

4. Churches



Almondbury Wesleyans, Mirfield Parish Cavaliers, Crossbank Methodists: three existing cricket clubs in Kirklees who advertise their historic religious affiliation in their name.

Go back a few decades and every village boasted one or more teams with church connections.

Honley Wesleyans CC, Ravensthorpe Congregationals CC, Almondbury Zion CC, Birchencliffe Church CC, Salendine Nook Baptists CC, Emley Nonconformists CC, Hanging Heaton Parish Church CC – to name just a few.

There were also leagues dedicated exclusively to church-based teams such as the Batley & Dewsbury Sunday School League.

What explains this trend?

As the nineteenth century progressed, it became common for religious bodies of most denominations to provide recreational opportunities for their congregations.

This is often viewed as churches showing a resolve to improve the health of the body, as well as of the mind, via 'rational recreation'.

It was part of a general movement to reform traditional working-class leisure habits.

Promoting these activities was also an effective means of encouraging church attendance.

As we noted, three Kirklees clubs currently broadcast their religious connection in their formal title. But this hides the fact that many of today's clubs were founded thanks to local churches.

Paddock, Spennings Victoria and Mirfield-based Moorlands all had Methodist origins.

The Spennings club evolved out of Cleckheaton Wesleyan Sunday School, while Moorlands were connected to Dewsbury Moorlands Methodist Church.

Early Moorlands players had to sign a register every time they attended Sunday school or church so as to determine eligibility for the cricket team – such was the strength of the bond.

Heckmondwike & Carlinghow CC emerged out of Upper Chapel – one of the most magnificent congregational churches in Yorkshire.

Reports on the infant Upper Chapel CC appeared in every edition of the church's 'manual'.

The club eventually became Heckmondwike URC CC and then Heckmondwike & Carlinghow United CC – but, poignantly, they have always played on Chapel Lane.

The Church of England also encouraged the growth of many clubs.

Slaithwaite CC was known as Slaithwaite St. James's CC in its early years, while the embryonic Golcar St. Johns CC used to hold meetings in the church school.

In 1881 the Vicar of Gomersal, the Rev R.F. Taylor, founded what was then known as Gomersal St. Marys CC, while at Emley the rector between 1886 and 1900, the Rev E. Sutton, used to sit in the centre of the front row in team photographs.

However, in the early twentieth century, Broad Oak had to be very diplomatic with the Vicar of Christ Church, Linthwaite, who at one point wanted to evict them from their ground!

There are still some mysteries, though. Was the early Flockton club linked to nearby St. James's? And were Batley club Hanging Heaton connected to Ebenezer Methodist or St. Paul's Parish Church? Or maybe even both?

The location of cricket grounds also indicates a close historic link between clubs and churches.

The headquarters of Broad Oak and Heckmondwike & Carlinghow United are a mere six-hit away from the churches they had connections with.

Golcar and Almondbury Wesleyans are located only half a mile away from the chapels they were once closely linked to – respectively, St. John's Parish and Almondbury Methodist.

And that still leaves traditional village clubs like Kirkburton, Thurstonland, and Holmbridge, who, literally, play in the shadow of churches – even though they don't have a historic connection with them.

Up until the 1970s Holmbridge could not play after 6pm on a Sunday – such was the bond that existed between their mill-owner landlord and nearby St. Davids Parish Church.

In fact, as soon as the church bells rang for Sunday evensong, players and umpires had to adjourn the game till Monday night!

Some clubs throw off their church links, like Honley St. Marys in 1879.

They disconnected themselves the local parish church, 'to improve the efficiency of the club...and that the club should be open to anyone subject to the approval of the committee.'

But, conversely, it is significant that clubs like Crossbank Methodists, from the Batley-Birstall area, recently voted to keep their religious affiliation.

That is, even though Crossbank Methodist Church has long been demolished.

They chose to keep 'Methodists' in their name because, perceptively, club members realised that the church connection was part of their proud heritage.

What is also interesting is that some clubs without church links have actually forged a relationship.

After a pavilion fire in 2002, Dewsbury-based Westborough CC had nowhere to serve sandwiches and cakes during the tea interval.

So they approached their local chapel – Westborough Methodist, which looks out over their Healds Road ground – and an agreement was struck to mutual advantage.

And finally...full marks to the Vicar of Thurstonland, the Rev. Jerome, who in the first decade of the twentieth century, regularly gave his local club 'assistance with a wheelbarrow to move the large mounds of earth' when members were working on the ground.

Well done, Rev!