

Chapter 1

1757: The First Derbyshire Cricket Match

When you watch cricket on a summer day in Wirksworth you gaze up from the boundary at the surrounding hills, Pittywood and Yokecliffe, where the old spoil heaps and remains of ancient lead mines scar the hillside. Lead was mined here in Derbyshire for hundreds of years from the time of the Romans through to the nineteenth century and was the source of the considerable wealth of Wirksworth and Kingsfield. Earning your living in these tight black holes was a hard job. You needed to be fit, tough, small and wiry, mobile, well balanced with good hand-eye coordination as you managed the tools. Aren't these exactly the physical qualities required by a cricketer? These miners were notoriously hard, self-reliant and disputatious individuals. The old established Barmote Court held its formal sessions in the town and mining rights were jealously guarded. The mines in the Wapentake of Wirksworth were owned by the Crown through the Duchy of Lancaster, to whom dues were paid. No duke dominated this part of the White Peak as Rutland and Devonshire did further north: deference has never been a characteristic of the Wirksworth mining fraternity.

It was from Wirksworth that men travelled in 1757 to play the match at Chesterfield which provides the first surviving record of a game of cricket in Derbyshire. The details from the *Derby Mercury* of 9 September 1757 follow.

On Thursday last a match at Cricket was played at Brampton Moor by eleven young men from Wirksworth against the same number from Sheffield for fifty pounds a side. At the latter end of the game the Wirksworth players were a considerable number of notches ahead of the others when, following a dispute arising about one of the Sheffield players being out, some of them desisted playing again, whereby it was left undetermined, but we hear it has since been given in favour of the Wirksworth players and the money has been paid them. The match was played with the greatest spirit and activity on both sides which afforded the highest satisfaction to a larger concourse of persons of all ranks than were ever seen in this County on a like occasion.

This is a tantalising piece of journalism from 250 years ago which opens up as many questions as it answers. Who were these Wirksworthians? Why were men of Sheffield the opponents? What kind of game was played on Brampton Moor near Chesterfield in 1757? Who promoted the game? Where did the stake money come from? How did the teams travel?

Wirksworth Cricket Club was 'established' in 1849 with Francis Hurt (1803-61) as its first president. When the club celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1999 I began to research the background to the Brampton match, probing some of the fascinating mysteries, which at this distance may never be resolved.

No cricket match takes place in a vacuum. The approach of Wirksworth cricketers in affluent 2007 is markedly different from those who played so cheerfully 50 or 100 years ago: 1757 is a world remote from today. The social and economic context in which cricketers live and take their leisure and play their game is entirely changed, both locally and nationally. I have pieced together snippets of information from many sources which make up the jigsaw of the event in 1757, trying to set the match in its all-important historical and social, even geographical, context.

In 1757, shortly before the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, which had its origins in Arkwright's factory innovations in nearby Cromford, Wirksworth was a thriving town. Turbutt in his *History of Derbyshire* states that: 'During Elizabethan times Derby was a flourishing county town with a population of 2,000, twice that of Chesterfield or Wirksworth, the only other towns of any size in the county.' Blome in 1673 says Wirksworth was 'the greatest lead market in England' and the town was 'the second in Derbyshire after Derby.' (Turbutt, 1167)

Certainly in Georgian times Wirksworth was independent, remote and flourishing on its lead mining resources. Elegant houses survive to this day in the town centre. As you stand at the top of the sloping ancient Market Place you glimpse the fine bay window on Payne's the Chemist which can be dated to 1756. Only 12 years before our match, Bonnie Prince Charlie had marched to Derby, calling at Ashbourne *en route*, but there is no record of Wirksworth being involved. Perhaps Charles Stuart recognised the traditional hostility of Wirksworthians who, led by the Gells, had been strongly

for Parliament in the Civil War. However, Turbutt also reports: 'When the price of flour rose sharply after the bad harvest of 1756 there were riots in Wirksworth and Derby.' (Turbutt 1480) A perceptive eighteenth-century visitor paints a vivid picture of the town and its people - Daniel Defoe wrote in a *Tour of the Island* (1724):

Wirksworth is a large well frequented market town, and market towns being very thin placed in this part of the county they have the better trade, the people generally coming twelve or fifteen miles to the market...though there is no trade but what relates to the lead works and to the subterranean wretches, who they call Peakrills, who work in the mines. The inhabitants are a rude boorish kind of people, but they are bold, daring and even desperate fellows in their search into the bowels of the earth...This town of Wirksworth is a kind of a market the like not known anywhere else that I know of except it be at the custom house quays in London. The [Barmote] court prescribes rules to the mines and in a word keeps the peace among them; which by the way may be called the greatest wonder of the Peak, for they are of a strange, turbulent and quarrelsome temper, and very hard to be reconciled to each other.

