

Butlins to the rescue

Northowram Fields CC - Westercroft Lane

Looking back, the merger was the best thing that could have happened to both clubs.

[Club president, Peter Atkinson]

It is very rare that one finds two club grounds backing on to each other, but this is exactly the case with Northowram Fields CC and its 'twin brother', Northowram Hedge Top CC. The rivalry between the clubs is intense - hence the introduction, many years ago, of an annual challenge match between the two elevens.

Northowram Fields is the more northerly of the grounds, lying just off Westercroft Lane in the south-western corner of Northowram village, a busy hillside community to the north-east of Halifax town centre. As such, it is a semi-rural venue with fantastic views to the east (Coley church in all its glory) and south (you can easily make out Emley Mast, 15-20 miles away). An aerodrome once stood adjacent to the pair of cricket fields.

In the history books, the first mention of Northowram comes in 1203. Seven centuries on, in 1948, Northowram CC was formed. In 1997, it merged with Bradford-based outfit, Fields CC. Common sense dictated that the new club be called Northowram Fields CC, and this is what happened. Today, the new club plays in the Central Yorkshire League - where Ossett and Birstall are among its local rivals.

One school of thought suggests that Northowram Fields CC, previously known as Northowram CC, existed in the first half of the twentieth century as Northowram Parish Church CC - competing in the Halifax & District Church League and the Halifax & District Amateur League.

A report published in the Halifax Evening Courier on 12 April 1920 seems to substantiate this theory: 'Under the auspices of Northowram Parish Church Cricket Club, a successful dance was held in the schoolroom on Saturday, at which a large number assembled. At intervals the lights were turned low and limelight was thrown in various parts of the room with pleasing effect. The proceeds are to partly defray

the initial cost of the laying of the crease at their new ground in Westercroft Lane. The work has been done by Messrs. Conway, Halifax.' Given that Westercroft Lane is now home to Northowram Fields CC, it would appear that the church side should be viewed as a long-lost relative, or precursor, of the present-day club.

As has already been noted, Northowram CC was officially formed in 1948. Thus, one can only assume that the church club disbanded some time in the 1920s or 1930s. This break in continuity is one of the peculiar features of Westercroft Lane's cricketing history.

As the 'roll of honour' in the pavilion bar makes clear to visitors, Northowram Fields CC has had eight presidents since its birth. On 16 August 1998, it celebrated its 50th birthday by staging a one-off challenge match between a President's XI and a Central League XI. (A wall display in the bar area reminds everyone of the highly enjoyable event. Also on view is a team picture from 1950 and a framed photo of the pavilion taken in 1989 to celebrate its 30th year).

When there's a big match on at Northowram, the atmosphere is always convivial. The pavilion, in particular, is a hive of activity and noise. Once upon a time, Northowram relied on an old wood hut. However, in the early 1990s they 'raided' Butlins at Filey after the holiday centre had closed down, and ferried stonework, doors and various other bits and bobs by lorry to the Westercroft Lane site. They proceeded to build a new pavilion - the one that proudly stands today. (Some time in the future, when finances permit, the club would like to extend the pavilion further). In 2001 a new scoreboard was erected at the ground. The facility was part-funded by grant money, and it replaced the small hut that had served the club up till that point.

As there aren't too many benches around the perimeter of the ground, spectators tend to make a virtue out of a necessity, and perch themselves on top of the long low dry stone wall that runs round the boundary on the pavilion side. There is always a lot of banter between cricketers and cricket-watchers - particularly when batsmen are either leaving or returning to the pavilion!

As a sideline, Northowram Fields lease their ground out to New Riding CC of the Halifax Association. Furthermore, in August 2002, Northowram Fields staged the Halifax Association cup final between Queens Road Muslims and Stirk Bridge; and, even though it drizzled with rain almost continuously, the ground proved itself to be an excellent big-match venue with a great matchday atmosphere.

The playing surface is more of a square than a circle and there are sightscreens on wheels and whitewashed stone walls at both ends. The

current club president, Peter Atkinson, says: 'The wicket here is very good. We have a groundsman who attends to the square on a regular basis, and another person who sees to the outfield. The wicket plays as well as any other in the league - it's a very fair cricket wicket. When we moved into the Central Yorkshire League, we were slightly unsure whether we would meet all their ground criteria, but in the end we did so on all counts - size of playing area, pavilion, changing rooms, the lot.'

There's plenty of room for parking on Westercroft Lane - a new car park was created recently out of a heap of gravel that just appeared on club premises. There's also room for parking on Westercroft Lane, but you're taking a big chance if you do leave your motor there. A straight six hit from the bottom end could easily leave your vehicle with severe bumps and bruises!

Atkinson maintains that the merger between Northowram CC and Fields CC has been a big success: 'Fields lost their ground when Yorkshire CCC installed their Academy at Bradford Park Avenue. At the time, we at Northowram were struggling, and in very quick time the merger was agreed. The new 'joint' side has progressed through the Bradford Central League, and we're now thriving in the top division of the Central Yorkshire League.'

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