

# Hebden Bridge and District Cricket League

## A Gentleman's Game?

Cricket has rarely lived up to its stereotype as the 'gentleman's game' for long.

In 1932 the Hebden Bridge League's committee decided:

'after hearing the report of an umpire regarding ungentlemanly conduct that each representative inform his committee and ask them to try to stop this kind of thing.'

The following league rules suggest that there never was a truly golden age of immaculate player behaviour.

### **1912: Rule 16**

**The decision of the Umpire shall be final (if in accordance with M.C.C. Rules), and he shall be subjected to no personal abuse or violence.**

### **1952: New Rule**

**If an umpire be subject to abuse he or either club is permitted to inform the League Secretary who shall put the case before the committee. The offender(s) shall be subject to whatever decision the committee shall decide upon.**

The shift in emphasis from the authoritarian commands of 1912 to a process of greater discourse in 1952 reflects the gradual liberalisation of society.

The authority's inflexible assumptions of compliance in 1912 have been replaced by greater interaction with accuser and accused and, by inference, an acceptance that players sometimes misbehave by 1952.

Gunnings Fired – Twice!

From the minutes of the Hebden Bridge and District Cricket League

23 June 1936

Resolved that ... C Gunnings be struck off the list of umpires for making remarks during a league match contrary to the good conduct of the game.

28 July 1936

Resolved that, after hearing a report from umpire C Gunnings, the previous decision of this committee be adhered to.

4 May 1937

Resolved that after an apology Mr C Gunnings be re-instated as an umpire.

4 June 1940

Resolved that C Gunnings be struck off the umpires' list for failing to turn up, until he sends a satisfactory reason.

### **In Support of Others**

The Hebden Bridge and District Cricket League raised funds for various other causes.

In the days before the protection of the welfare state and effective insurance, injury could threaten provision for a player's family. When A Warhurst broke his arm in a league match in 1934 a benefit match was organised to raise funds for his family. A Hebden Bridge League XI played a Todmorden League XI on 30 July at Calder Holme.

On 30 June 1947 a benefit match was played between Lumbutts and the Rest of the League at Todmorden Cricket Club for the widow of the late Norman Law.

The Devon village of Lynmouth, devastated by floodwaters after 8 inches of rain fell on Exmoor in 24 hours, was the beneficiary of local fund raising in 1952. The Hebden Bridge League contributed the proceeds of a charity match staged at Popples on 21 September. The League Champions played the Rest of the League, raising £2 3s 6d.

Occasionally the league provided moral rather than financial support. In May 1935 the league committee invited club members to join the procession through Hebden Bridge on Civic Sunday 'in honour of our President [Councillor JA Parker] on his appointment as Chairman of the Hebden Bridge United District Council'.

In 1953 the league was invited onto the local council's 'Coronation Committees', but declined 'in view of the facts that the league matches are so widespread and that most are already represented through Sunday Schools'.

### Odds and Ends

From the minutes of the Hebden Bridge and District Cricket League

1 March 1932

Resolved that we cannot accept Ryburn CC as a member of our league owing to their ground being too far away.

28 July 1936

Resolved that the umpires for Booth 2nd v Heptonstall Slack 2nd be written a letter of censure for leaving the ground too early and not returning when meeting the Slack team.

23 January 1952

Resolved to add new law – ‘All bowlers must be dressed in white shirts and white or grey flannel trousers’.

30 January 1952

The side batting first shall, as far as possible, have their tea before the tea interval.

**The Rise and Demise of the Hebden Bridge and District Cricket League**  
**1894-1957**

*'There are few men in the district who, at one time or another, have not turned out with one ... of the teams in the league.'*  
Hebden Bridge Times and Calder Vale Gazette,  
3 January 1958

The Hebden Bridge and District Cricket League was formed amidst an explosion in organised sport around 1890. Following the success of knockout cup competitions, leagues were formed across industrial Yorkshire, Lancashire and the north Midlands in football, rugby and cricket.

In local cricket the Halifax Parish Cup (1888) was followed by the Calder Valley League (1891), Halifax Amateur League (1892) and the Halifax and District League (1894). In 1895, the Ovenden and District, the Sowerby Division and the Brighouse Cricket leagues were formed.

