

Introducing Village Cricket
(Huddersfield Examiner, April 2006)



The local cricket season begins on Saturday 15th April with a full round of Huddersfield League fixtures. Then, on Sunday 23rd the Huddersfield Central League swings into action. Good news if ever there was some.

Needless to say, Huddersfield and the part of West Yorkshire covered by Kirklees is a hotbed of local league cricket. In 1945 Edmund Blunden produced a famous literary work entitled *Cricket Country* – he could well have had this area in mind as he put pen to paper.

For the record, Kirklees is home to 75 local league cricket clubs, many with historic links to churches, mills and pubs.

There are 45 clubs in Huddersfield and district, 30 more in the environs of Dewsbury, Batley and the Spen Valley. A hundred years ago, there were probably ten times as many sides.

And there are real centres of cricket fever: Almondbury and Mirfield both sustain three clubs each, while the Holme Valley boasts 11 and the Dewsbury-Ravensthorpe area 12.

Remarkably, there are also small communities like Linthwaite and Hopton which could stage their own intra-village ‘derbies’ – Linthwaite v Broad Oak, Hopton Mills v Upper Hopton.

But cricket is not just a game. It is a way of life and a fundamental part of the local cultural tradition – in a way that sports like Rugby Union or Ju-Jitsu are not.

It is not just the number of clubs or the age of the sport in this area that is impressive (the oldest club in the area, Lascelles Hall, dates from 1825). It is, rather, that cricket has its own very special niche in the fabric of local society, whether urban or rural, industrial or agricultural.

The world of local cricket is dominated by interesting people, intriguing places.

The groundsmen who labour on the square, the tea ladies who toil away in the kitchen, the scoreboard operators who juggle their stats.

Travel down the Holme, Colne, Dearne and Spenn Valley valleys, and you discover constellations of small, local communities that almost define themselves by their cricket teams.

Often, the cricket ground is located at the geographical centre of the village, and regularly too there are intense local rivalries.

For a full 50 years a legendary Holmfirth Cricket Club official boycotted away games at Thongsbridge because he disliked the place so much.

And, lo betide any first-time cricketing visitor to Denby who just happens to confuse it with Denby Dale. They will be told in no uncertain manner that the two places are totally distinct!

The great writer Neville Cardus once opined: 'It is more than a game, this cricket, it somehow holds a mirror up to English society.' And he was right.

The game is a focal-point for community life. It is not just that local men play for senior teams, but children turn out for junior elevens, women often help on the social side, and many elderly people take on administrative roles.

There is also high ethnic-minority involvement. In the 1960s and 1970s especially, playing cricket was a means by which recently-arrived immigrant communities could integrate themselves into Yorkshire society.

Hence the emergence of Caribbean Youth Club CC, Batley Indians CC, West Indians CC, Savile Town Muslims CC and International-Caribbean CC.

And today, Mount CC of Mount Pleasant, Batley, stands as the ultimate community club: predominantly Asian in membership, overflowing with qualified coaches and junior sides, and with impressive contacts at Headingley and Yorkshire County Cricket Club.

So sport reflects society. Why else is the most famous book about cricket – by West Indian writer C.L.R. James - titled *Beyond a Boundary*?

We are also told that the best things in life are free.

This summer why not test this hypothesis out with a trip to your local village cricket ground?

There's no admission charge, there's food and drink on tap, you're able to come and go as you please, and you can sit in the sun either reading, philosophising or listening to your iPod.

Moreover, while leather and willow confront each other in the middle, you can admire the magnificent landscapes, make the acquaintance of other locals indulging in the same excellent pastime, and explore the local village community when you want to stretch your legs.

There is no better way to spend a summer Saturday.