

# From pitch to prison

Sowerby Bridge CC - Walton Street

On average the ground gets flooded every third winter when the river overflows at the top end.

[Club spokesman, Tim Helliwell]

According to one source: 'Sowerby Bridge was very much a creation of the Industrial Revolution'. Over the years the town has gained a reputation for the manufacture of cloth, iron and toffees. It was also a key interchange for trains, buses and trams. Politician Austin Mitchell writes: 'Sowerby Bridge has produced no great authors, no famous figure to describe its life. It is, and has been, the home of Everyman and not an elite; the people not the posh, the masses not the classes.' The town was once famous for 'rushbearing' - a local winter custom involving the covering of church floors - and its pollution.

In a hidden corner of Sowerby Bridge - wedged between a factory complex, a beautiful sweep of greenery, and a narrow stretch of the meandering River Calder - lies a neat, flat, compact and rather distinguished cricketing venue, which was bought by SBCC almost two-thirds of a century ago, in July 1936. It is only a six-hit away from the main Halifax-Rochdale road, but it is a peaceful, secluded place.

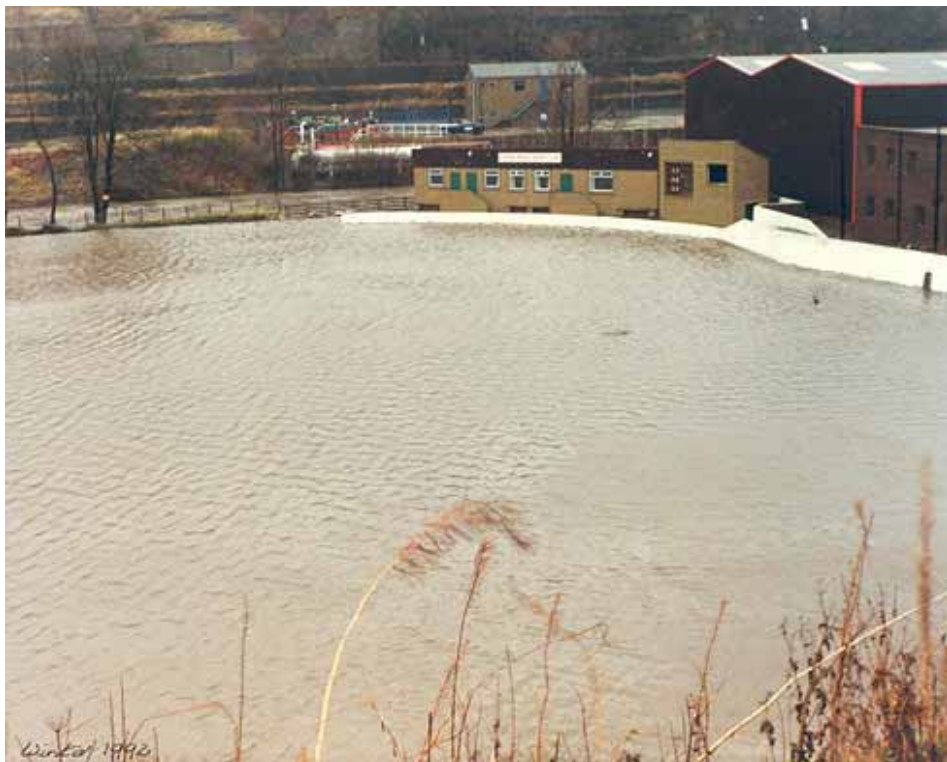
Granted, at the pavilion end, it is difficult to escape industrial noise, but around the other three sides of the ground, town becomes country: from west to east - a tree-lined mount, with the odd red and purple flower to add a dash of colour; a farmer's field, complete with busy tractor; and a grassy river bank, with water trickling gently below ('THE RYBURN ANGLING SOCIETY LIMIT' pronounces an A4 notice pinned to a protruding tree).

