning the demolition squads were in. Within hours Telford Street Park had become a mere shell of its past glory as the Howden End enclosure was dismantled, followed by the stand. Many fans came to take away pieces of the hallowed turf, one man to put on his father's grave. However plans to lay a large area of Telford Street turf at the rear of the new Stadium had to be abandoned when it turned out that it was too fragile to transport. But life had to go on and by now the imminent opening of the premises at East Longman had become the talk of the town.

From the outside that autumn, the Caledonian Stadium was a strange mixture. The ground itself looked finished, but it was surrounded by a desert of mud because the car parking and approach roads still required many months of work. What the public could not see was that inside a small army of workmen were labouring frantically to have the facility ready for the first game against an Inverness Select on Wednesday, November 6th. What was done inside during the last fortnight - in particular by joiners, plumbers, painters, carpet layers and other tradesmen - was little short of a miracle. A carpet van was even seen leaving the place for the night during the second half of that Select game!

The 48 hours preceding kick off on November 6th were particularly frantic and on the Monday a high powered SFA and SFL delegation led by League Secretary Peter Donald arrived for the formal safety inspection. The surrounding area still had many of the features of a swamp. But those top officials were very impressed indeed that after all the troubles they had monitored, often anxiously, from afar, such a superb facility had finally been delivered.

Peter Donald said:

"This is a huge step forward for football in Inverness and the people who have been involved in bringing the club to this stage obviously must be delighted that at last they can see the fruits of their labour. Those who were involved with the club of course were determined that they would succeed, and they have done."

This was the ultimate accolade from the ultimate authority - National recognition that all the troubles were over and the problems solved.

It was well into Wednesday before the Completion Certificate was obtained, but with just hours to spare the Caledonian Stadium at last opened for business that evening.

The match itself, in front of around 800 people, was something of a non-event and ended 6-2 for the Scottish League side. It was really just a dress rehearsal for the big event on the Saturday, but worth having all the same - if for no other reason than to mark where Inverness Caledonian Thistle had come from.

By now much of the town was gearing itself up for the formal opening of the Caledonian Stadium on Saturday, November 9th 1996, when Albion Rovers would provide the opposition. A grand pre-match lunch was organised for 200 guests. These included football dignitaries, MPs, Councillors, ex-Councillors who had been particularly helpful to the club over the years of strife, in addition to others.

Among them was Fiona Larg, about to attend a football match for the first time in her life. Her comments on what had been created at East Longman, and what it would give rise to in the future, provided yet more recognition that the crises were over and the good days had arrived.

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“We now have an excellent facility down at East Longman. It has opened up the whole of that East Longman site. It has allowed the road to go under the bridge and better access to Inverness Harbour and I really think it has been a driver for development in the Longman,”

she said in what was also a cheerful recognition of the outcome of the battle over where the Stadium would be built.

And it was with more than a hint of relief that she formally announced the end of the era of troubles, and the complete success of the venture which she and so many others had done so much to realise.

“It’s everything really that we wanted three and a half years ago and it came so close so often to not going ahead. But I must say I am really pleased with the way things have turned out.”

The lunch took place in the Kingsmills Suite with its superb view out over the Moray Firth. The pre-match festivities then continued with a tour of the Stadium. To be admired there was the equally luxurious Telford Suite, recalling the other half of the merger, and also the Ness and Culloden suites from which hospitality would be dispensed on an unprecedented scale to backers and other friends of which many other Scottish clubs could only dream. Down below there were two state of the art dressing rooms plus medical facilities, office accommodation, club shop and even Police cells! On the top deck two well appointed Press boxes and other cubicles to house honoured guests were set beside the Police Control with colour surveillance cover both inside and out. It was a tour of inspection which very proud-looking club officials were to repeat many times over the next few months, accompanied by personnel from visiting clubs and other guests.

