

Making tracks

44. Clayton West C.C. - Back Lane

In 1988 we were all set to play Holmfirth in the Sykes Cup. The West Indian fast bowler Tony Gray was playing for Holmfirth and, obviously, we weren't exactly relishing the prospect of facing him. This was prior to the era when everyone wore helmets, but our skipper was busy ringing round trying to order some. Then the night before the big match we heard that Gray had been called up to play for the West Indies in a tournament in the USA. You could say we were pretty happy about this!
[Club secretary, Mark Firth]

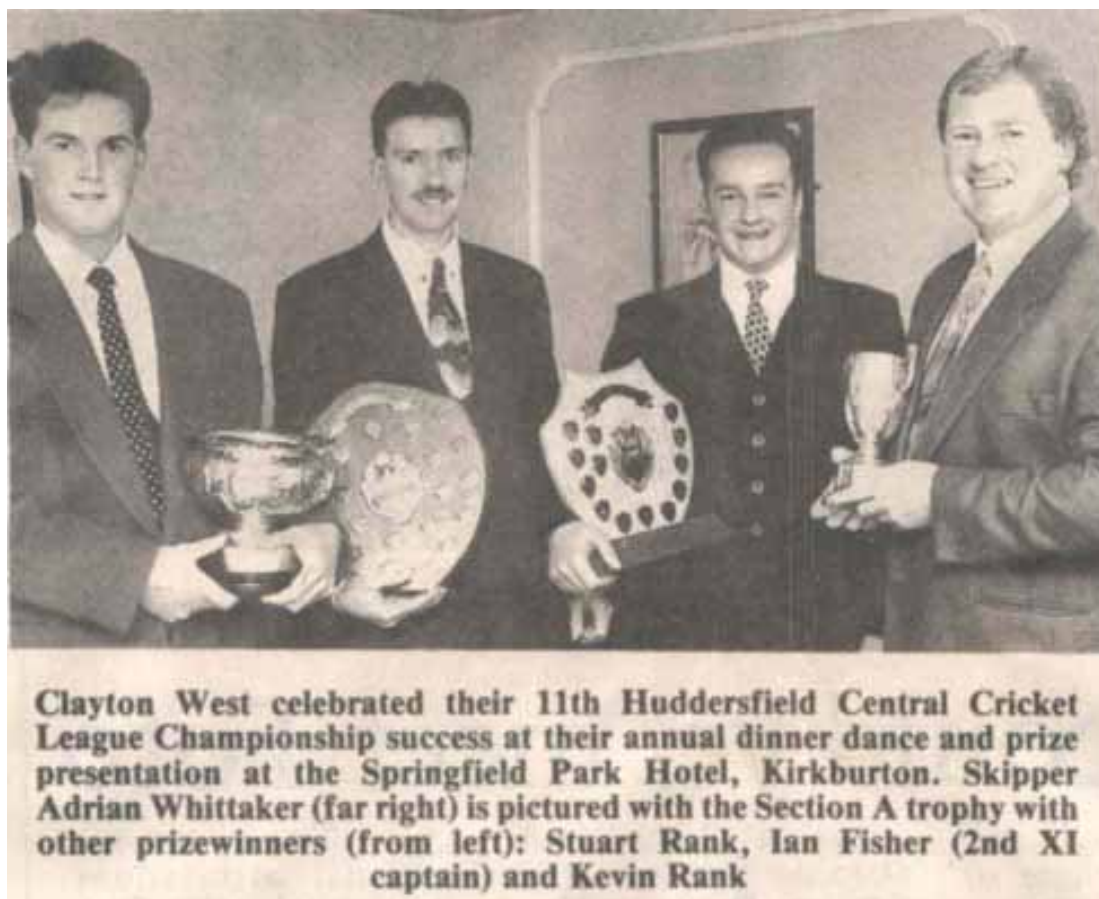
The village of Clayton West is situated just inside the south-eastern border of Kirklees, three miles due east of Denby Dale. It is an old mining and textile community whose most famous son is John Kaye, the industrialist and educationalist. Its train station closed in 1983, but it is now famous for its 15-inch miniature railway - which opened for business in 1991. In 1837 the population of Clayton West was 887, but the place has grown steadily in recent decades and it is now a significant commuter settlement.

The village is also well known for its cricket club. Before joining the Huddersfield League in 2000, Clayton West C.C. won the Huddersfield Central League a record 16 times, claiming the title on 10 occasions between 1986 and 1999, and winning it eight times in the 1990s. When he's asked to explain this amazing success, club secretary Mark Firth refers back in time: 'In 1984 and 1986 we won all the junior competitions, including the Walker Cup. This stood us in good stead; we already had the nucleus of a good senior side at the club. In Stuart Rank we've also had a very fine cricketer, and this has helped attract other players to the club. Moving into the Huddersfield League was a very big decision, but we needed a new challenge and we've got no regrets.'

