

When the Bulls Came to Town

By Jon O'Shea

There have been many fundraising initiatives in the long history of Northowram Hedge Top CC, ranging from whist drives in the 1920s to sponsored 20-mile walks in the 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps, though, the most memorable occasions, for all kinds of reasons, have been the club's two encounters with Super League's Bradford Bulls.

Sunday 13 August 2000 saw the first meeting between the Bulls and the Rams at Brighthouse CC's Clifton Road ground, which has been subsequently swallowed up by retail behemoth Tesco. A crowd of 2,500 made their way to the Tom Gardner Memorial Cricket Challenge, an event conceived and organised by Hedge Top's skipper Andrew Gardner with the aim of raising funds for both the club's new pavilion and the Special Care Baby Unit at Halifax General Hospital. Andrew's son Tom had sadly died in the Unit the previous year at the age of just two weeks, and he decided to use his friendly relationship with the Bulls as a means to organise a special event in Tom's memory.



**A page from the programme
for the 2000 event**

And special it certainly was! Bulls stars including Henry Paul and Stuart Fielden took part in the match alongside other well-known names such as ex-Leeds Utd keeper Nigel Martyn and the flamboyant Shelf-born footballer Frank Worthington. As if that wasn't enough, the Bulls brought along their spectacular roadshow, including their cheerleading squad - the Bullettes – and, most significantly, a very important piece of silverware also made the short trip from Odsal: the Challenge Cup was available for visitors to have their photo taken with. A crew from Sky Sports' *Boots 'N' All* programme were present to capture the whole event on film.

Unfortunately the weather didn't stay onside for the whole day, but that did little to deter the fundraising efforts of the hordes of club members and other volunteers. In the final reckoning, a charity auction including items such as a backstage pass to an Embrace gig, a signed Henry Paul shirt, and signed Leeds United shirts and balls raised over £2,000 towards a remarkable grand total of around £23,000, to be split evenly between the two causes. Senior club member Stephen Beverley later said

that the event was a great moment for Northowram, and that the wonderful attendance that day provided the basis for the construction of Hedge Top's much-needed new pavilion.

Then, two years later, in late July 2002, newly-crowned World Champions, the Bulls, provided the opposition once more – this time at the grand opening of the £40,000 pavilion at Hedge Top Lane. Again, stars including Leon Pryce, Leslie Vainokola and Henry's brother, Robbie Paul (who had been kept out of the previous meeting due to injury), donned their whites for a friendly game which also formed part of veteran Brian McDermott's testimonial year celebrations. The 'family fun day' which also incorporated an all-day barbeque, tombola, and tug-of-war competition, was attended by well over a thousand people – a phenomenal show of support considering the size of the village.

However, events in the early hours of the morning of the opening cast a long shadow over proceedings. The news had broken out that lifelong Hedge Top member Mark Oldman, a true driving force behind the construction of the new development and captain of the 2nd XI that year, had lost his battle with bowel cancer at the age of just 36. Many club people have since stated that without Mark's invaluable input, the extension would never have materialised. Duly, the pavilion was dedicated to his memory.

The two meetings of the Rams and the Bulls, though both tinged with sadness and loss, will always be remembered for the great fun had by young and old alike, and for the vital funds raised towards the growth and continued prosperity of Northowram Hedge Top CC.