

George Herbert Hirst

Mirfield Cricket Club

1891



by Patrick J.A. Neal

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Front Cover photo shows a young G.H. Hirst in his early Yorkshire CCC days and was taken about 1893.

Acknowledgements

A.A. Thomson, *Hirst and Rhodes* (1960)
N.H. Pobjoy, *A History of Mirfield* (1969)
A. Woodhouse, *The History of Yorkshire County Cricket Club* (1989)
D.A. Stephenson, *100 Years at Bankfield – A History of Kirkheaton CC 1883-1983*
The Dewsbury Reporter – 1891 and 1892
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The Huddersfield Examiner – 1889, 1890, 1891 and 1892
The Huddersfield Daily Examiner – 1889, 1890, 1891 and 1892
The Todmorden Advertiser & Hebden Bridge Newsletter – 1891
The Yorkshire Post – 1891 and 1954
Wisden Almanack – 1890, 1891, 1892, 1893, 1906 and 1955 – *Wisden* extracts are reproduced by kind permission of John Wisden & Co Ltd.
Yorkshire County Cricket Yearbooks
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Foreword

Providence must have been wearing a smile as wide as that of George Herbert Hirst when I discovered, quite by accident and from a distance of 300 miles, that Patrick Neal was writing this book about my grandfather. The following weeks were exciting for both of us as we pooled our knowledge of his life and career.

Patrick has researched his subject meticulously, and his readers will find his enjoyment infectious. The very well-written (and occasionally quite comical) contemporary press reports of George Herbert's matches which he has found are greatly superior to what appears on today's sports pages. Particularly vivid is the *Dewsbury Reporter's* use of the word 'trundler' to describe a bowler! But all of these reporters interact with their readers in a way which is no longer seen in these days of television.

We are thus the beneficiaries of their descriptions. Patrick also provides a complete record of Mirfield's 1891 season and places the reports in their context, while also bringing out the many facets of George Herbert's life and personality. His book deserves to be read both as a fascinating record of the Mirfield season of 1891 and as an appreciation of the life of the greatest all-rounder of the Golden Age.

George Herbert Hirst was revered and loved within his family just as he was on the field. So I am very, very proud to have had the privilege of contributing to this book. May Mirfield Cricket Club have a most successful future, and many other gifted young players make it the start of their career.

Lindsay Watkins
February 2006

Some profits from the sale of this book are being donated to the Candlelighters Trust, Registered Charity No: 1045077 to support the work of the Regional Children & Adolescent Cancer Unit at St. James Hospital, Leeds.

Introduction

George Herbert Hirst was one of the greatest cricketers to wear the white rose of Yorkshire County Cricket Club and also to represent his country. He was one part of the famous 'Hirst and Rhodes' partnership of the Golden Age, but did you know that for one summer he played for Mirfield and played his first Championship match for Yorkshire while a Mirfield player?

I have been associated with Mirfield Cricket Club for twenty years and from time to time someone would mention that the great George Herbert Hirst probably played for Mirfield. Indeed there is a splendid picture of him in the pavilion and one also of Wilfred Rhodes whose association with Mirfield I found was predominantly off the pitch. He worked as a cleaner in the railway repairing sheds at Mirfield until as H.N. Pobjoy comments in his History of Mirfield: 'One day when he was due to play, with his friend George Hirst, in an important match at Lascelles Hall, Rhodes left work early without permission. For this he was sacked by the Railway.' Rhodes did turn out for Mirfield once on 26th June 1915 when County players were helping local clubs out during the Great War. He scored 28 and took one wicket in Mirfield's home game with Ossett.

So, one bored lunchtime I went onto the Internet and searched for George Herbert. Much to my delight I found a passage from Wisden in 1905 which mentioned that he played as a professional for Mirfield in 1891. With this information in hand, I decided to set out to uncover the facts about the 1891 season and what part Mirfield Cricket Club played in the story of the life of this great man. This book tells the story of George Herbert's season with our club.

I Life and times: 'No one plays the game more earnestly'



The Brown Cow pub (thanks to Kirklees Community History Service - taken from the 'Images of Kirklees')

George Herbert Hirst was born in nearby Kirkheaton on 7 September 1871 at the Brown Cow public house in St. Mary's Lane. The pub was run by his mother's parents James and Sarah Maria Hirst. James also farmed six acres attached to the pub.