Where did their cricket come from? How did it come to Wirksworth?

The first recorded cricket match in England was in 1700 on Clapham Common and among schools Eton College played in 1726. Shawcroft identifies the third Duke of Devonshire as Derbyshire's first cricketer: he played cricket in Hyde Park, London, with the Duke of Richmond and other friends in April 1730. By the 1750s cricket was well established in the southern triangle of England. The game began as a rural pursuit in the villages of Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. There were many local matches played by agricultural workers, but by mid-century wealthy landowners had taken up the game and they organised challenge matches with enormous stakes and heavy gambling. Their fashionable friends from leisured London society played alongside 'gamesters' from the agricultural estates in matches often attended by large crowds.

This leisure activity involving the upper classes attracted the media of the day and they began to publish reports of matches,

though many had been played, no doubt in Derbyshire, before written records began. Once gambling entered this simple leisure-time pursuit, a common code was necessary. For a challenge match in 1727 the Duke of Richmond produced 16 'articles of agreement' - article 11 specifying 'that there shall be one Umpire of each side', and 14, 'the Battmen for every one they count are to touch the Umpire's Stick.'

The first laws of cricket were subsequently promulgated in 1744, drawn up at the Star & Garter by the London club of which Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales, was president. The Prince was not the only royal cricketer of the time. 'George IV, when riding in the Great Park at Windsor, once came across a party of his domestics playing the game near the Lodge. At the unexpected approach of the King the servants began to scamper in all directions, but his majesty, much amused, sent one of the gentlemen in attendance to desire them to continue their game and never to let his approach interrupt their sports. The king then continued to ride in another direction, observing to his attendants that cricket was a noble game and that when he used to play cricket he enjoyed it as much as anyone else.' This is the king who was depicted in his madness by Alan Bennett.

The Prince of Wales, leader of fashionable society, though no great cricketer, was a fanatical follower of the game and a generous patron. He promoted on Kennington Common the first county game played by Surrey and even today the club wears the Prince of Wales feathers. The Prince died young, partly, it is said, as a result of a blow on the head from a cricket ball. He was also a major gambler. In 1730 the Duke of Richmond was involved in a match with a stake of 100 guineas. Later the Prince himself staked 500 guineas in one match and £1,000 on a game in Kent against the Duke of Middlesex. These match stakes would have been supported by much side betting on individual scores. The aristocracy adopted cricket (and with it gambling) as one of their pastimes alongside hunting, shooting and fishing. Wealthy tax-free low wage-paying landowners were able to put up big stakes and they bet furiously on the performance of individual players. Oddly we have no individual scores for the early players. Inevitably there were arguments, as in the Chesterfield game, and in one match after a dispute the Kent team took a private prosecution through the

courts against the London team, claiming the stake of £100. A wise judge ruled that the game be replayed.

A stake of fifty pounds for the match in 1757 seems a huge sum until you compare it with London habits: Derbyshire people, often cautious with their money, have never been very fashionable or very wealthy. Even so, there was a dispute over the £50 - Wirksworth cricketers, in the lead mining tradition identified by Defoe, carry 'disputes' with them still. Roy Jenkins, writing about Gladstone's first budget, urges us to multiply by 50 to get a comparable figure today - and he was writing about finance a hundred years after the Brampton game. No betting man today would stake £2,500 (or even 25p) on the result of a Wirksworth match. It seems a kind of reckless madness.

Despite royal approval and the active involvement of the aristocracy, not everyone was impressed with the new craze for cricket. In the *British Champion* magazine, evidently determined to maintain the purity of the class system, we find in 1743 criticism of cricket matches. 'Lords and gentlemen, clergymen and lawyers...associate themselves with butchers and cobblers in such diversions.' And, 'These matches draw numbers of people from their employment to the ruin of their families. It brings together crowds of apprentices and servants whose time is not their own. It propagates a spirit of idleness at a juncture when with the utmost industry, our debts, taxes and decay of trade will scarce allow us to get bread.'

