

High in the moors

12. Slaithwaite C.C. - Hill Top

No cricket club in all Yorkshire has contributed more to the game than the Slaithwaite club who play on the Earl of Dartmouth's ground at Hill Top. The amenities are excellent, the ground always in perfect condition and the number of top-class players the club has produced are legion.

[Roy Genders, *League Cricket in England* - 1952]

Slaithwaite's ground is at Hill Top, once described as 'a populous district between the centre of the township and the New Hey or Nont's Road'. One local writer talks about Slaithwaite in the following terms: 'The moor-capped hills rise on either side of the valley with streams fed by numerous springs running down cloughs into the River Colne...Most of the hill tops are covered with peat and moorland vegetation, whilst the lower slopes provide grazing for sheep and cattle.' The venue is very reminiscent of Marsden's Hemplow HQ.

The views from the ground are terrific: layer upon layer of Pennine farmland. Each field is a different shade of green and each is separated from the next by a hand-crafted dry stone wall. From afar, the hillside roads are represented by small little 'worms', wriggling up and down the mountains. The panorama is magnificent - a peaceful, but at the same time inspiring, setting for local league cricket.

As its name suggests, Hill Top is located high above Slaithwaite village centre. After you have turned off the A62 into the shopping area, you have to climb up Bank Gate - a winding road on which the parish church is sited and under which the Huddersfield-Manchester train line passes (Slaithwaite Reservoir is also close by). Then, a few acute turns amid clusters of terraced housing and you arrive at the ground, a handsome presence on top of a challenging hill.

Slaithwaite, or 'Slawit', was once a spa, and once had its own docks. In yesteryear it was noted for its mills (big and small), its workers' cottages, its myriad industries - 'carding, spinning, weaving and fulling' - and a number of strange sports, including rabbit-coursing and dog-racing. It is also famed for its Philharmonic Orchestra (est. 1891) and its viaduct, plus Slaithwaite Hall and its annual holiday, Slaithwaite Feast (known locally as 'Sanjimis' - St. James' Feast). In geographical terms, the village is at the heart of the Colne Valley,

wedged between Linthwaite and Marsden, and located on a Roman road (built A.D.79), but it also has the feel of the Peak District. The local legend is 'moonraking', or 'trying to capture the reflection of the moon' in the nearby canal.

The playing area at Hill Top is reasonably-sized and is enveloped by a lovely peaceful air. There is little extraneous noise. You can hear the trans-Pennine trains as they whizz by every 10 minutes or so, but you can't see them. The nearby houses - both old and new - are far enough away not to impinge upon the solemnity of the Saturday-afternoon goings-on.



1928 2nd XI

Near the clubhouse and pavilion there is a set of ridges that together form a kind of natural bank. For spectators there is also a small white terrace - *à la* Linthwaite C.C.'s home patch - and a collection of benches. But woe betide them if they wander in front of the sightscreens; the home players are prone to bark out at any unfortunate soul who doesn't realise that the bowler is bowling from their end, and he or she is loitering a bit too close to the large white sheeting.

The clubhouse and pavilion are wedged together in a corner of the ground. The former incorporates bar, open-plan trophy cabinet and tearoom, while the latter - slightly smaller - is where home and away players change into and out of their cricketing gear. There is also a small scoreboard tucked away in this little area. Half a dozen flower baskets give the whole place a pleasant feel.

The tea room is a cute L-shaped room. The senior tea lady and her children prepare the sandwiches and cakes as the first innings proceeds, and every now and again one of the kids has to go outside to check on the number of overs left

until the players start traipsing their way in for food. Sometimes, the kiddies have to go on urgent errands - like when the kitchen is devoid of milk...and a spectator orders a cup of milky tea. For the record a full tea costs £2.50, a sandwich on its own £1.50, and a cup of tea 40p.

All around the clubhouse there are notices and adverts: 'NO DOGS'; 'NO SPIKES'; 'BEN SHAW - SINCE 1871'; 'ASDAC FLOORING SYSTEMS'; 'DAVID L. HALL UPVC'; 'TODAY'S SPONSOR: RICHARD AND JOHN CHIPPENDALE - GOOD LUCK'.

There is something quite solitary about Hill Top as a venue: old men sit on benches in ones and twos; mothers wander round the boundary with their buggies as if they're doing some kind of marathon race; locals patrol the perimeter of the ground with their dogs; and the odd picnicking family put their umbrella up to shield them from the sun and the wind.

Cricket is not the only sport played at Hill Top. There's also a bowling green, a snooker table and a dartboard. But only when cricket is being played is the full beauty of Hill Top on display.

Slaithwaite C.C. was formed in 1873 but the consensus is that cricket was played in the village before this date, but not in an organised form; whatever 'team' or 'club' existed in the pre-1873 era, it had disbanded by the time the 'new' SCC emerged.

In the immediate post-1873 period, Slaithwaite were known as Slaithwaite St. James. Initially, they played at Old White Royd - but this was soon needed for building; they then moved to Meal Hill Lane, where Mona Terrace now stands; they switched to Hill Top in 1881, and liaised with the Earl of Dartmouth, who was their landlord and patron, but who demanded only a nominal rent. (The Earl's family also donated thousands of pounds to local schools and churches, and paid for mass smallpox vaccinations in the village).

The 1880s were a busy decade. In 1881 David Townend was engaged as pro at 10/- per week; three years later, a club bazaar raised £25 17s 8½d for club funds; and in 1887 another bazaar was held - netting £93 6s 4d. The next 20 years were also crucial in the development of the club:

1892 - Dan Bottom engaged as pro.

1903 - Herbert Denton becomes club president; club put on 'solid basis'.

1906 - Slaithwaite bowl Linthwaite out for 23 (Wimpenny 6-18 and Sykes 3-5).

1907 - Pavilion enlarged (cost £180) and bowling green built (cost £170).

1908 - Dinner held at Harp Inn and attended by famous trio Hirst, Rhodes and Haigh.

Among the players SCC have produced are Clifford Walker (who had the best batting average in the Huddersfield & District League in 1937 and played for Hampshire), L.A. Dyson (star bowler in 1927), George Dawson (an excellent stumper) and Tommy Lodge.

Extract from P.Davies, *Pennine Pitch*