George Herbert left school at the age of 10 and went to work as a wirer for a hand-loom weaver. He also helped his grandfather droving the cattle, but as his granddaughter says, he told her that he always 'played cricket from noon till night otherwise'. He recalled in 1937, when asked to write a passage for a brochure to raise money for the new Kirkheaton pavilion: 'At the Old Brown Cow Inn, there we boys played our cricket in the yard and the Intake field below...It would be about 1885 or 1886 when I joined (Kirkheaton). We lads practised cricket, football and knur and spell every spare moment we could get after work. In fact, our parents said we lived at the ground. Practice with a ball makes the player – well we got our share.'



Field's Place – then and now



Hirst died on 10 May 1954 at his home, 33 Glebe Street, aged 82 years. A.A. Thomson's book *Hirst and Rhodes* tells us: 'When George Herbert left school (and he left at the age of ten) he was employed as a wirer for a hand-loom weaver, working in a corner cottage at the bottom of the road that rises steeply towards Lascelles Hall. After that he worked in Robson's dye-works on the other side of the valley, and all the time he was playing cricket as a "Saturday man", first for Elland, then for Mirfield, and afterwards for Huddersfield. In the winter he played Rugby football and it would have been hard to find a sturdier full-back.'

In 1889 he had played his first game for Yorkshire when only 17. On 9 August he appeared against Cheshire in a second-class county game. The *Wisden* of 1890 relates: 'Yorkshire did not have a full side, and in the absence of two of their regular team, they gave trials to a lad named Hirst, a left-handed fast bowler from Kirkheaton and Mr H.B. Wilson, a member of the Huddersfield club, upon whose ground at Fartown the match was played.' George Herbert batted eleven and scored 6. In the first innings he took 3 for 35 from 22 overs as Cheshire were bowled out for 67. In the second innings he bowled 10 overs, no wickets for 8, but with 8 maiden overs as Cheshire made 33 for 3.

The *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* (9 August) noted his first wicket for Yorkshire:

This two days' fixture was commenced at Fartown, today in dull weather. The Yorkshire team included H.B. Wilson of the Huddersfield club and the youthful G.H. Hirst of Kirkheaton. The toss was won by Cheshire and the Yorkshiremen took the field at 12-5. The first pair of batsmen were Crankshaw and Wright who were opposed by Hirst (town end) and Peel (pavilion end). Hirst started with a maiden and off Peel's first delivery Wright was caught at the wicket by Hunter...the first contribution from Hirst came in his fourth over, a single to Davenport, who soon after placed him to the leg for four, but, with the total at 14, the youngster bowled Crankshaw who had made 5...rain began to fall heavily at about quarter past one and compelled the players to seek the shelter of the pavilion. No further play took place before luncheon.

On the following Monday, the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* reported on his innings: 'Hunter was bowled and Hirst whipped in. Moorhouse off-drove Wright for 3, while Hirst, who batted admirably, got him to leg for a like amount...but before the end came Hirst had made his total to 6 by a cut for 2 and a single off Bretherton. The youngster was then caught at point for 6.' With time running out and Cheshire 125 runs behind, they could only hope for a draw. George Herbert bowled eight maidens in his 10 overs without luck but did have a hand in one of the three wickets to fall. The reporter commented: 'Wright was cleverly run out by Wainwright and Hirst.'

In an interview entitled 'A Coming Bowler' given by George Herbert at Fartown in August of 1893 to a publication called *Cricket: A Weekly Record of the Game*, he tells how he came to play in the match: 'But it was not while [the common Yorkshire word for 'until'] 1889 that I got to be known outside my club. In that year Kirkheaton won the Huddersfield Cricket Cup and as I had done my share in the matches, I was asked to play for somebody who couldn't turn up in the match, Yorkshire against Cheshire, on this very ground.'

Indeed, Kirkheaton had beaten Cliffe End to win the Lumb Cup by five wickets and George Herbert had taken 5 for 23 as Cliffe End were bowled out for 58. He goes on to relate how he fared, but whether due to modesty he forgets he even bowled: 'None too well, I scored an innings of six runs, and I didn't bowl a ball. I suppose I was, as you say, a bit nervous, not funky exactly, but I was so well known on this ground, and a few friends turned up specially to see how I should shape, that it was not to be wondered at if I did next to nothing.'

In 1890, he played two second class county games for Yorkshire. On 6 and 7 June he played against Staffordshire at Stoke-on-Trent. Staffordshire made 71 and 167 and Yorkshire 375 for 7 declared. George Herbert did not bat but bowled 10 overs taking 1 for 20 in the first innings and 12 overs, 0 for 30 in the second innings. On 27 and 28 June he played at Leyton against Essex. Yorkshire made 74 and 140, George Herbert scoring 5 and 5 not out. Essex scored 192 but as *Wisden* 1891 relates: 'Rain robbed the home team of victory in this match, preventing them going in to get the requisite 23 runs'. George Herbert bowled eight overs, none for 17 in the first innings.

