

“Nothing to Play For”

April: Annual General Meeting

This is the beginning of The Almondbury Casuals Cricket Club season. The current venue is an exclusive golf club, an old and remote converted mansion surrounded by fairways, greens and woodland. The Annual General Meeting must be a fleeting event, as I, and all the other diners, missed it completely. There are two references in “Cricket in Perspective” (1987).

‘The AGM and Dinner at The Borough Club (*a gentleman’s establishment in the town centre*) can rightly be claimed as the most distinguished and sophisticated event in the Huddersfield Calendar, with The Mayor’s Ball coming a close second. The actual AGM is something of a mystery as very few members can ever actually remember having one, though as a past chairman I used to open the meeting by raising an eyebrow to the secretary who would respond by closing it with a nod on our way to dinner.’ (anon)

‘I attended many such gatherings, but never actually took part in a single meeting. It seemed that, however early one arrived, the meeting was “just over”.’ (John Bell)

The truth is that there is no AGM and never has been.

I’ve been to the dinner though, with fifty others. We assembled in the club bar on the Friday evening before the first fixture of the season. From the window we could see a grassy courtyard with the first tee just beyond. There were no golf members. The aperitifs were subsidised by Casuals’ funds, so we drank as much beer as we could before moving through to the dining room. On the way, I spotted notices that asked us to wear a tie here, a jacket there and denim clothing nowhere. There was however little for the stewardess to worry about. This was a group who knew how to behave, dress and enjoy themselves.

Everyone ate the same things. Soup, beef and vegetables, and pudding. Will Ward sat on one of the arms off the end of the top table where Rupert Wilson was tucking in.

‘Rupert, can I take my jacket off?’ asked Will, after the soup.

‘They won’t say anything, they’ll just stop serving’, replied Rupert.

In his late fifties, Rupert was a golf club member and a Casuals’ opening bowler at the end of his career. Will was younger, a talented opening bat. There mustn’t be a golf club rule about correct placing of the serviette. Rupert had his tucked into his shirt collar.

There were after dinner speeches, introduced by The Casuals’ secretary, Bill Crossland who has opened the bowling with Rupert for many years. Greg Smith, chairman until 2006, was the first to speak. Whilst Greg hasn’t played cricket since his schooldays in Oxfordshire, he’s become, by dint of rugby hand-eye skills, a slow bowler with decent stats and an occasional punishing middle to late order batter. Greg welcomed us all and hoped we would enjoy ourselves. He was followed by the guest specifically invited for the purpose of making a speech. Other impromptu speakers then made unsolicited contributions, sometimes too long and often not about cricket. The guest speaker was not heckled, but anyone else who put his head above the parapet was fair game and the noise level rose dramatically. There was one individual who prided himself in being the loudest and most offensive without actually cursing. He was

accepted. 'That's old so-and-so, he always does it, its part of the evening.' 'Wouldn't be the same without old so-and-so.'

Looking beyond the rosy faces and bottles of red wine, it was hard to ignore the beauty of the dining room's wood panels, high ceiling and minstrel gallery. Everything about the place said old and tasteful. Apparently the first house was built here in the 1500's by the Kay family, passing to the Earl of Dartmouth in the early 1700's when the Kay's eldest daughter married the Earl's heir.

I didn't know many of the diners. Bill, Greg, Rupert, Will, Richard Umbers, Marc Davis and Jim Harris, with me, made eight with a combined age over three hundred. True enough current players. Some would say the only players at the moment. Greg said many of the diners were guests. I got the impression that the few true former Casuals were fifty, sixty and seventy somethings who would have played in the nineteen fifties, sixties and seventies. I wondered why they'd all come. It didn't seem to be about starting a new cricket season.

Wives and partners arrived around ten o'clock. They'd eaten out and come on to the golf club to meet their spouses in the mixed lounge for after-dinner drinks. One unfortunate lady, who must remain nameless, wore smart light blue denim jeans. The stewardess reported her to Rupert who went purple and he didn't speak for ten minutes.

At this point, I have to admit to a certain prejudice, raised as I was under the banner of "us". My dad taught me all about it on his knee. "Them" were the bosses, a privileged class who inhabited golf clubs and drove big cars. My brother and I were therefore expected to pass the "levels" and go to university. This was the nineteen-sixties prevailing route out of the working class for those lucky enough to be bright. A sort of 'if you can't beat them, join them'.

