

1. Places



Cricket in Huddersfield and the geographical area covered by Kirklees has a rich history and heritage.

In many ways, the story of the sport in the local area is shaped by geography and topography.

For Kirklees is a fascinating region, comprising four main valleys – Colne, Holme, Dearne and Spen – and an array of interesting towns and villages, most of which have thriving cricket clubs and cricketing traditions.

North Kirklees – Batley, Dewsbury and the Spen Valley - is predominantly urban, while South Kirklees – away from Huddersfield and a few small towns – is mainly rural and agricultural.

The key statistic is this: in modern-day Kirklees - from Marsden in the west to Birstall in the east, and from Salendine Nook in the north to Holmbridge in the south – there are 65 existing cricket clubs.

Go back 100 years and you can probably multiply this figure by 10. Then, every village had several teams, rather than just one or two, which is the case today.

The four main valley areas have very distinct identities.

The Colne Valley – stretching from Paddock to Marsden via Linthwaite and Slaithwaite – has a wonderful industrial heritage and this juxtaposes with cricket nicely.

The huge factory wall at Linthwaite's Manchester Road ground, the weavers' cottages that overlook Swallow Lane, Golcar, and the proximity of the railway line to the cricket ground at Paddock are all poignant reminders of the valley's personality.

That's not forgetting Hemplow, Marsden CC's ground, and Hill Top, home of Slaithwaite CC.

These are stunning, atmospheric places, set high up in Pennine country, not too far away from the frontier with the Red Rose county.

Honley and Holmfirth dominate the Holme Valley. In *Last of the Summer Wine* country, local league cricket venues are invariably quaint and idyllic.

There are pretty grounds in the bottom of the valley (Armitage Bridge, Thongsbridge) and spectacular vistas to be enjoyed at cricketing outposts in the clouds (Scholes, Cartworth Moor, Uppershong).

Not too long ago, the BBC asked Holmbridge CC for permission to film 'on location' at the club's Woodhead Road ground.

Compo, Clegg and Nora Batty on the boundary's edge? Yes, surely, a TV moment that was waiting to happen.

The Dearne Valley is also a hotbed. Here the interplay between textiles and sport is very apparent.

Enlightened mill owners played a major role in supporting local clubs (Norton in Scissett/Nortonthorpe and Zachariah Hinchcliffe at Denby Dale).

Nevertheless, it is still a predominantly rural, agricultural zone.

As if to highlight this, Denby CC and Clayton West CC were severely affected by the Foot & Mouth epidemic of 2001.

Cleckheaton, Heckmondwike and Liversedge are at the heart of the Spen Valley.

Here, population density is high and there are only few green spaces. As if to emphasise this, the cricket grounds at Cleckheaton and Hartshead Moor are situated only a six-hit away from the M62 and the two Heckmondwike clubs are enveloped by housing on all sides.

The town of Heckmondwike also boasts a pub called the Cricketers Arms – what better indicator of the sport's centrality to the region?

The urban/rural split in Kirklees is fascinating.

Urban Huddersfield is home to its fair share of clubs. Augustinians and Birkby FMA play out of Salendine Nook, Nuffield CC are based in Birkby, and Bradley & Colnebridge have their HQ at Deighton.

Add in three famous clubs that have produced an above-average number of Yorkshire and England cricketers – Paddock, Primrose Hill and Kirkheaton – and you have a town that is steeped in cricket history.

Go to Fartown, Huddersfield, and Savile Town, Dewsbury, and you can see the remnants of once prestigious and distinguished county grounds that once staged high quality fixtures and hosted cricketers of international calibre.

The two venues are now in a dilapidated state and are, quite frankly, an embarrassment.

But this is part of a pattern: cricket clubs situated in urban settings are struggling – note also the recent demise of 'inner city' sides such as Dalton, Lockwood and Bradley Mills.

Take a trip around local villages, though, and you see a different story.

Gorgeous places like Cumberworth, Kirkburton and Shepley are home to thriving clubs run on an impressive and professional basis.

In such communities, the cricket club is the heartbeat – at the very centre, both geographically and socially.

Amazingly, other villages are home to two clubs, not just one – for example, Golcar (Golcar and Leymoor) and Hopton (Hopton Mills and Upper Hopton).

Granted, village teams may no longer rely exclusively on local, village talent – 'incomers' now rule the roost at some clubs – but the fact is that village identities are still alive and kicking.

This is reflected in the number of inter-village rivalries that still exist – like Golcar-Slaithwaite, Paddock-Broad Oak, Denby-Denby Dale and Shelley-Shepley.

Kirklees is a beautiful, fascinating, intriguing area, and its cricket culture and cricket grounds are reflective of this.