Firth is familiar with the recent history of the team, but slightly unsure about the club's deepest roots: 'Clayton West C.C. has existed since around 1900, though I couldn't pinpoint the year exactly. I've seen a map from the period which suggests there was a cricket field at the back of Scissett Baths; some people say that this was the club's first home, but it could just as easily have been the early headquarters of Nortonthorpe

C.C..'

There is less controversy about the recent history of the Back Lane ground. A new (small white) scoreboard replaced the old one in the 1980s, and there was a succession of wooden pavilions before the current prefabricated structure was erected in 1990. This has recently been extended, and further improvements are also planned.



Champions in 1993

In the mid-1990s the club was able to put down an artificial wicket. The Yorkshire Cricket Association helped fund the development, and Yorkshire and England fast bowler Chris Silverwood was present at the official opening of the strip. In recent years, the club has also been forced to erect a 25-foot high 'fence' around two parts of the ground to protect nearby houses from flying cricket balls.

Ex-players Ian Rank and Mick Sellars put a lot of time in as club groundsmen, and Firth is delighted with the state of the Back Lane wicket: 'It's a very good batting track. I'd say that in 50 overs a par total is somewhere around the 220 mark. But saying that, we set a Huddersfield League record in 2001 when we scored 411-7 against Dalton. It should be noted, though, that the opposition only had nine men!'

Traditionally, batters at Back Lane have had to take account of 'local rules', which used to state that a ball hitting the boundary fence on the full was a four rather than a six. (For the umpire to signal six, the ball had to *clear* the fence). This was local custom up until the 2002 season, when Clayton West eventually fell into line with League rules regarding boundary hits.

Clayton West C.C. is one of only two sports clubs in the village (the other being the bowling club). It has a 1st XI, a 2nd XI, and junior teams at under-13, under-15 and under-17 levels (and look out for Jonathan Butterfield, star of the Yorkshire Under-12s side).

Previously, the ground was owned by the local colliery, but when this closed in the 1980s leasing arrangements changed. Today, the cricket club sub-lets the field from a local farmer, and it is very proud of what it offers. 'A warm welcome awaits all First and Second Elevens, and their supporters, visiting Back Lane,' says the club's publicity in the League handbook. And it goes on: 'Excellent teas provided.'

The local pubs - The Junction Inn and The Woodman - also have a fine reputation.

Today, Back Lane is a compact and very square-shaped cricketing venue. It is located to the north of the village, not too far away from Park Mill, the River Dearne, the local school and the old colliery. Within walking distance are Emley's ground at Upper Lane and Nortonthorpe's, in Scissett, just down the main road.

The immediate surrounds are interesting: a field of horses (of different colours), a couple of new housing estates, a caravan, a bit of light industry, a crane, an *ad hoc* building site, lots of bushes, and a farm. In the far distance you can see Emley Mast; in the near distance a neat white fence marks off the perimeter of the ground.

You can enter the ground in a variety of ways. The pavilion (no spikes!) is tucked away in the corner: it's a white one-storey building, with the letters 'CWCC' protruding in one of the windows. A notice says that junior cricketers must wear protective helmets at all times; another that the exercising of dogs is forbidden; and a third declares that all cars are parked at the 'owners' risk'. There are benches, bins and a BBQ facility on the side of the ground linking the pavilion and the scoreboard.

In fact, this side of the ground boasts a fine line of tall hedges - with adverts pinned to the netting in front of them. There's excellent publicity for Nuswift, ABM, Timber Specialists, Solarshade Ltd., Fawcett Electrical Ltd., Ernest Bedford & Co., Braithwaite Excavation, Mills, Kemp & Brown Solicitors, Close Consumer Finance Ltd., Victoria Kitchen Company, CMAS, N.G. Wright & Son Ltd., and Dolce Vita Restaurant.

In front of the hedging and the ads are several benches with poignant

inscriptions:

Gibby's Seat - Peter Gibson - Former Player and Supporter 1932-1995.

Harry Whittaker - Chairman, Clayton West Cricket Club 1957-1970.

Greta Whittaker - Supporter of Clayton West Cricket Club for many years.

Traditionally, Clayton West have preferred to nurture homegrown talent rather than employ professionals, but things changed in 2003 when they signed South African Paul Van De Berg. As the *Huddersfield Examiner* explained: 'A highly promising all-rounder, Van De Berg comes from the Mpumalanga Province, and plays premier grade cricket for the Secunda club...[He] is being sponsored by his club and local business contacts back home for his spell at Clayton West, where as well as fronting the side's hopes of maintaining their Premiership status, he will also be required to coach all the junior and senior sides as he holds a coaching qualification from the northern union.'

(Extract from P.Davies, *Pennine Pitch*, 2003)