<u>ADULT</u>	<u>CONCESSION</u>	INVERNESS CALEDONIAN THISTLE F.C.	
TO BE GIVEN UP	TO BE GIVEN UP	Caledonian Stadium - East Longman - Inverness - IV1 1FF Tel: 01463 222880 Fax: 01463 715816	
Inverness C T F.C. V Albion Rovers F.C. Date 09-11-96 Kick-Off 3:00 pm <u>Section Row Seat</u> E L 22 £7.00	Inverness C T F.C. V Albion Rovers F.C. Date 09-11-96 Kick-Off 3:00 pm <u>Section Row Seat</u> E L 22 £4.00	Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC V Albion Rovers F.C. Date 09-11-96 Kick-Off 3:00 pm <u>Section Row Seat</u> E L 22	
GATEMAN TO DETACH	GATEMAN TO DETACH	PLEASE RETAIN THIS PORTION	
		VAT No. 624 1719 54	

Then there was the acceptance of a cheque for £500,000 from the Football Trust by McGilvray. By now the crowd had swelled to 3734 to witness the official opening of this marvellous new facility. That was performed by Allan Sellar, now the new Provost of the Inverness Area of the Highland Council, with local MPs Charles Kennedy and Sir Russell Johnston also in attendance. Although all of the football and Council controversy had come between his two periods as Provost, Mr. Sellar had still been very much involved and had made a significant contribution as a Director of INE as well

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Provost Allan Sellar officially opening the Caledonian Stadium on 9th November 1996.

as a member of the Stadium Committee. First of all both teams were presented to the assembled dignitaries and then came the moment for which Inverness had waited for so long.

The act of opening was performed by Provost Sellar who, to a massive roar from the terraces, fired a high lob from the centre circle which even Barry Wilson had difficulty controlling when it got to him. Inverness now formally had a Football Stadium to be proud of - even if some of the infrastructure would take some months to complete.

Perhaps predictably, given the occasion, the team did not settle particularly well and it was Albion Rovers' Dave MacKenzie who scored the first competitive goal at the Caledonian Stadium. However it only took Iain Stewart four minutes to level matters and that was how it ended.

After the match, McGilvray was able to announce live on Radio Scotland that this Division 3 club from the Highlands had, at a first approximation, raised over half a million pounds in its Share Issue which closed at 5pm that evening. On the Monday the figure was confirmed as a gratifying £564,370 which was well above the £400,000 needed to complete the Stadium finances and even allowed some wearing down of the overdraft. As a result the club also became Inverness Caledonian Thistle plc. During the autumn an anonymous institution had enquired through a solicitor about buying up the whole issue. It had been politely explained that this was not possible, but now here was a club which belonged to the people of Inverness as well as to the former Caledonian and Inverness Thistle organisations.

The magnitude of this undertaking was almost unique in any line of business in the North, never mind football, and it was administered for the club by Allan MacKenzie and his firm Ledingham Chalmers.

However that Share Issue did create one final crisis for Inverness Caledonian Thistle. When the

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Clydesdale Bank were no longer able to meet the club's requirements they switched at a very late stage to the Bank of Scotland, who still required bank guarantees to be obtained from individuals to the extent of £400,000 in the event of the Issue not reaching that figure. This had to be achieved in a very short time indeed and had the effort failed the club could have become insolvent.

Also hitting the headlines that autumn was the official song "Bring It On Home." Written and recorded by David Balfe, who had long Highland connections and an impeccable pedigree in the football end of the music market, the song became an instant hit in the town and was sold on cassette. On the basis of a briefing on its background from Ann Nicoll, Balfe admirably captured the spirit of the club.

**Caley and Thistle, two teams in a town divided.
Strong, brave, defiant. Never give in till the final whistle.
Right to the end, both sides have fought their battles.
Now just one team. They're on the run, the new fight's begun.
And the Thistle and Eagle are one.**

INVERNESS CALDONIAN THISTLE.
(OFFICIAL TEAM SONG)

BRING IT ON HOME. BRING IT ON HOME INVERNESS CALDONIAN THISTLE
BRING IT ON HOME BRING IT ON HOME GIVE ALL TO THE FINAL WHISTLE
YOUR

David Balfe 1996

David Balfe's own manuscript of "Bring it on Home".

