

ACS MEMBERS MEETING – HUDDERSFIELD UNIVERSITY

Andrew Hignell

On Saturday, October 25th two dozen members of the Association, plus a dozen non-members, attended a Conference in the Castle Hill Suite at the University of Huddersfield. Entitled “From Centre Vale to The Oval, via Halifax and the West Riding”, the Conference was a cricketing journey looking at some of the themes explored by Dr. Peter Davies and the members of his research team engaged on the Cricket Heritage Project.

With funding from the University and the Heritage Lottery Fund, Dr. Davies and his colleagues have spent the past four years engaged in some fascinating original research – one of the core values of the ACS – and the members of the Association who attended the function were able to share a plethora of findings from the enthusiastic team.

The Conference began with Brian Heywood outlining the history of Todmorden C.C., starting with its foundation in 1835 by Sam Fielding, with quite humble and rural origins, before expanding and diversifying its operations in the late 19th century and playing many of the leading clubs in Northern England.

Drawing on his own playing experiences, Brian also made some interesting comments about the often intense and fierce local rivalries and heated controversies, including days when visiting umpires needed police escorts out of the town. Brian also recalled some of the many great names who have played for the club, including Sir Learie Constantine, Fred Root, Brian Close, Garry Sobers and Kevin Pietersen, as well as mentioning some of the club stalwarts off-the-field, including one gentleman who also looked after a neighbouring theatre and one evening back stage, had to bleed a radiator in order to get some hot water to make a quick cup of Bovril for Dame Edith Evans before she made an appearance on stage!

After a short refreshment break (without any Bovril!) Dennis O’Keefe then spoke about the strong links between churches and religious organisation in promoting cricket in the Calderdale area in the Victorian and Edwardian era – a period when over 180 church-related teams were formed. Many were casual and ephemeral, but around 20% went on to become fully-fledged, and independent, clubs.

Dennis looked at the range of factors prompting the religious leaders to form teams, including the spread of the ethos of Muscular Christianity, and the promotion of church activities and membership. Drawing on evidence from three examples – including Illingworth St. Mary’s – Dennis also showed how an additional factor should be considered, namely the actions of the congregation, who often were more active than the local vicars in organising and taking part in the games.

After lunch in a neighbouring pub, Dr. Rob Light took centre stage with a talk about 19th century cricket in the west riding, looking in particular at the way grand challenges matches, some for quite sizeable stakes, had helped to boost civic pride and regional status at a time of urban and industrial growth.

Rob focussed his early comments on the activities in Sheffield at the Darnell ground, and he drew specific attention to the positive spin-offs, including the commercialisation of cricket, with improved spectator facilities and entrance fees – all of which were important aspects to the evolution of cricket in the West Riding from a pre-modern to a modern sport.

Duncan Stone, a Ph.D. student at the University, then spoke about his planned research, building on work for his Masters degree on the development of regional identities in Yorkshire and Surrey when he had undertaken a questionnaire survey with 400 supporters from the two counties.

He began by highlighting some of the perceived and stereotypical differences between the two counties, as well as significant variations in the structure of cricket, with Yorkshire having strong and competitive leagues, populated over the years by some hard-nosed and bloody-minded professionals, whilst Surrey had a strong tradition for club cricket based around friendlies and a strong amateur ethos. Duncan also drew attention to how the public perception of cricketers from Yorkshire were often shaped by the many journalists and writers attached to the 10 regional papers covering White Rose cricket. A stark contrast to Surrey where no regional papers existed, and supporters had to rely on the comments of national writers.

Dr. Davies and myself then rounded off the day by looking at future developments, including the possibility of further collaborative research in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics, when national celebrations of sports heritage are planned, and the involvement of clubs in other areas, building on the excellent work at the Universities of Huddersfield and Glamorgan

These stimulating talks all prompted some lively discussions in the plenary sessions following each presentation. Thanks to the help of two female members of the university team, the on-day registration process and other conference administration was also highly efficient, and all in all, this was an excellent advertisement for the ACS, and a fine example of the sort of local-scale events the committee are keen to organise. Finally, many thanks to Dr. Davies and the University of Huddersfield for organising a most stimulating day of cricket research and conversation.