Club spokesman Tim Helliwell says that the river is a key feature of the venue: 'A lot of balls end up in the water, but we're pretty ingenuous in recovering them. At one point we used a fishing net; then we trained a member's dog to fish them out; and now we're using modern technology - a remote-control toy boat that is very good at detecting small round red things!'

A seasoned visitor to Sowerby Bridge says: 'It's an unusual setting, but the facilities are good and you really feel involved in the game. It's also a good place for a walk - sometimes it's nice to dip in and out of the game.'

The sporting arena is an oasis of tranquility amid the hustle and bustle of Sowerby Bridge town centre. The western perimeter of the ground is demarcated by a finely crafted dry stone wall. Benches are plentiful and attractive. One seat carries this dedication: TO THE MEMORY OF JEANIE BICKERDIKE. TREASURED TIMES, SHARED WITH FRIENDS HERE AT SOWERBY BRIDGE. The bench in question obviously gave the spectator an exquisite side-on view of the action.

The pavilion, to the right as one enters the ground through the main entrance, is brown and tan in colour: there are five (protected) windows, three brown doors and two sets of steps. The building was rebuilt in 1985 after a fire the year before, and it fits in nicely with the architecture of the Calder Valley as a whole.



The original scoreboard was erected in 1934; today, a simple scoreboard is incorporated into the frontage of the new pavilion. A visiting player comments: 'The playing area is flat and large. There are good photos of the Sowerby Bridge floods inside the clubhouse and the club is also famous for Richard Sladdin, who went on to play for Derbyshire.'

Sowerby Bridge CC has a long history. It was founded in 1852, and thus celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2002. In its early years, it played at Fore Lane - halfway between Sowerby Bridge and Sowerby - and another venue in the town, just off Burnley Road.

The club moved to its current headquarters in the period immediately following the end of the Great War, and purchased it in 1936. During the Second World War, the ground was used by the War Office as a detention barracks or prison. As such, the club had to find an alternative venue for its wartime fixtures, and so it lodged temporarily at Sowerby St. Peters CC, up the hill in Sowerby village. Because of the 'merging' of the two clubs between 1939 and 1945, when the war finally ended, some Sowerby Bridge players switched to the St. Peters club and some players from St. Peters moved in the opposite direction.

The war may have finished in 1945, but it took time for Sowerby Bridge's ground to revert back to normal use. In May 1947, a town meeting demanded that the War Office move out, but this did not happen until February the following year. By April 1950 - a full five years after the war ended - it was back as a venue for local league cricket.

The ground boasts one orthodox sightscreen (at the far end) and one long white wall that doubles as the batsmen's friend (at the other). But at Sowerby Bridge's HQ, the main issue isn't seeing the ball, but finding it if it's ever hoisted out of sight. It either lands in the river, in the middle of bushes, or on top of a very elongated factory roof.

Local writer John Morrison reminisces about his visit to the venue many years ago: 'The ground - like so many others in the South Pennines - had been shoe-horned into whatever space was left once the mills and the houses had been built. Flat land on the valley floor was at a premium, and cricket pitches were not top priority when these little industrial towns were expanding at such a rate...The one abiding memory of that game in Sowerby Bridge is of a beefy batsman launching himself into an almighty on-drive which sent the ball sailing high over my head, way over the boundary for six and - splash - into the less-than-limpid waters of the River Calder. This show of aggression was the cue for a young lad to leap, with practised ease, into a canoe conveniently tethered at the canal-bank. He paddled expertly towards the ball, fished it out with a net, paddled back, tied up, got out, hurled the ball arrow-straight into the wicket-keeper's gloves, and sat down in his deck-chair again, as if this was an everyday occurrence. Which it undoubtedly was.'

The ground scores well in terms of serenity and facilities. Helliwell comments: 'I would say that the wicket here is one of the best in the

league. It's slower than we would like, but a team batting first would generally be looking to post a total around the 200 mark. We host the Parish Cup final every four or five years, so we would like to think that Sowerby Bridge is one of the top five grounds in the Halifax League.'

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