From then on, this club anthem was a regular feature of home matches - as much for the benefit of visiting teams as of home supporters!

The next game at the new Stadium was a major occasion too when a crowd, officially numbering 4562 which was the temporary maximum, packed in to see its first, all ticket, local derby. The early part of the game was notable for two incidents. Brian Thomson hurt his back, which turned out to be a long term injury, and then County striker Sandy Ross was sent off for elbowing Richard Hastings.

Goals from Iain Stewart in 49 and 89 minutes sealed the points, but it was Barry Wilson's game. Injury had kept him out of the September derby in Dingwall but this time he played with a vengeance, penetrating the County defence with his sheer pace and laying on both goals. His Man

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of the Match award was the cream on the cake. This was also early confirmation of Paterson's belief that the huge wide pitch was tailor made for wingers.

The Caledonian Stadium had attracted well over 8000 fans to its first two games, and on that second occasion half of them at least went home deliriously happy. What they did not realise at the time was that this was the beginning of a remarkable run of eleven straight wins. That began with the team tucked comfortably in the chasing group and ended with them sitting on a formidable eleven point lead. The tradition that Inverness Caledonian Thistle were very difficult indeed to beat on their own new pitch was rapidly born and the Caledonian Stadium played a major part in the success of that season. It also drew the club into a unified entity more than ever before.

However this run of eleven straight wins was no picnic. The team may have sailed majestically through some games, but others proved the saying that a good side is one which can win when it plays badly. The successes may all have been different in the making but they still just reeled off one after the other.

November 23rd:- 3-2 against Queens Park at Hampden - 3-0 up after 21 minutes, but a frantic finish. November 30th:- 4-1 at Arbroath - four different scorers - a convincing effort. December 14th:- 2-0 at home to Montrose to grab the top spot comfortably from the visitors in front of 2477 fans. December 21st:- 2-1 at home to Cowdenbeath on a freezing pitch. A bit of a struggle back from 1-0 down.

And that was it for 1996, indeed until January 13th, because the frost took over. The team kept on the road though. The game at Alloa on December 28th was put off when they were already there, and they had got as far as Ayr when Stair Park, Stranraer suffered the same fate in the Cup on January 11th 1997.

So it was back down to the deep South two days later on the Monday to fight out a 1 all draw with their Division 2 rivals to bring them back up to Inverness on the Wednesday. Here extra time was as goalless as the first 90 minutes so it was on to penalties. And Jim Calder was the hero when he saved two after Paul Cherry had missed his, putting Caley Thistle through to the third round at home to Hamilton on the 25th. Just to end the cup strand, Iain Stewart's return to scoring form continued in this game when he got the opener in 12 minutes. And although the Division 1 bound full timers finally prevailed 3-1, it could be said that there were few sad faces among the Inverness team or officials. League promotion was the first and foremost objective. Now, unlike the previous year, this could be concentrated on exclusively.

Just as the League campaign resumed, the Scottish League issued their half yearly figures which showed that Inverness Caledonian Thistle's attendances had risen dramatically by 50% from 1579 to an average of over 2300 per game. This compared with 1275 for that first, disappointing season. Meanwhile Ross County's gates had dropped by 17% to an average 1565. Four matches at the new Caledonian Stadium, bringing in 12,961 bodies, had certainly helped, but five of the nine games involved had also been at Telford Street. That average was well above anything else in Division 3 and it was also above the whole of Division 2, although Livingston and Ayr got close. It was even better than four clubs in Division 1, making Inverness Caledonian Thistle the seventeenth best supported team in Scotland that half season.