Huddersfield New College played soccer, hockey and rugby union and you had to choose which to concentrate on by the fifth form. Our rugby fixture list included a Wednesday game against a select XV from the local rugby club and we guested at their 7's competition. Then there was a Huddersfield Schools XV which I recall became a sort of model for colts. The upshot was selection for the local club's First XV when I was still a schoolboy. Most of the team talked posh and I couldn't afford a round of beer.

Then to Liverpool Medical School in 1966 and a well known rugby club near Southport. My accent didn't change and I had to arrange an overdraft to pay for the beer. Thus a socially challenged grammar school boy came in regular contact with the natural confidence and occasional arrogance of public schoolboys, teaching hospital consultants and the twits that drink in the men-only rugby club bars.

Dad would have learned which class he belonged to through the three West Yorkshire Walker generations that spanned Victoria's reign (1830-1901). Eli - born 1813, clothier; William - born 1854, mill engine stoker; and Frank - born 1883, shop manager. He had plenty of personal experiences too, living through the twenties and thirties, as a corporal in the war and then those difficult times that followed his return to England in 1947. He was also a great rugby league man. A different working life hasn't altogether changed my perceptions of what dad taught me. Can I be forgiven for imagining that the middle class is created by fashionable fee-paying schools followed by university and entry into one of the professions, or developed in the family business, mixing with like minded fellows down the rugby and golf clubs? Life chances enhanced by family money. And once you are in and have the accent, you're in for ever. Bankruptcies and other disasters are no impediment.

Looking back now from 2009, I wonder what my fellow university cricket students from the leagues would have thought of accountants, teachers, headmasters, judges, bankers, businessmen and company directors who attend golf and cricket club dinners? Would the issue of middle class Victorian ancestry have been raised? Those that helped create the divide between professional and amateur sports in the late eighteenth century, decreeing that to earn a living through sport was not the behaviour of a gentleman? From that time good working class cricketers played league and county for a wage, whilst the gifted amateur played country house and nomadic cricket. There were amateurs who played both and hypocrisy was not unknown. Even W.G. Grace was said to have earned more from cricket than any of the professionals with whom he played. On the other hand, professional and working class club players regarded friendly cricket as having 'nothing to play for'. More importantly perhaps, so did the spectators.

Trollope exemplifies these attitudes in "British Sports and Pastimes", "To play billiards is the amusement of a gentleman; to play billiards pre-eminently well is the life's work of a man who, in learning to do so, can hardly have continued to be a gentleman in the best sense of the word."

I've limited experience of the local golf, cricket, rugby and social roundabout, so I looked to "Cricket in Perspective" (1987) for evidence of a connection between The Casuals and the Victorians:

'One didn't feel like throwing oneself into the canal, if, for instance a dolly catch was dropped. Twelfth man just brought you out a bucket.' (Guy Overton)

'One remembers the happy times at Thurstonland Cricket Ground, followed by a convivial evening at The Golden Cock, Farnley Tyas. Halcyon days and weekends at Hunstanton and Windsor. Particularly at Windsor one remembers the lobster cutlets on the Saturday night at that gorgeous gourmet's delight, The Hinds Head at Bray. The following day a lunch time session at The Pineapple followed by the match on the meadow.' (Guy Overton)

'There are and were at the other end of the scale some rather good cricketers. Jolly good chaps whose primary function was to make up for the rest of us. Luckily they realise this and know their place.' (Jim Netherwood).

'There is a lot of money about in sport today. Proportionately speaking, the greater the stake the nastier the sport. Even the term amateur is now regarded with more than a little cynicism. But one thing is for sure, no one in his right mind would ever pay a Casual to play cricket.' (John Bell)

The truth is, as usual, mundane. The Casuals and the golf club are modern institutions, not Victorian. Golf wasn't played on the Earl of Dartmouth's land until the early twentieth century and it was 1939 before the club finally purchased the estate outright. The Casuals weren't formed until 1949. Maybe The AGM is, after all, simply an old buffers' booze-up disguised as the start-of-season cricket dinner. Some things never change.

And what would my fellow students have said about The Casuals? League cricketers and officials to a man, they were too competitive to have taken us seriously. They might have smiled and made a comment about toffs and what they get up to. But there was one important common factor. Whilst they were primarily interested in something worth playing for, it was transparent that they also loved the game for its own sake. Most of them helped administer the game and

tried hard to instill the best sporting attitudes and habits in their players, especially the youth.
They said it was all about respect.