

A Local Rivalry: The Sladdin Cup

By Jon O'Shea

In cricket many fierce local rivalries are played out summer after summer with no quarter given nor asked – the white rose of Yorkshire versus the red of Lancashire springs most readily to mind. These contests are notorious for adding intrigue to even the most routine of fixtures, and for producing all kinds of memorable incidents to be recalled and debated by fans in pubs and bars for years to come. In the case of the village of Northowram, that competitive edge is all the more keenly felt, as all that separates one club from another is the width of a stone wall.

With Northowram Hedge Top CC and Northowram Fields CC divided by a mere matter of feet, there has always been a healthy rivalry between the two, despite both taking part in different league competitions. This uncommon situation - with two clubs effectively living in each other's pockets - inevitably throws up the occasional problem. The most obvious being the competition for acquisition of new talent from a relatively small pool of young cricketers in the village. However, the close proximity of the neighbours will always, if nothing else, act as a spur for further progression on both sides of the wall.



'Them over the wall!'

Because of their residence in separate leagues, cup matches present the only opportunities for meetings between the two teams. The Sladdin Cup, inaugurated in 1950 by successful Northowram landowner A.W.Sladdin, originally comprised eight local teams: both Hedge Top and Fields (then simply monikered Northowram CC) first and second XIs, St. Thomas's, Witchfield, and Shelf's first and second XIs were invited to take part annually (Heywood CC also competed in some earlier editions, being crowned champions in 1951). Such cup games were initially played on midweek evenings, because play was not allowed on Sundays due to church commitments.

Unfortunately, towards the end of the 20th century the Sladdin Cup began to lose some of its early lustre, becoming something of an afterthought for a number of reasons, including: the increased number of other cup games; the introduction of the

Halifax League Sunday Section; the proliferation of junior cricket at the clubs involved; and, perhaps most significantly, the notable changes in social habits meaning that local men no longer had the opportunity to devote every weekend to playing cricket. So, as fixture congestion started to become an insurmountable obstacle, the competition was gradually put out to pasture.

The catalyst for the cup's recent rebirth was most unlikely. During a re-fit of the Stocks Arms pub, which was previously the headquarters for local club cricket and the one-time home of Fields (playing then as St. Matthew's CC), the original solid silver trophy was found discarded in a dustbin, ready for the dump! The trophy's fortunate salvation from certain oblivion saw the Sladdin Cup, now condensed into a one-off tie between Northowram Hedge Top and Northowram Fields, revived in 2005.

Honours are even at one apiece over the two summers since the competition's improbable resurrection, with Hedge Top currently in possession of the trophy. In the overall history of the competition, though Shelf CC enjoyed an outstanding run between 1956 and 1966 (emerging victorious nine times in eleven years), Northowram Fields lead the way with 12 wins (eleven of these came prior to their merger with fellow Bradford Central League side Fields CC and their subsequent move into the Central Yorkshire League). Hedge Top have so far picked up the trophy 10 times in all.

Despite the distinctive nature of their rivalry, the two Northowram clubs have, of course, always remained on genial terms, with both teams watching the other's game should their own tie finish early, and both regularly lending each other players in the years before league regulations were tightened. Nevertheless, the difficulties of maintaining two thriving cricket clubs in the village are evident. Some tension has arisen over where juniors will decide to play, particularly as Hedge Top have developed an enviable youth-coaching set-up, from which the best talent has often been cherry-picked by other local teams. In truth, for a village the size of Northowram, the butter has been spread perhaps a little too thinly in terms of playing resources.

Inevitably then, talk of a merger is regularly bandied about by injudicious outsiders, but opposition *within* the clubs to such a dramatic move is fierce. Clearly, the feeling prevails that as both clubs have each worked so hard to accrue their own impressive histories while neighbours, just why should they diminish their independence now? Without doubt, Hedge Top's long-serving Stephen Beverley gives the definitive response when presented with the prospect of joining forces with the club he calls 'them over the wall': "A merger?" he scoffs, "It will never happen will that!"