These rising numbers also appeared to spawn an alternative interpretation of the presence of two Highland teams in the Scottish League. The double triumph of Caledonian Thistle and Ross County in the January 1994 election was generally regarded as a just reward for the two strongest candidates. Initial evidence confirmed the view that the area could sustain two Division 3 clubs, helped by huge derby crowds. The original thinking was that it would be to their mutual advantage to be promoted together so these money earning derbies could continue.

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However what then began to emerge from the Inverness end early in 1997 was the idea that once promotion began to be achieved there might ultimately only be room for one Premier League club in the North, should matters progress that far. This could therefore result in something of a race up the League between the two Highland clubs, with the loser possibly consigned to feeder status.

The run of League victories then resumed, again with mixed performances but always the same result. January 18th 1997:- 4-1 at home to Arbroath. An emphatic performance. January 22nd:- Lacklustre midweek show at home to defensive Queens Park. An Iain Stewart penalty produced the only goal of the game with just 10 minutes left. February 1st:- 2-0 at Montrose, but the points only went in the bag with another late Stewart penalty. February 8th:- 2-0 up at home to East Stirling who pulled back both before MacLean got the winner. A bit too causal.

This brought the tally to nine straight wins and ironically it was to Dingwall that they had to go midweek on February 12th in search of the tenth, which would put them ten points clear at the top. There would be no room for sloppiness here, but neither would anyone feel like showing any. With County lying second, the game, which was actually the postponed New Year's Day derby, attracted massive interest and a Division 3 record 5017 fans packed into Victoria Park.

Inevitably Barry Wilson in his first return to Dingwall got the bulk of the abuse. Charlie Christie was ecstatic because the particular obscenity which the Jail Enders traditionally reserved for him was now being focused on his team mate. But in 36 minutes the Jail End was plunged into silence when Scott MacLean put Inverness ahead. And the County supporters were utterly dismayed just before half time when Wilson made it 2-0 with a screamer from 25 yards. The response from the Inverness end of the park was a loud chorus of "You only sing when you're winning!" MacLean completed the rout in the second half with a further goal which made him the Man of the Match. When the final whistle went, McGilvray was there to applaud his team off the pitch and the fans off the terraces. The "feel good factor", which the club had predicted when it made its case for the Council grant, was now sweeping the Inverness area and was set to intensify.

Victory number eleven came at Cliftonhill on February 15th, where Albion Rovers' normally sound defence conceded three in the second half without reply. The winning run ended on February 22nd at home to Forfar who took the lead just after half time before Stewart grabbed his 20th of the season with an 84th minute equaliser. But this still extended the lead to a massive eleven points with eleven games left. Only a dramatic collapse could now deny promotion or even the title, and of that there was no sign. This draw still extended their unbeaten streak to 14 League games, and they had lost just one in 23 since August 24th.

One of the keys to success was the ability to field a settled team and for much of the season Paterson's preferred starting lineup was - Calder, Teasdale, Hastings, MacArthur, Noble, Cherry, Wilson, Stewart, MacLean, Christie, Ross. He was conspicuously sparing with his use of substitutes, with Hercher, Addicoat, Tokely and latterly de-Barros the most common names in the frame.

The unbeaten run continued. Next they overcame Alloa (and a gale) 3-1 at home on March 1st. The following Saturday at Hampden they bounced back with almost frightening speed after losing a goal to win 2-1. After a trip to Alloa the following midweek, Paterson admitted that this 2-0 victory was the most comfortable he'd seen yet. The squad, he revealed, were now talking about going unbeaten until the end of the season and if there was a problem with under par performances it was because opponents simply weren't stretching them. Unusually, but very appropriately, the opener here came from skipper Mike Noble who that night became the first player to make 100 appearances for the club.