At the western end of the Calder Valley, Todmorden was a founder member of the Lancashire League (1891) and the Central Lancashire League (1892), Walsden joining the latter in 1893.

Of the major clubs at the eastern end of the valley, Halifax and Brighouse both joined the West Riding League in 1893, Elland joined the Spenn Valley League in 1895 and Queensbury entered the West Bradford League.

The Hebden Bridge League was formed as a subsidiary to the Calder Valley League in 1894. With a number of grounds in remote hilltop fields and most players working on Saturday mornings, transport and punctuality was a problem for Calder Valley League clubs.

The wave of sporting enthusiasm soon enabled clubs to field a second team and it was decided that these would play more locally. In 1893 the Todmorden and District League was founded, comprising the second teams of eight Calder Valley League clubs plus one new club. In 1894 the Hebden Bridge based clubs followed suit. The founder members were:

Cragg 2nds  
Crimsworth 2nds  
Cross Lanes 1sts  
Hebden Bridge Salem 2nds  
Hebden Bridge United Star 2nds  
Heptonstall Parish 2nds  
Heptonstall Slack 2nds  
Mytholmroyd 2nds  
St James's 2nds

By 1896 there were 47 first and second elevens playing between Todmorden and Mytholmroyd. Whereas minor leagues quickly collapsed at Ovenden (1897), Sowerby (1901) and Brighouse (1902), the Hebden Bridge and Todmorden leagues flourished. Indeed, there were so many clubs in and around each of these towns that travel between the two was unnecessary and these leagues effectively replaced their parent Calder Valley League.

In 1908 the Hebden Bridge League expanded to two divisions of ten clubs. The outbreak of war in 1914 had an immediate impact. The league was reduced to nine clubs in 1915 and did not function between 1916 and 18. Following the signing of the Armistice in 1918 one division of nine clubs was quickly organised for 1919 and by 1920 there were two divisions one more, nine teams in division 1 and eight in division 2.

There was a steady turnover of clubs between the wars. The league was strong enough to reject the application of Ryburn in 1932 'owing to the ground being too far away', but by the end of the decade there were first indications that the league was in decline. Clubs were having greater difficulty raising teams and in January 1939, a few months before war was declared, the resignations of Booth and Luddenden Parish Church saw the league advertising for new members.

In hindsight it is obvious that the more successful clubs, particularly those situated between Hebden Bridge and Halifax, would drift towards the larger conurbation with its stronger league as they aspired to improve and progress.

World War II interrupted this long-term trend and, of course, brought problems of its own. In 1940 the league was reduced to one division of ten clubs and by June so many players had been called up that the committee 'resolved that men from the press be allowed to play for any team in the league for this season'. Local journalists present to report the game were likely to find themselves playing for any team with an unexpected shortfall.

To make best use of players before they were called up, fixtures for 24 August 1940 were brought forward to the July holiday break and the play-off semi-finals brought forward to 24 August and the league limped through to September.

The AGM in January 1941 was adjourned until player availability would be clearer and in March it was 'resolved that owing to the small number of clubs who can raise teams for this season we do not run a league'.

The league was in abeyance for over five years. The next meeting was held on 3 December 1946, when the teams represented were Birchcliffe, Hebden Bridge Salem, Heptonstall Slack 'A' and 'B', Lumbutts, and Old Town 'A' and 'B'.

These seven teams contested the 1947 season and in November of that year advertisements for new clubs appeared in the local press. Initially new teams were attracted, including the first and second elevens of Mytholmroyd Methodists and Todmorden's third eleven. In 1949 there were twelve teams competing and in 1950 the league again ran two divisions. That was the peak of the post-war boom. After that clubs were lost and advertising for new clubs became an annual ritual.

Hebden Bridge and District Cricket League  
Final Table 1949

	Pld	W	D	L	Pts
Old Town 'A'	22	20	1	1	41
Birchcliffe 'A'	22	18	1	3	37
Hebden Bridge Salem	22	16	1	5	33
Heptonstall Slack 'A'	22	16	0	6	32
Heptonstall Slack 'B'	22	11	1	10	23
Todmorden 3rd XI	22	8	6	8	22
Lumbutts	22	9	1	12	19
Old Town 'B'	22	9	1	12	19
Mytholmroyd Parish Church	22	8	0	14	16
Mytholmroyd Methodists 2nd XI*	22	5	0	17	10
Birchcliffe 'B'	22	3	0	19	6
Friendly Methodists	22	3	0	19	6

\* Mytholmroyd Methodists 2nd XI deducted 2 points for breach of rules

In the 1950s clubs in the Calder Valley made significant improvements to their grounds, spurred on by post-war enthusiasm, access to improved machinery and the need to maintain facilities in keeping with other clubs.