Gambling was seen as a problem by the moralists of the day. The *St. James's Chronicle* says, 'Cricket is a most notorious and shameless breach of the laws, as it gives the most open encouragement to gambling.' And reports, 'A young fellow, a butcher, being entrusted with about £40 by his mistress to buy cattle in Smithfield Market, instead went into the Artillery Ground and sported away the whole sum in betting on the cricket players.' Soame Jennings, a satirist of the early 1700s, wrote, 'England, when once of peace and wealth possessed, began to think frugality a jest; So are polite, hence all her well bred heirs Gamesters and Jockeys turned, and Cricket-players.'

We have the national picture of a fashionable game, played by all classes often for high stakes. What kind of game did the 'gamesters' of 1757 play? The laws of 1744 and a vivid

contemporary painting by Hayman, now held at Lord's, give us a good indication of the cricket played at Brampton Moor in 1757. From the 1744 laws:

Law 1

Ye pitching of ye first wicket is to be determined by ye cast of a piece of money.

Law for ye strikers.

If ye wicket is bowled down its out.

When ye ball has been in hand by one of ye Keepers or Stoppers, and ye Player has been at home, he may go where he pleases till ye next ball be bowled.

In the match at Brampton the cricketers played with a curved club bat, like a modern hockey stick, on a 22-yard pitch (the agricultural chain), bowling an over of four balls at two stumps, 22 inches high, with one bail of six inches. They bowled underarm - not slow flighted diddly dobs - but fierce, low, swinging deliveries bouncing irregularly on the rough bumpy grass. Till 1807 there is no mention of round arm bowling and not till 1828 was it permitted to raise the arm above the elbow. The ball weighed between five and six ounces. There was no LBW and a batsman, with no pads before 1800, wore long woollen stockings as rather hopeful protection. In Hayman's picture the stumper has neither pads nor gloves and, although the first stumping was recorded in 1744, the most important fielder was a fast-moving sure-handed long stop.

The ground was cropped by sheep and the creases were marked in a suitable spot by cutting into the turf. Each side provided an umpire. The scoring was by notches, cut into a stick (with a deep cut every ten): a run is called a notch in the 1744 rules. The two scorers notched together, no doubt watching each other closely. The earliest known scorebook dates from 1776. Did the players touch the umpire's bat to record a run? Ropes were used in London to mark the boundary when there were large numbers of spectators. Was admission charged at Chesterfield? We know the entry charge at the Artillery Ground in London was 2d.

Before these sturdy cricketers could take the field, both sides faced a Derbyshire challenge - a considerable journey over notoriously rough roads. Chesterfield is equidistant, about 15 miles,

from Sheffield and Wirksworth, so it must have seemed a suitable neutral venue, but even so the travellers confronted a demanding journey. Daniel Defoe again: Chesterfield is 'a handsome populous town well built and well inhabited notwithstanding it stands in the farthest part of this rocky country.' The modern traveller to Chesterfield would go via Matlock Bath, but 'this bath would be much more frequented than it is if two things did not hinder it; namely a base, stony, mountainous road to it and no good accommodation when you are there.'

Defoe found that Derbyshire's roads impeded rather than facilitated travel, but there was some improvement by mid-century. The road from Derby to Sheffield went via Chesterfield (the line of the present B6031/A61) and was turnpiked in 1739 - note the date - so there was an established road for the cricketing travellers. In 1756 the turnpike road from Duffield to Wirksworth along the high route past the Hurt estate at Alderwasley opened, an alternative route leading on via Cromford, Starkholmes, up Steep Turnpike in Matlock over the hills to Chesterfield, but the northern section was not completed till 1760. The modern A6 through Matlock Bath had not yet been blasted out of the rock alongside the Derwent. We had to wait for Arkwright to establish his mills for a valley road to be excavated. When I consulted a historian, an expert in early travel by stage coach, he immediately suggested that all would have depended on the rich cricketers, who could travel by horseback and who would also own a carriage themselves. I expect the wealthy promoters, who had offered the cricket challenge and could afford the stake money, easily provided travel places for the players in several coaches. Was there a supporters bus? There was clearly a good attendance at the match. Who were these wealthy Derbyshire men, who offered the challenge, made the effort to get their teams to Chesterfield, put up the £50 stake and organised an event 'which afforded the highest satisfaction to a larger concourse of persons of all ranks than were ever seen in this county on a like occasion'?

