

Walsden

Like many cricket clubs, Walsden did not have a continuous existence from its first formation in the 19th century.

The current club, which has existed continuously since 1870, had at least two forerunners. There is evidence that a club was formed in 1856 and re-formed in 1862. It is rumoured that prior to 1856 a club called White Scar existed in the village but no evidence has been found to substantiate this.

Walsden's first recorded match was played on the land in front of the bandstand on what, since 1910, has been Centre Vale Park.

This was an away match against the 2nd XI of the Todmorden club which had been re-established in 1850.

The Centre Vale cricket ground was so waterlogged that Todmorden's president, Sam Fielden, who owned the whole Centre Vale estate, allowed the teams to play in front of his Centre Vale House, erecting a tent for changing and refreshments there.

A double innings match was completed in one day, Todmorden 2nds (65 and 88), beating Walsden (42 and 26) by 85 runs, and, remarkably, the scorecard for the game has been located. When a batsman was caught, the fielder but not the bowler's name was recorded.

The match was played on a Monday, suggesting that most of the players would be self-employed or employers of labour, able to take time off.

Walsden have played on their current ground since 1870, but apparently had two former grounds in their earlier incarnations in the 1850s and around 1862.

These were at White Slack and at Heights Houses. The latter was still used as a ground in the Todmorden & District Cricket League until it folded in 1959.

The current ground was formerly the site of Inchfield Mill dam and was leased to the Club by E. Smith of Inchfield Villa. 137 members enrolled at that time and the ground was opened in a 16-a-side match on 23 July 1870.

A feature of cricket as popular entertainment in the 19th century was travelling troops of clown cricketers.

As Walsden's major fundraising event of 1871, 'XI Gentlemen of Todmorden and Walsden' played Mr Dan Rice's 14 Clown Cricketers at Walsden on 21, 22 and 26 July.

Prior to the match on Friday 21 July, the clowns, dressed in 'grotesque costumes', toured the streets in horse-drawn carriages accompanied by the Todmorden Brass Band.

Rain delayed the start until Saturday, when the locals made 113 all out and the clowns replied with 24 for 3.

The clowns had little skill as cricketers but entertained the crowd with their witticisms and contortions at the fall of every wicket.

On Saturday evening the clowns sang and performed acrobatics on a raised platform and the band played for dancing until darkness fell. Todmorden Cricket Club's Ladies' Tent was borrowed for the occasion.

Rain delayed the match until the following Wednesday when the clowns were all out for 56.

A total attendance of 2,464 raised £66 14s 2d for Club funds.

Walsden Cricket Club has been an integral part of the village community throughout its existence.

Many local groups have used its facilities, including Todmorden Gun Club who met monthly through the latter part of the 19th century.

The standard of shooting was high, competitors travelling from as far as Liverpool, and it was usually necessary to kill eight or nine birds with no misses to win.

We are fortunate that the prestigious Central Lancashire League has such a well documented history. Not so well known are the clubs' histories before the league started in 1892.

At that time all played what we would regard as friendlies, except that with no league, they took on much greater significance.

Called 'Challenge Matches', these were fiercely contested town v town battles for local pride. The report of Walsden's visit to Foster Holme, Hebden Bridge in 1888 gives a flavour of this.

Hebden Bridge's deep suspicions about the Walsden umpire from a previous encounter were, in their eyes, confirmed when an appeal for a stumping was rejected during Walsden's 110 all out: '...a most deliberate case of giving a batsman a second innings'.

When the Hebden Bridge pro, D. Pollard from Dalton, was adjudged lbw 'without hesitation' at the start of the reply, all hell broke out.

Non-striker George Cotton struck down the wickets at his end with his bat and was joined by T. Cheetham who rushed onto the field, seized the wickets at the striker's end and 'attacked the umpires with wholesale oaths and imaginary blows.'

As the Walsden team shepherded their umpire towards the pavilion, Cheetham ran ahead and locked them out.

Peace was restored, aided by a policeman and the refusal of Cotton and Cheetham to participate further in the match.

The rest of the home team only batted after 'earnest solicitation' from the captain, their disinterest reflected in a final score of 28 for 8.