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Paterson's statement was perhaps a risky one to make on the eve of the final County game of the season which was witnessed by another Division 3 record of 5525 in Inverness on March 15th 1997. And in an incredible carbon copy of the last clash there in November, County striker Sandy Ross got another red card, once again for a foul on Hastings just twenty yards away from the site of his original offence. The other player to go off in November had been Brian Thomson - with that bad back injury - but his return to the Caledonian Stadium derby scene was as triumphant as Ross's was tragic. The 15 yard shot Thomson put away was magnificent while Iain Stewart goals on either side of it made the final score 3-0, enabling Stewart to break his own club scoring record with 25. The other tragedy of that afternoon was a serious knee injury to Scott MacLean. This was what brought Thomson back into the starting eleven so quickly but MacLean's cruciate ligament damage would keep him out of the game for a long time to come.

The arithmetic now said that a win at Arbroath the following Saturday would seal promotion. But a poor effort yielded only a goalless draw at Gayfield - and also the much more romantic prospect of clinching promotion and the Championship at the Caledonian Stadium in two consecutive home games, a much more romantic prospect.

However the run-in was overshadowed by perhaps premature speculation about the future of the manager. Immediately it was revealed that there were plans to take on around 10 players full time, the next obvious question was about the role of Paterson who continued to hold down his "day job" in Social Work. McGilvray indicated that the manager's post would also be full time and that Paterson would be offered terms. Pele on the other hand could not immediately give a commitment to abandon the security of Social Work for the uncertainties of full time football management, and latterly admitted that media speculation about his future had drawn too much attention away from the marvellous achievements of the players.

April 5th 1997 was the day that Inverness Caledonian Thistle finally began to realise its dream of marching up the Scottish League. The visitors were Montrose who almost delayed the party again when they went 2-1 up. But it could not have been more appropriate that an Iain Stewart hat trick confirmed Division 2 football with a 3-2 scoreline.

The 3000 crowd gave the team a standing ovation lasting several minutes. But despite the euphoric scenes on the terraces, club officials' reactions were more muted - relieved almost, as if this was yet another step away from a long, hard fight. There was also the fact that promotion had become slowly more likely as the unbroken success of the season progressed, thus depriving the proceedings of a defining moment of glorious relief.

In the end it was Paul Cherry, a relative newcomer to the Caley Thistle scene although not to the winning of Divisional titles, who possibly summed it all up the best.

"One of the reasons I came to this club was because I believed it had potential," he said. "This is great for the supporters because they have been through a lot over the last few years with the merger. Hopefully that is all over now and I'm very pleased for the people of Inverness."

A week later, in a marvellous gesture of sportsmanship, the entire Albion Rovers team clapped the Inverness lads on to the park to begin their efforts to grab the three further points which would make them Champions of Division 3.

Again they let the opposition back into the game at 1-1 after Brian Thomson had opened, but they finished with a flourish with one more from Thomson plus contributions from Wilson and de-Barros. The final whistle opened the floodgates for yet another party. As 3000 more fans applauded and the Stadium PA system rang with the song "We are the Champions" Paterson, who even allowed himself the beginnings of a smile, said: "Once we got our noses in front I genuinely believed that we were the best team in Division 3 and I have no reason to change that. This is a success which is thoroughly deserved."

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On the up and up. Delight in the dressing room when promotion is finally confirmed on 5th April 1997.

Once again fans and all concerned with the club warmly pumped each other's hands as, at the third time of asking, the Highlands basked in its first Scottish League title. There were many old Caley faces in that crowd, and a lot of former Jaggies too - plus many, many more who previously never went near football before this club came along. After decades of unfulfilled efforts to get into the League and years of strife and anguish in Inverness football, this was a climactic moment. The previous Saturday's promotion may have been strategically more important with respect to long term objectives, but it was good to feel the warm glow of complete victory.

During the post-match press conference Paterson appeared to drift closer and closer to an admission that he would be staying on, without actually saying so. Then, that evening, the floodgates burst and he finally revealed that he would be taking the plunge. The Chairman's spontaneous response was to say that he believed that Pele Paterson had the ability to take Inverness Caledonian Thistle to the Premier League - but that is another story.

