

Samuel Fielden

Samuel Fielden founded Todmorden Cricket Club.

Eldest son of cotton manufacturer and MP for Oldham John Fielden, Sam developed his passion for cricket at public school. On his return to Todmorden in 1834 he was put in charge of the Waterside Mill where he gave some of the factory workers time off with pay to play cricket with him on the hillside behind the mill, at Shoebroad Field, Longfield. It was here that Todmorden Cricket Club was formed in 1835.

A fast underhand bowler and decent batsman, Sam was treasurer and effectively ran the club until it disbanded in 1841. By then, the club had moved twice, to Old Shop Meadows in 1837 and, when this land was required for the railway embankment, to Eccles Holme (now known as Centre Vale and the club's current ground) in 1839. In 1849 Sam inherited the Centre Vale estate, which had been extended to include Eccles Holme, from his father and immediately re-formed the club.

Sam was often too busy to play. He was a millionaire industrialist, leading shareholder in the Lancashire-Yorkshire Railway Company and a leading light in local affairs (and national ones in supporting the interests of factory workers). He was also generous if private in supporting good causes. On a visit to the Shetland Islands the crew of a trawler had been given up for lost in stormy seas but Sam organised some volunteers, put out a boat and rescued several of the crew. He then presented the Shetlanders with £500 towards a lifeboat which he insisted, 'must neither bear my name nor point in any way to the donor'.

Despite his many other commitments, he remained President of the cricket club, owner of the ground and followed the club's fortunes closely. He paid for many improvements to the ground, including raising the Burnley Road wall in 1873 and, in 1874, a new tea pavilion in time for the prestigious match between the United North and the United South of England. When this match finished before lunch on the third day the club faced a financial loss and Sam persuaded the players, including WG Grace, to stay and play a one innings match in the afternoon.

Incensed by younger members breaking into the pavilion in 1875, and having little faith in the competence of the committee, Sam insisted on an increase in membership fees to create a smaller and more exclusive membership. He also put the club on annual probation, applying to him for use of the ground each season. He often used this hold over the club to get his own way. When members voted to reduce the age and fees for membership at the AGM of 1885, they were refused use of the ground unless they reversed the decision - and even then Sam did not confirm the ground's availability until April 1886.

For all his threats over the years, it is doubtful if Sam would have closed the ground as he had a genuine love of cricket. Rather, he knew the men he was dealing with and had their measure. He had to push to the limit to make them run the club efficiently and with strict attention to protocol and detail.

Sam's contributions to Todmorden included financing two thirds of the cost for lowering the river bed to reduce flooding, and, along with his brothers John and Joshua, the building of the Town Hall in memory of their father. Sam also built the Unitarian Church, his own final resting place.

Sam could be very stern and strict with people in his determination that things should be done properly and, despite his many good deeds, his darker moods earned him the nickname 'Black Sam' in later life.

By the end he was more respected than loved in Todmorden but on his death, aged 73, in 1889, the town suffered a great sense of loss. Mills, shops and businesses closed, and the blinds of private houses were kept drawn. The streets were lined with silent mourners for the simple funeral procession from Centre Vale House to the Unitarian Church ... 'the sombre mood of the town ... far more eloquent than any words could be.'