

Third time lucky

Old Town CC - Boston Hill

We used to have a problem with moles, but we invested in a road roller and this hardened up the field, and also got rid of the moles!
[Committee member, Peter Sutcliffe]

'It's up there somewhere, but don't ask me exactly where!' So said the female pedestrian on Burnley Road in the middle of Hebden Bridge.



1948

For the first-time visitor, locating the village of Old Town, never mind the headquarters of Old Town CC, can be a nightmare. The place is easy enough to locate on a map: up from Hebden Bridge, and lying equidistant from Midgehole to the west and Chisley to the east. However, most maps cannot indicate the gradients of hills or the width of roads. And to the north of Hebden Bridge, in and around Keighley Road and Birchcliffe Road, there are plenty of steep narrow lanes.

Eventually, when one has journeyed through the middle of the village - past the Methodist chapel, the recreation ground and the bowling green - one spots the cricket ground on the left. There's a bus stop nearby, and a distinguished-looking residence next door (The Coach House). Club official

Peter Sutcliffe does not believe that Old Town is the highest cricket venue in the area: 'No, I'd say Queensbury or Stainland are higher - probably quite a bit higher.' The first-time visitor might wish to disagree.

The new pavilion at Old Town is superb: a large grey bungalow-style building that houses changing rooms, a spacious bar, function-room area, many nostalgic photos framed and displayed, and excellent kitchen facilities. The old pavilion had been opened on 8 June 1957 and had served the club well. The new construction was ready in 1991. Sutcliffe explains: 'It was actually built by out-of-work builders. We supplied the materials and we got the labour free. A decade on, all it now needs is a bit of decorating.'

Around the ground, there are interesting things to observe: to the left and right of the pavilion, the pair of rather cute steps that lead up to the building, the clusters of white stones on either side of the playing area, and the block of outside toilets near the main entrance. And that's not forgetting the brick scoreboard (which was built in the late-1990s at a cost of £10,000) and the neat wheeled sightcreens (during the close-season, they remain in place, but the white sheeting is taken out).

There's also a huge chimney in the near distance, connected to what used to be Mitchell's mill. It was built in 1890 and overlooks the ground in the same way that a famous South London gasworks looks down on the Oval. (The mill has now been converted into industrial units). When one exits the ground, one can do so via the 'OT FC' gates to the right of the pavilion. The gates are made out of iron and look rather smart.

Boston Hill can get pretty wild. Even though trees line the ground, the wind can really get up, and in September, as the Halifax League season draws to a close, the playing area can sometimes attract a carpet of golden-coloured autumnal leaves. It can also get quite foggy.

Old Town CC was formed as far back as 1885, although it temporarily disbanded between 1891 and 1894. Originally, it played its home games at Middle Nook Farm on the far eastern fringes of the village (in time, the farm became the site of a house called 'Stalheim', now known as 'Burnside').

In 1895, it moved to Old Laithe, in the Chisley area. In *Old Town Cricket Club: A Short History*, this ground is described in the following terms: 'It was in a bleak and isolated position, 1,100 feet above sea level, occupying one of the last flat patches of land before the moors started. If the "Summer Game" has an unlikely home in England's climes, then at Old Laithe it was even less hospitable. Still, if it didn't lend itself to the cultivation of refined skills, it was suited to the grittiness of local cricket. Most of the clubs had small grounds and surfaces that made good fortune an important deciding factor in results. Many have fond memories of their years at Old Laithe: "the wicket was good but you did tend to lose the ball in the long grass."' During the Second World War, Old Laithe was requisitioned by the National Fire Service - with compensation duly paid to the club.

After the war, the club announced the formation of a special sub-committee, 'for the purpose of securing a field more convenient'. The feeling

was that Old Laithe was too small and the pitch too uneven. The official history says: 'Conditions were very spartan...Water had to be brought to the ground for each match and toilet facilities were distinctly elementary. Something better was needed!'

Finally, in 1957, the club relocated to Boston Hill: 'The land was in a beautiful setting surrounded by trees in an area containing approximately 3¼ acres. There was a fall of about 21 feet in 120 yards across the site. To one side was a circular tank 25 yards in diameter and six feet deep, formerly used as an ornamental pond...There were also the little matter of at least 130 trees to be felled and cleared from the proposed playing area. To transform this into a cricket ground was going to take a colossal effort and a faith that was literally going to move mountains.' The key events in the run-up to the move were these:

1949 - Decision taken to re-locate

1950 - President of the club, Raymond Ashworth, starts work on the ground switch.

1952 - Club agrees to pay £465 for Boston Hill (grants were gained from the National Playing Fields' Association [£300] and West Riding [£30])

1954 - Club formally applies to buy land. Work starts on felling trees on the site.

1955 - Reginald Harding masterminds clearance and preparation of ground. Outfield seeded.

1956 - Seeding of wickets.

8 June 1957 - Ground officially opened by Lord Trefgarne of the National Playing Fields' Association. He declared: 'It is the opinion of our headquarters that the creation of this cricket field is one of the finest voluntary efforts which has come before them.'

Boston Hill was christened on 27 April 1957, with Old Town 2nd XI taking on Stones 2nd XI. The year after, Old Town spent an unhappy year in the Halifax Amateur League, and the year after that, it joined the Halifax League. The new ground not only hosted cricket but the Whit Monday Gala - a big local event - and various functions and dinner dances, many of which were fundraisers for OTCC.

Sutcliffe puts the move into historical perspective: 'Where our current ground now stands, there was once a big house, ornamental gardens and a pond. I think that in the early 1950s the club was getting itchy feet and saw the potential in upping sticks and moving to Boston Hill. They saw it as a better ground, but the members had to do quite a bit of work before the venue was ready - including levelling off the playing surface and adding clay in certain places. In all it took three or four years to get the place ready so we could move in. A few decades later, a group of particularly dedicated members traipsed through the village pulling a heavy roller, and eventually

depositing it at the ground. So, all in all, we're not afraid of hard work up here!'

In the early days, Old Town elevens competed in the Calder Valley League and the Hebden Bridge League, and in 1895 five members of the local Greenwood family turned out for the first team. Times were hard: in 1906, after journeying to Cragg Vale in a specially-hired wagonette, the Old Town 1st XI was skittled out for a paltry total of 11.

Today, the club runs three senior teams and two junior sides. Mytholmroyd Methodists and Booth are the traditional local rivals.

Old Town is a small community with a farming heritage. Within yards of the ground, there are horses, sheep and cows, all wandering aimlessly in their fields. There is lots of new housing in the village and property prices, generally, are booming. Sutcliffe says: 'It's a nice place to play cricket. It's also a nice place to watch the game. On a good day, you can sit in the pavilion, or on the verandah, and look down towards the action. Some grounds you're on the same level; here you're almost on top of the cricket. The wicket has also improved in recent years, and that's thanks to our groundsman, who also happens to work for Calderdale in the Parks and Gardens department.'

One home supporter declares: 'I might be biased, but at Old Town you get a beautiful setting and good facilities.'

Extract from P.Davies, *Home Soil* (2003)