The following year, while a Mirfield player, he made his full Yorkshire Championship debut against Somersetshire at Taunton and then broke into the side in 1892 where he missed just a few games. *Wisden* in 1893 commented: 'At the start of the season a good deal was expected of Hirst, a young bowler with a nice action, straight and quick. In one or two matches his success was quite remarkable, but his natural ability was not assisted by any considerable degree of judgement.'

Indeed the following season was to see George Herbert really make a mark as Yorkshire won the Championship. He told *Cricket: A Weekly Record of the Game*: 'This year has been my best in batting and bowling, and I am delighted that our county is right up at the top. Perhaps my best work was up at Lord's when I took twelve wickets – six in each innings – for 48 runs; but I was even prouder of what I did against Surrey for they have such a lot of fine hitters; I got eight of them out for 55 runs, and four Notts men for 11 runs when we got the whole side out for 38 down at Trent Bridge. But I want to do better still. Shouldn't I like to turn out a second Tom Emmett!' The interviewer was obviously won over by George Herbert and commented: 'There is something in his honest, genial frank face one likes; you feel instinctively he will put on no "side" and that he will tell you all you

have any business to know, though his looks indicate that he would be thankful when the operation was over.' He ended his column with what later could have been said as an understated prediction! 'With age, strength and sturdy self-control on his side, Hirst may before long prove to be worthy of a place on the list of great Yorkshire bowlers'.

In his early Yorkshire days Hirst was seen primarily as a bowler but as the seasons progressed so did his batting. His career statistics for the county make amazing reading. Between 1891 and 1921 he played in ten County Championship-winning sides. He played 717 matches, scoring 32,024 runs at an average of 34.73. He scored 56 centuries, his first being at Bristol against a Gloucestershire team led by W.G. Grace in 1894. His top score was 341 against Leicestershire in 1905. This is still a Yorkshire record individual score. A.A. Thomson recalls, 'When Hirst went in Yorkshire were 22 for 3 wickets; when he was out, so to speak, three centuries later, they had reached 515. He was at the crease for seven hours...only two other men made 20. In this mammoth effort he hit a six and 53 fours...the scorers must have been as tired as he.'

Hirst took 2,481 wickets at an average of 18.02. Only Wilfred Rhodes has taken more (and played in 76 more games). He took two hat-tricks and on four occasions took nine wickets in an innings with a best haul of 9 for 23 versus Lancashire in 1910. He took 518 catches and completed the double (1,000 runs and 100 wickets) on 14 occasions. In 1906 he became the only man in history to complete the double-double of 2,000 runs and 200 wickets. He scored 2,385 runs and took 208 wickets. A.A. Thomson recalls the story told to him by George Herbert's younger sister of the day at Scarborough when he took the two hundredth wicket:

Among the thousands of spectators who went to the Festival game for the pleasure of seeing Hirst get his two-hundredth wicket were two elderly ladies who had a vested interest in the matter. One was his mother; the other was Wilfred Rhodes's mother. The desired result was slow in coming. Hirst bowled wholeheartedly, as he always did, but the batsmen defended with obstinacy and some good fortune...the tension mounted. At last the strain grew so great that neither of the ladies could bear it a moment longer. There was only one thing to do and that was to get as far away as possible from this intolerable stress of waiting. Quietly they slipped from their seats and made their way slowly through the massed crowds towards an exit. They were a little breathless as they walked slowly down the North Marine Road. Suddenly from behind them a roar of cheering broke, swelled, and went rolling up into the sky. George Herbert had taken his two-hundredth wicket. And they had missed the sight of it.

Hirst made his Test match debut against Australia in Sydney on 13 December 1897. England won by nine wickets as George Herbert scored

62 in the first innings score of 551 all out. However, he remained wicketless, taking 0 for 57 in the first innings and 0 for 49 when Australia were forced to follow on. It must have been a great honour to go with the touring party to Australia but his granddaughter, Lindsay, informed me that he was dreadfully seasick and on both tours to Australia he had to travel by land to Marseilles so that some of the sea journey could be avoided, especially the Bay of Biscay. He played his 24th and final Test at Old Trafford, Manchester on 26-28 July 1909 in a drawn match.

It is interesting to note that if he had played 12 years of Test cricket in modern times he probably would have played nearer 100 tests! Twenty-one of the Tests were against Australia and three against South Africa. But in those 24 tests he took 59 wickets at an average of 30.00, with best figures of 5 for 48. He scored five fifties and scored 790 runs at an average of 22.57.