On April 19th it was 3-0 away to East Stirling, but by now the season's phenomenal effort seemed to be running out of steam rapidly. The following Saturday at Cowdenbeath the 22 game unbeaten

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League run came to an end when a 2-1 scoreline signalled their first defeat since October 26th.

The Saturday after that - May 3rd 1997 - had been set aside for the presentation of the Division 3 trophy and before the match it was confirmed that Paterson had accepted a four year full time contract. Three days later Richard Hastings was named as the club's first full time signing. The game itself, against Forfar, was important for a number of reasons. They needed a win to stay on course to beat Forfar's Division 3 points record and this was also the only Division 3 club against which a victory had not been gained in 1996 - 97. Success would also extend the unbeaten League record at the Caledonian Stadium into the next season.

However that was as nothing compared with the importance of this clash for Ross County whose attempts to secure the second promotion spot would have been given a huge boost if their neighbours had managed to beat their promotion rivals. But it was not to be. Despite the presence of almost 4000 fans the team produced a dreadful performance, slumping to a club record equalling 4-0 defeat. It was probably the only time that season that a home crowd felt genuine dissatisfaction. But that did not in any way muffle a huge roar as captain Mike Noble held the trophy aloft after the match in advance of the team's lap of honour to rapturous applause and another standing ovation..

That attendance also raised the average crowd for the second half of the season by a further 300 to an amazing 2676, giving a figure of 2500 for the season as a whole - around double the inaugural 1994-95 statistic. This was well above the initial projections made by the Board for Division 3 and the club's financial status received a corresponding boost.

However there was also triumph and tragedy on either side of that final home game. On May 1st, David Stewart, who had proposed the vital District Council motions which secured the £900,000 grant, was elected Labour MP for the constituency of Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber in which the Caledonian Stadium lay. As a result of the same General Election Andrew Hardie QC, who had given the final legal verdict on that particular matter, became Lord Advocate. Then five days later all connected with the club were stunned to hear of the sudden death at the age of 58 of Roy Lobban who had done so much work as Caley's Ground Convener before playing his part on the Management Committee of the new club.

On the field, the conclusion of such a successful season turned out to be something of an anticlimax when the team signed off with a 1-0 defeat at Alloa on May 10th 1997. This meant that at the end there had been a completely out of character run of three defeats in a row - albeit in completely meaningless matches. That had happened only once before in the League in the spring of 1995. There had also been two defeats at the start, but what had gone on in between had been magnificent. The other 31 games produced just one reverse and included a 22 match unbeaten run and eleven straight wins. The final points tally was 76 although the poor finish had reduced the winning margin from 18 points to nine. Next came Forfar and Ross County, both on 67 points, but the two Highland clubs were not destined to go up together.

Although County finished on a strong winning run, so did Forfar who in the end got the second promotion spot on goal difference. Apart from being unfortunate for County, this also brought to an end, for the moment at any rate, the series of Highland Derbies which sent out regular reminders to the rest of Scotland that the game was in excellent health in the North. And as far as Inverness was concerned, this in addition meant that in season 1997-98 there would, for the first time since the 1880s, be no such thing as local rivalry in football. For the previous three seasons, Ross County had admirably filled the gap left by the disappearance of the Caley - Clach - Thistle eternal triangle. But now Inverness would be devoid of the magic of derby action.

The final curtain came down on season 1996 - 97 at the Caledonian Stadium on the evening of Wednesday, May 14th when the team had a glorious 3-2 victory over a strong Aberdeen team in a

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friendly. The front cover of this book shows the scene on that evening. Once again Iain Stewart showed that he could rise to the big occasion when he scored a spectacular hat trick. Making their ICT debuts were goalkeeper Les Fridge and the versatile Norwegian Vjelte Enderson. Already Paterson had begun to strengthen his team for the forthcoming Division 2 campaign, and more new signings were promised. In Fridge's case it was a local boy come home. This was the lad who at the age of 16 had withstood the onslaught of Celtic when Thistle had gone to Parkhead in the Scottish Cup in 1985. After journeyings in England, Ireland and Central Scotland, he was back in Inverness. That night, Paterson also revealed his extensive plans for the following season's full time squad which would begin to write the next chapter of the history of Inverness Caledonian Thistle.