Partisan letters from supporters of both teams appeared in the Hebden Bridge Times and Calder Vale Gazette, 'A Lover of Fair Play' from Hebden Bridge commenting:

I think if an umpire had given such bare faced decisions on any other ground in the county he would have got what he richly deserved, viz.:- a ducking in the nearest sheet of water.

Extract from: Cloth Caps and Cricket Crazy: Todmorden and Cricket 1835-1896

Walsden Cricket Club's professional and groundsman in 1890, A. Storah, quickly became disenchanted because '...the members would come to practice with clogs on, thus cutting up the ground and giving him no chance to keep it in good condition.'

By July he had agreed to sign for Otley, where his package was to involve 'assisting the cricket club organisation in the summer and the football [rugby] in the winter'.

However, the Yorkshire Rugby Football Union would 'not allow a man to pose as an amateur in a football club after playing as a professional with the cricket eleven belonging to the same club'.

These were tense days when, despite huge crowds, the rugby union, fiercely protective of amateurism, would not allow players to earn a penny.

Five years later the world of rugby broke in two. The Northern Union was founded in 1895 – effectively the birth of rugby league which sanctioned first 'broken time' payments (for loss of earnings while playing).

The first ladies cricket match in Todmorden was played at Walsden on 6 June 1893 at a time when women were just beginning to strive for greater independence.

The match, between women of the Walsden district, provoked a predictably chauvinistic response from the male preserve of local journalism, the Todmorden Advertiser stating:

Whether those of the feminine gender are as fit to indulge in the good old English pastime as those of the opposite sex I do not care to argue, but evidently the fairer sex in the Walsden district...seem to think they are, as a match was played on the Walsden Cricket Club's ground ... between members of the 'Petticoat Club'.

Walsden have not played Todmorden in a league or cup match since 1896.

But often since then there has been a challenge match between the two and, until the last decade, these have been very competitive.

The Donald Rigg trophy was inaugurated in 1976, and for the next few years, and there was a full day of cricket, with the second teams playing a 30-over match in the morning and the first teams playing a full game in the afternoon.

Honours were about even in these affairs over the ten or so years.

More recently, the teams wore coloured clothing for the first time in the fixture in 2000 and 2001. Following the counties' example, the Walsden Wolves were adorned in an impressive red.

The Todmorden Tornadoes contrived an offensive lemon and sky blue combination in 2000 and an improved claret and blue in 2001, the last time the teams met.

But rivalry was never more fierce than when the clubs were both in the Central Lancashire League between 1893 and 1896. After a Todmorden victory in 1894, one Walsden supporter was moved to verse.

'Play up Walsden' by 'Spectator'

Play up, Walsden, heed not defeat;
Think not that Todmorden cannot be beat;
The tide may turn when next you meet
And bring you joy – entire, complete.

Play up, Walsden, your last score
Is greater than it has been before;
This your opponents will deplore,
More anxiously wait for what's in store

Play up, Walsden, think what renown,
Should victory your next effort crown,
Your hamlet beat the little town,
The scales be turned upside down.

The Todmorden cricket writer was very defensive in 1895 when Walsden had much the better of a draw.

He wrote that a Walsden victory over Todmorden, 'would cause as much delight to reign in the hearts of the victors as a visit of the Queen to Walsden would occasion. It would make the villagers feel such transcendental joy that they wouldn't know where they were for weeks afterwards'.

'Todmorden have no need to put on any supercilious airs when they come to Walsden,' riposted Walsden committee man Dr Stephenson.

The finances of both clubs would benefit if the fixture was revived with genuine rivalry. In this age of Twenty20 cricket, a series of evening games at the height of summer might well capture the public's imagination.

National service

Local cricket clubs pulled their weight during the First World War.

Walsden played Todmorden to raise funds for the War Relief Fund in 1914, and in support of the Centre Vale Military Hospital in 1915 and 1916, the latter match realising the considerable sum of £50.

As added attractions in 1915, the Todmorden side included Wilfred Rhodes and Percy Holmes, while Walsden had the services of George Hirst.

