

The King of Batley
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The sporting scene

Sport was another means by which Batley people enjoyed themselves either as spectators or participants in the many rugby, soccer, cricket, tennis, hockey and boxing clubs in the district. The area always has had innumerable small clubs and it was from such ranks that the premier club, the Batley Cricket, Athletic and Football Club was formed.

The cricketing side was first evolved in 1863 when the then Prince of Wales Cricket Club dubbed itself with the town's name. The first field was at Staincliffe, but subsequent moves were made to Mount Pleasant, Howley Fields, Whitaker Whins—where Field Lane School was later built—and Billy Wood's Croft near Howley Hall.

Billy Wood, after whom the spot is named, was a witty but eccentric person who burned his name into local dialect through his dealings, it is said, with a foreign rag dealer who visited the town seeking room in which to store large imports of rag bales. Billy, apparently, told the near frustrated foreigner that he had room to let, enough, he assured the rag dealer, for twenty tons, 200 tons or even 20,000 tons if he wished. The dealer jumped at the chance of storing so much at the cheap rent asked by Billy.

He was not very pleased, however, when he found that his rags had been dumped out in the open air, in Billy Wood's croft. "Yah said nowt abaht t'store hevving to hev a roof on" answered Billy indignantly. Since then "going to Billy Wood's croft" has been a colloquial expression for going out into the open air.

After gathering strength in numbers, support and finance the Batley Cricket Club left Billy Wood's croft and rented land at Mount Pleasant overlooking the rhubarb fields. In 1871 the members considered setting up a football section but this was deferred until 1880. When that date arrived the question was posed as to which club was to be given the honour of calling itself Batley Football Club. At the time there were two powerful clubs in the area, the Batley Mountaineers whose ground was in Norfolk Street, and the Batley Athletic. Each club claimed supremacy and it was agreed that the victor of a challenge match should be chosen.

In the event both clubs claimed victory and submitted self-favouring reports to the local Press. The questioned legality of a try had led to the dispute. A re-match was suggested to settle the affair but the Batley Cricket Club pre-empted such a move by choosing Batley Athletic as partners.

In the fifth year of the partnership the rugby section established its claim to rank among the top sides in the Northern area by winning the Yorkshire Cup. With so many younger players in their ranks who never gave up against sometimes incredible odds it was a performance which won for the team the title of Gallant Youths. The following year the team was going strongly for the cup once again when it met and defeated Halifax in the semi-final at Crown Flatt. Halifax, however, disputed the legality of a try, lodged an objection which was upheld by the County Committee and the game was ordered to be replayed at Huddersfield the following Wednesday. Batley created a sensation by refusing. The players, said the committee, could not afford to have time off work—in those days players were amateurs who could only play on Saturdays. As a result the County Committee disqualified Batley and in doing so helped fuel the growing call for a new administration.

The rules stated that no payments should be made to players, but it was known that clubs were making illegal payments, not only to attract better players but to compensate others for breaking work. By 1895 the question led to the great split and the formation of the Northern Union in 1896 which allowed payment for broken time.

It was stipulated that footballers should follow ordinary employment during the week. This rule was quoted some years later when Batley were fined £60 and ordered to suspend one of their players for two years when the game's administrators refused to believe that a certain class player was employed as a "coal order canvasser".

Batley made great strides in the new Northern Union. The team carried off the Rugby League Cup in the first two years of the competition and won it again in 1901. In 1900 they carried off the Yorkshire League championship, in 1912 the Yorkshire Cup and in 1924 achieved the glorious double by winning the Yorkshire League championship and the Rugby League championship. They were the days of the legendary Ike Fowler and equally illustrious Frank Gallagher.

They were also the days when thousands flocked to Mount Pleasant for each home match, a task made easier by the building of the new road, Victoria Avenue. Councillors said the road was a means of bringing people from Mount Pleasant and Batley Carr to shop in Batley. Football supporters claimed it was built to take the councillors to Mount Pleasant.

The year 1924 was the club's greatest. Since then the only season of any real note was 1952 when the team reached the final of the Yorkshire Cup only to be defeated by Huddersfield.

Side by side with Rugby League success the cricketing section had its moments of glory. It won the Heavy Woollen District competition in 1894, 1895, 1900, 1905, 1911, 1919 and 1922. A brush with the league administrators robbed the club of the chance to add 1898 to that impressive list. Rain caused the postponement of the planned final. The administrators set an alternative date but Batley objected as it clashed with the attractive opening of the Rugby League season. The cup, therefore, was awarded to Morley without a ball being bowled.