

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sport for All

From bowls to boxing, skittles to skating, Birstall has seen a variety of sporting activity. Out of them all, the primary sports group in the town has to be the cricket team. It started long before any senior football team, rugby or soccer, it achieved greater success and has survived longer.

A brief marriage in the 1880s between cricket and rugby clubs was barely consummated before a quickie divorce and can be discounted as but a passing fancy in the history of both.

In 1967 demolition workers in High Street found an old rule book of the Birstall Albert Cricket Club which contained references to meetings at the Black Bull, Kirkgate, and to rules formulated in June, 1856. But the club, named after Queen Victoria's husband, had existed at least two years earlier.

There were other cricket clubs in Birstall in 1856 called the Raglan, Britannia (mill?) and the Wellington. A team of the late 1850s to at least 1863 was the Havelock C.C., which played in the field behind the White Swan pub roughly where the Market Place is now.

An indication that the Albert was the recognised premier side was a match in 1857 in which two of their stars were barred from their XI against a Wellington team of 14 players. That was the year when they moved from their first ground, a field of which the church graveyard and war memorial are now a part and before later boundary walls were built. The new ground was in Scott's field behind the National schools. After the 1870 season the club had to leave, but by the 1871 season Copley close, the field in Leeds Road, Howden Clough, had been moved into and there the team have played ever since. The club was now called Birstall Victoria, Prince Albert having died in 1861, though it might have just called itself the Birstall club for a few seasons.

Birstall Young England C.C. had been formed in 1867 and played on the Brier Hall ground, off Church Lane, gobbled up the other year by Kalon extensions. In 1873 there was a dispute when a Young England match was reported as involving the Birstall club and the president of the Victoria club, W. H. Steward, took exception.

Controversy was no stranger. In a match against Heckmondwike in 1869, Steward, as captain, grabbed the stumps and ended the game in an argument about a run-out decision by the visitors' umpire. He later said he'd overheard the visitors saying they'd come to "fratch, fight or win." The visitors' secretary said the action was precipitated by Birstall's score of 16 for seven.

Umpiring decisions caused games against Batley and Morley in 1874 to end prematurely, again with bitter accusations in the Press. There followed a few years of declining performance and finances and an image battle with Young England before 1880 saw the club turn the corner.

In May, 1883 the cricketers decided to amalgamate with the rugby side as Birstall

Cricket and Football Club. Within two years there was a split and the resumed Victoria C.C. celebrated by winning the 1885 Heavy Woollen Challenge Cup against Dewsbury at Savile Town. Thousands gathered at the Smithies that Thursday evening and Birstall Band played "See the Conquering Heroes." The cup was hardly ever empty of alcohol, but a few weeks later friends held a teetotal celebration, with cup, at the home of slow bowler Oliver Wilson, the team's staunch T.T.

When Birstall did it again over Dewsbury in the 1886 final a similar boozy celebration ended in a broken leg for young Willie Hinchliffe when he fell while dragging the team's wagonette around the town with other supporters. Again temperance friends of Wilson and Johnnie Lister honoured them separately with a tea in the Temperance Hall.

Plans were passed for a grandstand at Leeds Road in April, 1887, but the 5,000 who filled the ground in August saw Birstall lose to Dewsbury in the semi-final of the cup. Not only that, one sports writer called the field a model of what a cricket ground ought not to be: at one end a steep embankment and the other sides rugged, furrowy and ugly.

Much money was spent on improving the round in 1892 and it was later recalled that hundreds of tons of pit waste material were tipped on to level the field up. That year they beat Batley in the H.W. Cup final. On the way home the team, accompanied by Birstall Band, were waylaid near the Knottingley Wells, Batley, and pelted with grass sods. Celebrations went on a full week.

The club bought its field in 1896 and when there was some anxiety over the mortgage in 1904 president Dr. Forsyth came to the rescue. The H.W. Cup was won again in 1909, the players for some reason not getting their medals until 1914, and yet again in 1915.

Dr. Forsyth's death in 1918 almost led to the death of the club. He had willed the ground to the town and when Birstall UDC assumed possession of it in January, 1919 it was said the council could not give the field to the club because of the will's wording. And as a public park the question of admission charge might be open to challenge.

It was decided to continue the club and that year the team won the championship cup. The H.W. Cup was won in 1932.

A mild sensation was caused in 1935 after Birstall's claim to the semi-final against Ossett for non-appearance was over-ruled and Birstall declined to complete the match later. The club followed up by quitting the league and joining the new Leeds league, a move labelled "the suicide of Birstall cricket." During the 1936 season the club decided to return to the H.W. League for the following year to regain the element of local rivalry which had been an asset. The second team won its Leeds league championship.