Speaking at the Hebden Bridge League's Annual Dinner, held at the White Hart Hotel, Hebden Bridge on 2 October 1953, league auditor Clement Stansfield stated:

'Local cricket pitches are not as good as they might be, but going back 40 years they were much worse. Local cricket has improved tremendously, and grounds are much better. In the old days more often than not, a hundred was a winning score, but in present day local cricket individuals make centuries.'

However, the improvements to grounds contributed to the league's decline. President Doctor AH Clegg identified an alarming trend at the league's AGM in 1954:

'A point worthy of mention is the effort being made by some clubs to improve their grounds ... This is how it should be, but I appeal to the clubs not to slope off into the Halifax League when these ground improvements are completed.'

The league was sinking fast. In 1955 when double winners Bridgeholme followed Hebden Bridge Salem, Mytholmroyd Methodists and Luddendenfoot St Marys in jumping ship to the Halifax Leagues, all of the Hebden Bridge League's first division champions since 1950 had left.

At the league dinner, secretary Richard Farthing was pessimistic:

'The present lack of interest in the Hebden Bridge League is heading for the winding-up of this old established organisation ... I cannot see any prospect of re-starting once the present league ceases to function.'

The demise of the Bradford section of the Yorkshire Council's second eleven competition provided a temporary reprieve. The second teams of Halifax, Illingworth St Mary's and Sowerby Bridge joined the league in 1956, but, despite the best efforts of committed administrators, the end was nigh. In 1957 Old Town were awarded a walkover when Heptonstall Slack 'failed to field seven men' and both Sowerby Bridge and Halifax received walks-over against the Halifax-based Royal Army Pay Corps.

Yet there was no hint that the league's last ball had been bowled at the annual dinner on 18 October. West Indies' opening batsman Conrad Hunte presented the prizes for what league President Dr AH Clegg described as 'quite a good season'. League Secretary Richard Farthing reported 'a possibility of one or two new teams joining for next season' and financially the clubs were sound.

Over the next two months the picture changed dramatically. By the AGM on 3 December Halifax, Illingworth and Sowerby Bridge had resigned en-masse, returning to the Yorkshire Council which had re-formed its second team league. Birchcliffe, increasingly struggling to raise a team, announced they would not be competing in 1958 and suddenly the Hebden Bridge League was reduced to three clubs – Heptonstall Slack, Old Town and the Royal Army Pay Corps, the latter possessing no ground.

As a final throw of the dice the meeting was adjourned so that the Todmorden League could be approached for the second time in four years with regard to an amalgamation.

The Todmorden League, which itself had only six teams, offered membership to any new teams but wished to retain its identity and would not amalgamate. The policy was independent, but also insular and short-sighted. The Todmorden League acquired no new teams and within two years was also defunct.

The end came for the Hebden Bridge League on 30 December 1957. Old Town were willing to support the league but, needing competitive cricket at their wonderful new Boston Hill ground, had also gained provisional acceptance into the Halifax Association. Realistically, the Hebden Bridge League could not stand in their way and league secretary Richard Farthing minuted: 'Owing to there being only Heptonstall Slack remaining the league be disbanded.'

Within a fortnight both Heptonstall Slack and Old Town were formally admitted to the Halifax Association.

There was one further meeting of the league committee, fourteen years later on 1 December 1971. The league's assets, its five trophies, had been held at the local council offices in the unlikely event of the league being re-formed. In distributing its trophies, the league committee confirmed that there would be no second coming for the Hebden Bridge League.

The first division trophy was presented to the Collinson Memorial Charity Competition – the Collinson Cup. Two trophies were given to Mr K Lord for 'Calder Valley competitions' and one trophy to the Hebden Bridge Gala committee. The second division championship trophy, the Sowden Trophy was returned to the club which provided it, Bridgeholme CC, where it is still awarded to the club's player of the year.