'The persons of all ranks' reflects the reports from the south of England where the common people mixed happily for sporting purposes with their betters. Here I move into profound speculation. To me, Sheffield has always been a puzzle. The town was at the time a small marketing centre, perhaps the same size as

Chesterfield, serving an agricultural community rather than the industrial city which is familiar to us.

I begin in Wirksworth and I pick out the Hurt family. I am grateful to Derek Wain, who published his research on the Hurts before his death in 2002. We know the family was deeply involved with Wirksworth cricket in the following century and there is evidence of family members being educated at the top public schools, both Eton and Harrow. In 1736 Horace Walpole wrote of a game of cricket two years after leaving Eton and in 1751 Old Etonians played the Gentlemen of England. In the mid-seventeenth century 'there were pockets of cricket activity around schools and universities and a natural transmission by interested clergy, schoolmasters and others educated at southern boarding schools.' (Birley)

At this time there were two branches of the Hurt family relevant to this story. Charles Hurt (1678-1763) was Lord of the Manor of Alderwasley, a village high on the ridge above Wirksworth with the new turnpike road near the Hall. As well as running the extensive estate, Charles ('astronomer, banker, bibliophile') was active in lead mining and was developing a business providing charcoal to the local iron smelting foundries. Charles was appointed High Sheriff of Derbyshire in 1756: 'the Hurts were firmly established...and had been accepted by their peers in the upper circles of Derbyshire society'.

In the Hurt family history there are many Francis Hurts to cope with. Francis Hurt (1722-83), son of Charles, had married into the Gell family.

No-one knows and no one can tell
How well I love Miss Mary Gell.

The Gells were the most powerful of the local lead mining families, so Francis was building a strong business and financial alliance through his marriage. In 1757 Francis, not yet Lord of the Manor, was living aged 35 in Wirksworth. We know nothing of Francis Hurt's education (though later Hurts attended both Eton and Harrow), but Gells for many generations have attended Eton. Could this be the route for 'a natural transmission by...those educated at southern boarding schools'?

For the next part of the story I am indebted to Renishaw Hall and the Sitwells by Reresby Sitwell. 'Six miles from the heart of the great sprawling city of Sheffield' lies Renishaw Hall (where there is a long established cricket ground) owned from 1753 by William Sitwell, a massively wealthy bachelor with no direct heir. He adopted his nephew, another Francis Hurt (1728-93), as heir in 1755. Francis succeeded to the estate and changed his name to Sitwell in 1777.

Francis Hurt Sitwell, as he became, had been brought up in Sheffield and after his adoption lived with his bachelor uncle, though they seem to have preferred the social life of Bath and London to the wild north of Derbyshire. Perhaps this branch of the family discovered cricket on their travels in high society. 'The Hurts [great sportsmen] seem to have had a wild streak in their blood.' This Francis was aged 29 in 1757: he was a flute player and a violinist - good rhythm and hand-eye co-ordination helps a cricketer. The South Yorkshire branch was probably related distantly to the Wirksworth/Alderwasley Hurts, so a family contest seems a real possibility.

The two Francis Hurts fit the profile of the Chesterfield promoters: rich men, living one in Wirksworth, one in Sheffield, with players from their estates to make up the family teams. They were men of power and spirit, had the resources and social confidence to put up the stake, to organise a match attended by fashionable people, to travel and convey their teams to Chesterfield as a neutral venue. I wonder if there was a host at Brampton, who helped organise this considerable event. Was there a cricketer at Brampton Hall? The game, in my view, could have been billed as Alderwasley v Renishaw, a cheerful, family challenge match, which ended in a dispute.

I submit that the contest 250 years ago on Brampton Moor was Francis Hurt's XI v Francis Hurt's XI, an enticing possibility, but, alas, I have no firm evidence with which to prove that case.