In 1901 he was made one of the five *Wisden* Cricketers of the Year and the following passage is taken from the Almanack:

GEORGE H. HIRST was born at Kirkheaton, on September 7th 1871. He joined the village club about 1885 and remained connected with it until 1889, in which year the eleven carried off the Lumb Challenge Cup. In the cup ties Hirst did very well as a bowler, and made so good an impression that late in the season he was given a trial for Yorkshire at Huddersfield against Cheshire. In this, his first appearance in anything like good class cricket, he took two wickets but only scored about a half a dozen runs, his batting powers at that time being quite undeveloped. In 1890 he had a professional engagement at Elland, and in 1891 at Mirfield. Then in 1892 he became associated with Huddersfield, and his real career commenced. With local cricket at Huddersfield it may be added he kept up a close connection, till the Yorkshire Committee stopped the members of the county eleven from taking club engagements.

It was in 1892 that Hirst became known to the general public, his first match being for Yorkshire against the M.C.C. at Lord's. Without doing anything sensational he yet showed such capital form, both as bowler and batsman, that no good judge who saw the game could doubt that an all-round player of far more than ordinary promise had come forward. He took four wickets for 29 and two for 58, and though so little was thought of his batting that he was sent in last in the first innings, he scored 20 and not out 43. He was then less than twenty-one years of age, but in appearance a small Hercules, and it was quite certain that whether or not his skill as a cricketer developed, he would never fail for want of strength or stamina. The present writer happens to remember the match very well, and can recall vividly the energy with which Hirst bowled at the late William Banes, compelling that brilliant batsman, who scored 61 and 71, to play in each innings an unusually strict game.

Still, though his first appearance was such a success, Hirst did not as a batsman do much for Yorkshire in 1892, only scoring in twenty-two matches 243 runs, with an average of ten. Though he tired before the summer was over and lost his place in the eleven, he bowled up to a certain point with excellent results, and in all matches for the county, took 69 wickets for just over 16 runs apiece. In the first-class county matches, however, only seventeen wickets fell to him. For some time after his first season Hirst's career was one of steady progress rather than of brilliant achievement. He proved quite worthy of his place in the Yorkshire eleven, but met with no startling success. Even so early as the season of 1894, however, he made a score of 115 not out, and thus gave an unmistakeable indication that, as afterwards proved to be the case, he would win fame more as a batsman than as a bowler.

In 1895, his batting suffered a temporary decline, but he probably bowled better than in any previous or subsequent season, taking 130 wickets for Yorkshire in first-class county matches alone, and 150 wickets for the county in all engagements. In 1896 his position among the leading professionals of the day was firmly established, as in that year he performed the double feat of scoring over a thousand runs in first-class matches, and taking more than a hundred wickets. To be quite exact he made 1122 runs with an average of 28, and took 104 wickets at a cost of something over 21½ runs each. From that time Hirst has only once looked back, but while he has developed enormously as a batsman he has paid the penalty for getting so many more runs by taking fewer wickets, and at the present time he is more of a change than a standard bowler for Yorkshire, having now and then his deadly days, but not bowling with consistent success in match after match.

In the winter of 1897-98 he went out to Australia with Mr. Stoddart's second team, but it cannot be said that he did himself justice in the Colonies. In the eleven a side matches he only scored 338 runs with an average of 28, and his bowling was so utterly ineffective on the beautiful grounds at Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, that the nine wickets he took cost him over 75 runs each. He was not in particularly good form when he came back to England, and apart from a score of 130 not out he had a poor season for Yorkshire in 1898, but a year later he was quite himself again, batting better for Yorkshire than he had ever batted before. In all matches for the county he scored 1546 runs with an average of 37, only F. S. Jackson and Brown being in front of him. In 1899, moreover, he had the distinction of being picked for England at Trent Bridge in the first of the five test matches against the Australians. Unfortunately he met with no success either as batsman or bowler, but his fielding was so superb as to almost justify his selection.

What he did last summer will be found fully set forth in the Almanack in the section devoted to Yorkshire. A better man in a county team than Hirst is at the present time not easy to find. No one plays the game more

earnestly, or works more strenuously for his side. Blessed with any amount of pluck and confidence he is just the man to do his best under difficult conditions, and there is scarcely a batsman in England who can hit with greater power and dash on a wicket spoilt by rain. What he can do in the way of pulling on slow wickets must indeed be seen to be believed. His bowling, as we have said, has declined with the advance of his batting, but his fielding remains perfect. It is no exaggeration to describe him as the very best mid-off in the county.