Walsden had three England players in their ranks in 1916, Rhodes playing alongside Lancashire opening batsman Johnny Tyldesley and Warwickshire bowler Frank Field. The Todmorden team included Hirst and double cricket and football international Jack Sharp.

As well as supporting the war effort, clubs had to adapt to wartime conditions.

Walsden, like most clubs, did not employ a professional during the key years of both world wars.

In 1916 the players were asked to forgo their usual half-pay broken-time payments for wages lost while playing. In the same year the pavilion, tea room and bowling green pavilion were insured against damage by air raid.

In 1917 this was extended to talent money as the Club came close to winding up, at least temporarily.

Various activities have taken place in the pavilion at Walsden over the years.

In 1922, with moving pictures the new craze, an offer of £50 was made to use the pavilion as a 'Picture Palace' for six months during the winter, but the committee rejected it.

Inchfield Bottom drama group staged several plays there and several slide shows and lectures have also helped boost Club funds.

The Club has staged its own functions, including whist drives and dances, and in 1939 a 'gramophone concert' was held.

For decades there was a 'Winter Club' for indoor activities including table tennis and dominoes.

Walsden Football Club and others also let the dressing rooms for many years before changing rooms were built on the adjoining field.

During the War the Home Guard, ARP and Air Training Corps all played games on the Walsden ground and the Club provided a 'Don Bradman bat' to be raffled as part of the 'Todmorden Wings for Victory Week'.

Money and players were in short supply during both wars, although there was a little compensation after World War II.

A minute for 25 March 1946 states: 'That the secretary write [to] the Borough Surveyor re. seating from air raid shelters.'

Pitches & polling!

'A double of sorts' was the Todmorden News and Advertiser's understated verdict on Walsden's triumphant season of 1962. The Club won the Wood Cup and became champions of the Central Lancashire League for the first time, sharing the title with Stockport after a dramatic final day.

Nothing had seemed less likely at the end of June. Walsden were languishing in ninth place, 13 points behind leaders Stockport and had won just 3 of their last 11 games.

Progress was smoother in the Wood Cup. In the first round professional Bob Bartels (6 for 36 and 74 not out) was magnificent against Milnrow.

Jack Coupe (7 for 34) demolished Heywood in round 2 and the team received a huge confidence boost by beating Gary Sobers' Radcliffe over three nights in the semi-final at the start of July. Bartels and Peter Green both took five wickets as Radcliffe were dismissed for 145.

Sobers, batting extremely low at number six, was left stranded with the tail and made 38. A whirlwind 42 in 36 minutes by Allan Stuttard, who struck Sobers for two sixes in an over, put the result beyond doubt and although the great West Indian took three wickets, his 14 overs cost 74 runs.

Despite ignominious defeat to Castleton Moor, who won only twice all season, Walsden closed on the League leaders in July. At the end of the month Radcliffe were despatched a second time, Sobers' 71 and 8 for 78 not enough to prevent defeat by 91 runs, and Middleton were defeated in the Wood Cup final at Milnrow, the match running to four evenings.

Basil D'Oliveira made 40 of Middleton's 156, but solid batting right down the order steered Walsden to victory by five wickets.

With three matches left, the 'Double' was 'on'. Walsden were third, four points behind joint leaders, Stockport and Radcliffe. Victory at Stockport was essential and duly achieved, and a home win over Rochdale put Walsden top with one match to play as Radcliffe and Stockport slipped up against lowly opposition.

Three points ahead of Stockport and four ahead of Radcliffe, victory in the last match at Milnrow would guarantee Walsden the title. A draw would guarantee a share of it.

All looked fair as Milnrow were dismissed for 120 and Walsden cruised to 81 for 3. Then the wheels came off: Milnrow professional Cec Abrahams ran through the middle order.

At 95 for 9 with 20 minutes to play, Walsden's title dreams were hanging by a thread.

An appeal against the light was rejected and last pair Peter Horne and number 11 Jack Coupe defended grimly in the gathering gloom.

A close lbw appeal against Coupe in the final over was turned down and Walsden survived, Coupe 7 not out and Horne still on zero after the longest half hour of his cricketing life.