Birstall swept the board in 1954, winning the Yorkshire Central League championship, the H.W. Challenge Cup and the Wheatley Cup. The club reached the cup final in 1955 and 1957, but there followed a steady decline until 1985 saw them back in the trophies with the Crowther cup and promotion back to the first division of the Central League.

Minor clubs in the late 19th century and into the 20th were the Tradesen's, White Lee, the Wesleyans, playing at Windmill field, Wensleydale (Intake Lane), the Parish, Mill Street, Brownhill, disbanded in 1944 after 25 years, and Howden Clough, formed between the wars. The last-mentioned lost its Windmill Lane field to housing in the 1960s and established itself at the end of Owler Lane.

One last line: when Len Hutton played in a match at Dewhurst's field on Sunday, July 2nd, 1944, organised by Birstall Civil Defence sports club, he made 77. He was caught by G. Rhodes (Birstall) off the bowling of L. Halstead (Batley).

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*"Radcliffe is the champion,
Smith can kick the goal,
Stoner is the scrimager
And Platt call slip them all."*

In the early days of Birstall's first rugby (union) team, this ditty was recited, sung or shouted at a field at Mount Top. The fast and graceful W. Radcliffe was also a Birstall cricketer, centre Arthur Smith was the brother of cricketer and county umpire Alf, and Tom Platt was an elusive halfback. That was in the mid-1880s.

The evolution of both rugby and soccer in the town does not have the same continuity that cricket has had. Clubs flourished, died and re-emerged, or changed name and status.

The rugby club was formed in 1878 and players in the first few years included Radcliffe, Fred Ramsbottom (a good goal dropper), W. Rhodes, Ellis, F. Hinchliffe, H. Broadbent, J. Haigh, N. Gibson, J. Hudswell, E. Mann, Waite, T. Coates, H. Wallis, J. Crowther, G. Teal, W. Blackburn, J. Schofield, J. Wilford, A. Shires, J. G. Scholes, G. H. Firth and G. Brook.

Owing to a fixtures slip-up the team once played two games the same day, winning both. There were 70 members by 1881 and that decade saw the brief link with the cricketers and success twice in the H.W. District Challenge Cup. The best year was 1897 when the team won 18, drew three and lost four of their 25 matches. But that year also saw an enforced move when work on the new rail line spoiled their field.

The new field was Mr. Scott's "show field", which seems to have been Sloper field behind Britannia mill.

A row broke out in 1898 which led to the club quitting the Yorkshire Rugby Union and joining the breakaway Northern Union (the later Rugby League). Normanton's objection to Birstall's cup tie win over them was upheld despite the union secretary saying that hearing it would break the rules and despite the referee's statement that the objection was frivolous. Birstall officials withdrew from the hearing and next day applied for membership of the N.U.

Playing in blue jerseys, that 1898 team was described as the club's best ever, but matters were at a low ebb by 1900 with helpers needed. In January, 1901, part way through the season, second from bottom in the Yorkshire Seconds competition western division with one win and eight defeats, Birstall - "practically disbanded" - were eliminated and their points expunged.

For most of the 23 years three players had been the backbone - Newsome Jubb, said to have been the best all-round player, Willie Nelson and Fred Firth.

Rugby football continued in Birstall with a Birstall and district Junior League of 11 teams playing under N.U. rules, one of which, Birstall Juniors, joined the H.W. League in 1902 and then the Yorkshire Senior competition for the 1903-04 season, dropping the word Juniors. The club found membership a financial strain and returned to the H.W. League after one season. The H.W. District Cup had been won by them while in the senior competition and success came again in the 1905 final. In green and black jerseys the team became known as the "Dubs" (Dublin), players including Martin Duffy, Phelps, Adams, Tom Stead, Horsfall (capt), Narey, Turner, Johnson, Bottoms, Linsky, Fred Hill, Smith, Coyne, Flanagan, Marshall, Manley, Varley and Donnelly.

years. Jim Lee Racing, Bradford Road, have been involved in British Formula three racing, providing cars, parts, back-up, workshop facilities, mechanics for drivers. Born out of his engineering business, the firm is now over 10 years old.

The opening of Howden Clough sports centre in 1977 wasn't the first chance to go for a swim within Birstall. Over the years mill dams have been used in winter for skating and in summer for swimming, even the forbidden big tank of tepid water on top of College mill. My father was one of those who dared to swim there when he worked at the mill.

Golf came with the opening of the minor course at Raikes Lane in 1975 and though another course was planned for Popeley fields by 1988 it had not materialised by mid-1994. Another planned facility which did not come to fruition was a dry ski run at Howden Clough. It was opposed by local residents and Duncan Developments dropped the idea in 1990 and put up the site for sale.

A squash club came to town in a new building on the site of the old Low Lane cinema in the 1980s.