

The Birth of a Club: 1919-39

By Jon O'Shea

Monday 6 June 1919 witnessed the first recorded match played by the club that would, in due course, become known as Northowram Hedge Top Cricket Club. On that day Northowram Wesleyan Cricket Club took on their neighbours from the village's Ebenezer church at their then home in a crudely converted farmer's field to the rear of Heywood Chapel, and they marked their formation in style – by winning convincingly.

The club had been conceived by the elders of the local Wesleyan church, situated opposite the Shoulder of Mutton public house, as a means of recreation for its members, and so took its original name from this association. The role of club president was assumed by the superintendent minister of the chapel and the board of trustees were also the trustees of the chapel, thus inextricably linking the fledgling cricket club with religion from the outset. The very first club secretary was village butcher Mr Andrew Greenwood and Mr Frank Anderton of Hud Hill took the position of treasurer.



A line-up from 1921

The chapel also established a tennis club around this time, which jointly hosted a fundraising event documented by the *Halifax Evening Courier* in November 1919. A concert presented by the joint efforts of both clubs and Heywood Chapel's Sunday School raised an impressive sum of nearly £9. In fact, all of the cricket club's meetings, social events and fundraisers were conducted in the Sunday School, at an annual cost believed to be in the region of £2.

That first year also proved a great success on the field for the newly-formed club, as they entered the Mackintosh Cup and duly won it by defeating Pellon Baptists CC in the final which took place on Saturday 2 August at Ovenden Cross. The cup and prizes were presented by the Reverend F.Drennan, then president of the Halifax and District Nonconformist League.

The following season Northowram Wesleyans had their application to join the league (which was inaugurated in 1908 and then reformed after the culmination of the Great War) accepted, thus joining in regular competitive action with rivals including Heywood, Ovenden Wesleyan and Halifax Baptists. In that 1920 season they reached the semi-finals in defence of the Mackintosh Cup and

finished a comfortable third in a league comprising eight members in all. It was indeed a smooth introduction to competitive cricket for the club.

However, the surroundings in which they played were not quite as satisfactory. The inimitable former club chairman, the late Walter Howden, recalled some years later that the only mowed area of the original ground by Heywood Chapel was a small square in the middle surrounded by a makeshift wire fence to keep the cattle out – the rest of the field went largely untended.

Mr Howden, who selflessly served the club for more than half a century, also recounted that the facilities afforded to the players at this early juncture were decidedly Spartan; stretching only as far as one small undivided dressing hut, shared by both teams. There were certainly no refreshments available on site, and there was neither running water nor any toilet facilities. This state of affairs would probably have made watching Northowram Wesleyans a rather arduous affair. Similarly, to play in these conditions was not conducive to great cricket, certainly if the scoring (or lack thereof) that season is closely considered: most winning totals fluctuated between 40 and 100.

In 1926 the club took the bold decision to move operations to their current home at Hedge Top Lane, situated adjacent to local rivals Northowram St. Matthew's' (since merged with Bradford Central League side Fields CC to form Northowram Fields CC) Westercroft Lane premises, which were opened in 1920. The new ground was owned by the Coley Hall Estate and leased to Northowram Wesleyans for £5 per annum on an initial ten-year lease and for a period also hosted the tennis club's single court in a corner of the field.

The ground was, as it is today, very compact. There were two deep, worked-out quarries at one end where shiny new cricket balls would, as you might expect, be inexorably attracted. To remedy this problem, the club decided that a suitable solution would be to seat an old gentleman between the quarries to watch for lost balls. Again, there were no sanitary arrangements in place at this stage, but, gracefully, officials did provide a ladder to help players down into the quarry when needed. When asked about this time in the club's history, the late Walter Howden also remembered well the occasion on which an old hen hut was transported to the Hedge Top Lane ground to be cleaned out and utilised as a makeshift refreshments kiosk.

On moving to their new premises, the club then applied for membership of the Halifax & District Amateur League and were duly accepted. While their village neighbours St. Matthew's and Heywood CC competed in the top division in the summer of 1926, as a junior member the Wesleyans initially entered the league's third tier. During this time league cricket was played primarily on Saturday afternoons, with only the occasional evening fixture in the week. The club did, though, sometimes hire a coach to travel to friendly fixtures on weekdays, treating the day as a family outing with all invited along.

After a period of consolidation, in 1937 the club underwent its first change of name from Northowram Wesleyans to Northowram Methodist CC. This was due to the amalgamation of the Ebenezer and Wesleyan denominations, which then adopted the 'Methodists' moniker. Of course, less than a year later the Second World War was declared and organised cricket in Calderdale, and elsewhere for that matter, was significantly curtailed. The club did manage to sporadically turn out against other local clubs that were able to sustain teams in the face of the unfolding conflict, but the start of the war effectively marked the end of an era in which the club we know today was launched.