News of victory for Stockport confirmed two things.

The title had been shared – and Peter Horne had just played the most valuable nought not out in the history of the League.

'Walsden are known as the "Cinderella" club and are content to stay that way. We don't want to have to work all season just to pay one star his wages.'

So commented Coucillor Fielden at the club's AGM of 1963, and it seemed that the rest of the League was, temporarily at least, in agreement.

Previewing the 1964 season, 'Matt', the whimsical reporter at the Todmorden News and Advertiser, commented: 'It seems that all the other clubs have answered "And so say all of us". Not one star name appears on the list. Gone are the names of yesterday – Cec Pepper, Gary Sobers, Sonny Ramadhin, Dattu Phadkar.'

Nor did he welcome an extension of Sunday cricket introduced in the early 1960s, as the Wood Cup faced the prospect of ten 'double headers': 'For players' wives who are not interested in cricket there are going to be many lonely weekends and for reporters' wives who are not interested in cricket – well, my divorce proceedings begin next week.'

He felt, however, that the omens were good for Walsden: 'On the administrative side it is pleasing to see at long last an old player on the selection committee – for let's face it, in the past some of the selectors would have been better suited to picking a tiddly-winks side. Jim Wilkinson is the older player in question and his knowledge of the game should help a great deal.'

With the pros all 'much of a muchness', the League would be a true test of amateur ability, and so it proved.

Walsden stayed with the leaders in the early weeks of the season and pulled away from the pack with six wins from eight games in June and July. With four matches to go, Walsden were six points ahead of second-placed Werneth and nine clear of Ashton in third.

Defeats to Heywood and Royton allowed Ashton to cut the lead to one point and Werneth to two. A repeat of 1962's shared title was a possibility, but Walsden held their nerve to beat Middleton by 36 runs on the final day.

Matt's predictions had proved correct: ...their outstanding season of triumph has at last proved that Walsden have some of the finest amateurs in the Central Lancashire League. Walsden's team has not greatly differed in the last ten seasons but whereas other clubs have had the big name professionals to pull them through Walsden have plodded along getting the best man possible at the price they could afford. Now when the stars have departed and the amateurs have come to the fore Walsden have at last proved themselves. For instance, where in the league is there a better opening attack than Jack Coupe and Steve Boam? Where is there a better opening bat than Bill Barker, and where is there a finer wicket keeper than Sammy Connor?

Over the decades, Walsden's women members have made a massive contribution to the Club's wellbeing.

Australian star Trevor Chappell inspired Walsden to Wood Cup victory over Werneth in 1975 – scoring 124 not out with the bat and taking 5-30 with the ball.

During seasons 1978 and 1979 Walsden 3rd XI played at Dobroyd Castle.

In 1983 Walsden's signed stylish Pakistan opening batsman Mohsin Khan, shortly after he had scored a Test double century at Lords. In 1984 he thrashed 1,378 runs in total for Walsden.

In 1992 Walsden put on a very special cricket match – for those with a seeing disability. In the same year, Scott Street played host to archery.

In Millennium year, Walsden hosted a special women's cricket match.

As if to emphasise themes of family and community which characterise Walsden Cricket Club's history, 2005 saw the Club hosting a Charity Day for the Walsden Community Fund which raised £1,000 in aid of the St. Peter's Church Spire Fund.

Thirty years ago Walsden ran three teams. It now runs seven – three open- age teams, plus under-18s, -15s, -13s and -11s.

The 3rd XI had forerunners in the Todmorden & District and Hebden Bridge cricket leagues until the 1950s, and was re-formed in 1978 when it joined the Halifax & District Cricket Association – where they met a few of the old local league teams such as Old Town and Bridgeholme.

The 3rd XI won promotion in their first season and won the Calder Valley Cup in 1991. During this time matches were played at Walsden, Dobroyd and Calder High School. After 24 seasons, the third team left to join the Central Lancashire 3rd Team League, winning the knockout cup in 2002.

Walsden have also entered the twenty-first century with an excellent website: www.walsdencandbc.fsnet.co.uk.