Winning the Division 3 title and opening a new Stadium in the same season was like an episode from a fairytale for the club. But many would say that in any case what had happened over the previous four years was far more fantastic and incredible than anything from the realms of the supernatural.

When Inverness and Nairn Enterprise first approached all three Inverness clubs in May 1993, no one knew what the final outcome would be or what kind of difficulties lay around the corner. Hopes were certainly high of Scottish League membership in a new Stadium. And although the facility appeared more than a year later than was originally - and perhaps rashly - promised, to have got it there at all was still a magnificent achievement. To have a team beginning its fourth League season there on a full time basis in Division 2 was a dream come true.

All of that would have been remarkable progress even with a straightforward, uncomplicated storyline. Its achievement under the incredibly adverse circumstances which have been detailed in previous pages must be described as little short of a miracle. There were just so many occasions when the survival of Inverness as a Scottish Football League entity looked impossible, and they affected so many different aspects of the Stadium and Merger strands of this tale.

However there were also men who refused to buckle and give in under all manner of adversity, and it is to their fortitude that the town owes a debt of gratitude. There were certainly mistakes made along the way in situations which had neither been experienced before nor expected.

But four years on from those first, tentative meetings in the offices of Inverness and Nairn Enterprise in the summer of 1993, here was a club which had so often survived the unthinkable - and succeeded. This has surely been one of the most amazing stories in the history of Scottish football. The birth of Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC, most certainly did take place "Against All Odds."



The Caley and Thistle teams together before their final encounter at Telford Street in May 1994.



Wilson Robertson and Dave Brennan tangling with Ross County's Billy Ferries. January 1995. Local derbies in front of huge crowds did a lot for the credibility of North football.



Inaugural team line up - 1994 - 95

BACK ROW :- John Scott, Paul Pressie, Steven MacDonald, Mike Andrew, Mark MacRitchie, Jim Calder, Mike Noble, Richard Hastings.
MIDDLE ROW :- John King (Physio), Martin Lisle, Alan Hercher, Peter Hardie, Alan Smart, Wilson Robertson, Alex Young (Trainer), John MacAskill (Doctor).
FRONT ROW :- Dave Brennan, Mark McAllister, Dave Milroy (Coach), Sergei Baltacha (Manager), Danny MacDonald (Assistant Manager), Charlie Christie, Colin Mitchell.



Team line up 1995 - 96

BACK ROW :- Martin Lisle, Alan Hercher, Danny MacDonald, John Scott, Ian MacArthur, Paul McKenzie, Mark McAllister.
 MIDDLE ROW :- Norman MacMillan, David Ross, Mike Noble, Mark MacRitchie, Jim Calder, Graeme Bennett, Dave McGinlay, Doug Green.
 FRONT ROW :- Alex Caldwell (Assistant Manager), Colin Mitchell, Iain Stewart, Robbie Benson, Dave Brennan, Charlie Christie, Richard Hastings, Steve Paterson (Manager).



Ready for the off against Rangers in the Scottish Cup. Caledonian Thistle captain Mike Noble shakes hands with opposite number Ally McCoist as referee Stuart Dougall looks on. The mascots (left to right) were Darren Jarvie, Aaron MacKenzie and Linda Maclean.



Paul Gascoigne bursts through at Tannadice despite the best attentions of Graeme Bennett, Iain Stewart and Alan Hercher.



Top scorer Iain Stewart. A spectacular hat trick in the club record 6-1 victory over Albion Rovers at Telford St. October 1995.



Goalkeeper Jim Calder - penalty shootout hero of the Scottish Cup replay against Stranraer - is congratulated by his team mates at the Caledonian Stadium. January 1997.



