

FATHER OF THE CLUB

Profile of Sheard Sykes by Sam Smith

Huddersfield-born Sheard Sykes could well be given the title of “Father of the Club” at Blackley – being the oldest living ex-player at the age of 88. And he recalled that on two occasions he was the “Father Christmas” at Lindley Road. He played the role at children’s festive parties and gave out presents to eager youngsters.



But at one party his disguise was blown by a chirpy young fellow called Steven Priestley, son of Cyril Priestley, who played for Blackley and worked with Sheard. “As Steven got to me in the queue he shouted out at the top of his voice: ‘It isn’t Father Christmas, it’s Sheard Sykes – I can tell by his shoes’, which gave everyone a good laugh,” said Sheard.

It was one of many fond memories Sheard has of his 10 years as an all-rounder at Blackley – the highlight of which was taking a hat-trick. The former engineer remembers the days when he, his wife Olive – who helped with the teas - and daughter Janet – who was scorer for nine years – would catch the bus from Huddersfield to Ainley Top and then walk across the fields to get to the ground. “They were happy times,” he added.

Besides his love of cricket, Sheard was an all-round sportsman who also played competitive football and table-tennis. (He is still a season ticket-holder at Huddersfield Town Football Club).

His cricket career started as a 17-year-old in 1937 with Bradley Mills in the Huddersfield and District League. He remained in that league – playing also for Dalton and Lepton Highlanders – before joining Blackley in 1957. His association with Blackley continued for a couple of years as an umpire after he stopped playing.

However, his cricketing days did not end completely with Blackley because Sheard still turned out occasionally for his works team Highfield Gears. But he remembers clearly the day he packed in and hung up his batting gloves. “I broke a finger in a match at Leeds Road playing fields,” he said. “I was 58-years-old and I had dropped a catch in that match. I went home and said to my wife – that’s it, I’m finished with cricket now.”

Sheard had a reputation as a keen fielder – and he believes he had a young Australian to thank for that. As an 18-year-old playing for Bradley Mills, he admitted he was more interested in batting and bowling than fielding. But the Australian who played in the same team told him: “Look, you must run about more than you do. You’re a young man fielding at cover-point – you’ve got to use your speed. Run about and cover the field – get more involved and you will enjoy the game more.” Sheard added: “I always remembered his words to me – and did what he said and I ended up a pretty good fielder.”

Sheard and his wife Olive – they been married for 63 years – recently visited the village when another ex-player, Harry Aspinall, celebrated his 80th birthday at the club pavilion. Olive said: “It was really nice to go back and see everybody – it was a fantastic occasion.”

It seems that for many people, once you are in the Blackley cricket family you are always part of it.