Team line up and Directors - May 1997. Much had changed since 1994.

BACK ROW :- Douglas Riach, Alastair MacKenzie, Norman Miller, Dougie McGilvray, Craig Maclean, Roy MacLennan, Jim Falconer, Ken Thomson.
MIDDLE ROW :- Ian Manning, Jim Jarvie, Ian Gordon, Scott MacLean, Mike Teasdale, Brian Thomson, Paul Cherry, Jim Calder, Ross Tokeley, Richard Hastings, Ian MacArthur, Alan Hercher, Alex Caldwell.

FRONT ROW :- Marco de-Barros, Charlie Christie, Iain Stewart, Steve Paterson, Mike Noble, Wayne Addicoat, David Ross, Barry Wilson.



Directors and Management Committee 1996 - 97.

BACK ROW :- David Jessiman, Sheddly Carr, Ian Broadfoot, Ian MacKenzie, Mike Shewan, Roy Lobban, John Falconer, George MacRae, Brian MacKenzie, Renato Turritani, Bruce Graham (General Manager), Jim Falconer (Secretary).

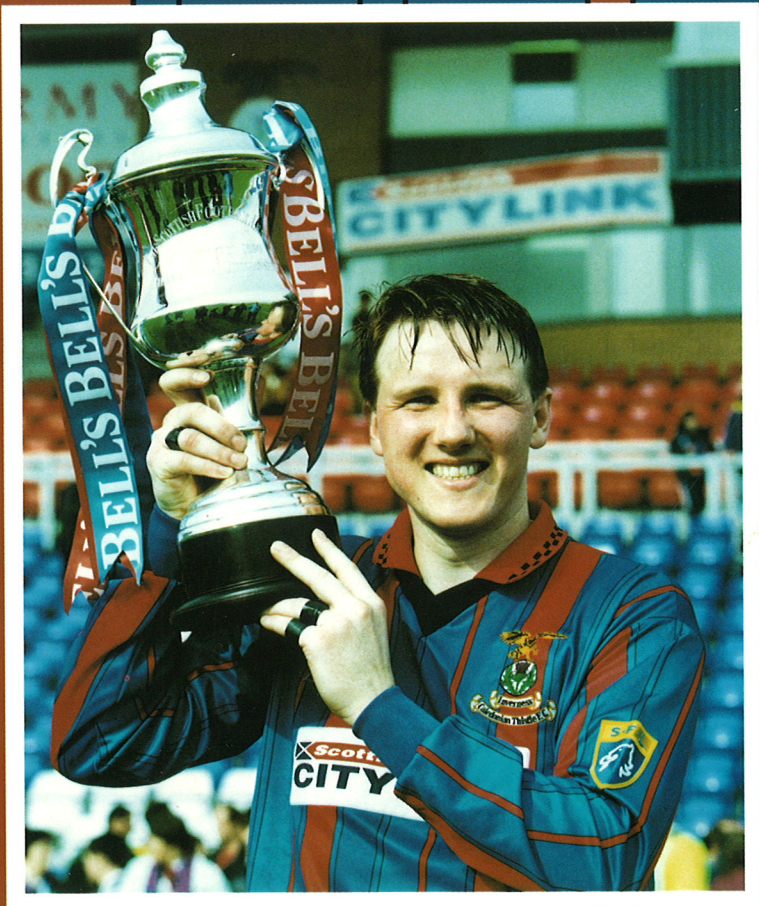
FRONT ROW :- Ian Gordon, Craig Maclean, Roy MacLennan, Norman Miller (Vice Chairman), Dougie McGilvray (Chairman), Alastair MacKenzie, Douglas Riach, Ken Thomson, Jim Jarvie.



The Inverness Caledonian Thistle and Albion Rovers teams coming out at the official opening of the Caledonian Stadium - 9th November 1996.



Ian MacArthur, Mike Noble and Charlie Christie lead off a lap of honour with the Division 3 trophy after the presentation on 3rd May 1997.



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