

George and Wilfred R.I.P.

2. Kirkheaton CC - Bankfield

It is an ancient joke, greatly venerated, as are all ancient traditions in the Huddersfield district, that nobody knows the name of the world's greatest all-round cricketer. All we know for certain is that he batted right-handed, bowled left and was born in Kirkheaton.

[A.A. Thomson, *Hirst and Rhodes* - 1959]

Kirkheaton, 'a small stone-built village, firmly dug in...on the slopes of the Pennines,' is an unassuming place, three miles north-east of Huddersfield town centre and high above the River Colne. It was home to Norse settlers in the tenth century and later gave birth to the legend of 'Black Dick'. By the last quarter of the twentieth century the village had a population of approximately 4,000. Even the most unknowing of guidebooks talks about the 'fine cricket tradition' of the place. This is an understatement, for Kirkheaton - or 'Yetton', 'Heton' or 'Heptone' - has a spectacular cricketing pedigree.

Two of the most famous all-rounders in the history of English cricket, George Herbert Hirst (1871-1954) and Wilfred Rhodes (1877-1973), hailed from the place, and plied their trade at Bankfield. Their career records were very special: Hirst won 24 Test caps, scored 36,356 first-class runs and took 2,742 first-class wickets. The equivalent figures for Rhodes are 58, 39,802 and 4,187. When Kirkheaton bowled Slaithwaite out for 9 in 1904, Hirst took 5-2 and Rhodes 4-3. We should not forget either that another England star was born in Newton, Kirkheaton: Allen Hill, who took the first wicket ever to fall in Test cricket (1876-7 v Australia). Cricket historian Roy Genders describes Kirkheaton as a 'village known, like Pudsey, throughout the English-speaking world'.

Hirst and Rhodes were aware of the debt they owed the place. In 1923 Hirst stated: 'I attribute my ability in later years to the persistent practice which half a dozen of us Kirkheaton lads put in night after night in all departments of the game. We used to take the side nets away and every ball had to be fielded.' Hirst had actually grown up in one of the village pubs, The Old Brown Cow Inn, and had practised his skills in the backyard of the pub and in the nearby croft. In later life, both men assumed the club presidency.

Kirkheaton's ground is perched on Nab Hill. On the horizon is Emley Mast; in the foreground - just - is the Lascelles Hall cricket ground. Hills, houses, trees, a football pitch, a road and several telegraph poles form the immediate

environs. All in all, it is quite an exposed, isolated and windy venue.

In 1959 A.A. Thomson wrote of the Kirkheaton ground: 'The playing surface is shallow; between the level, green turf and the hard rock underneath there is no more than a foot of earth. There are two pavilions: the old one with its high scoring-box has something of the air of a compressed Noah's ark; the other has a magic name, for it is called the "Hirst and Rhodes". It was built with the stones from a disused chapel...'

Today, the playing area is flat. The turf is slightly raised and 'circle' patterns on the outfield enhance the overall effect. There are no sightcreens - just two whitewashed dry stone walls. And you're very high up when you're at the ground; in fact when you look out over Huddersfield, Castle Hill seems to be perched on the same altitude level.

The clubhouse, whose foundations were laid on 26 August 1950, is a glorified bungalow, which pays due homage to Hirst and Rhodes on its walls. It looks out over the bowling green and a 'cake rota' is pinned to the noticeboard near the main entrance. The trophy cabinet is pretty full and also displays a copy of *100 Years at Bankfield*, the club's centenary history. The changing-room bloc is separate, a rather cute two-storey construction, with chairs in front. A low, curved white wall - an excellent wind-break - runs between the two buildings, and there are red and blue benches around the ground perimeter. The scoreboard was donated by Mr. M.E. Broadbent, club president, in 1980.

The club was founded in 1860, although this is a matter of debate (some commentators put it slightly later). Originally, it played on Horse Field at Whitley Hall. Then it moved to Kirkheaton Moor - stayed until 1870 - and from there it was on to Hole Bottom. By 1883 the club had moved into its present ground at Bankfield (known originally as Fletcher's Croft), and in 1921 it was able to purchase the land outright. In 1900 it is estimated that membership stood at around 70.

Originally the club was called Kirkheaton Beaumonts (in honour of a nearby hostelry, the Beaumont Arms), but in 1880 they became Kirkheaton. In 1888 they signed their first professional: Allen Hill, formerly of Yorkshire. According to Genders, 'He was paid in those days the very useful sum of 5s a night to coach the youths of Kirkheaton.' The year after, Kirkheaton won the Lumb Cup; in this era they also competed in the Heavy Woollen Cup. By 1893 they had joined the Huddersfield & District League (in the previous year their application had been mysteriously turned down), and their debut game was against Meltham Mills at home (Kirkheaton scored 61; their opponents were all out for 41). We are told that in this period subs were 2d per week (summer) and 1d per week (winter). The early minute books reveal some interesting and bizarre details:

On 3 December 1873 it was 'resolved that the challenge of Meltham C.C. be left over until Dr. Douglas enquires what kind of club it is.'

On 5 July 1876 it was decided 'that Henry Moseley mows the ground when required at fourpence a time.'

On 18 June 1883 it was 'resolved that one 18-gallon barrel of beer to be in the field. Price 14 pence per gallon. Mr. Martin to have the key for it and Mr Alf. Wortley to have charge of the beer. Mr. J.K. Armitage has kindly consented to stand drinks round for the second team - if they win.'

On 1 January 1923 it was decided 'we loan horse shoes to Bradley Club to be returned before 1 March.'

On 16 February 1925, 'L. Tolson to look for a horse.'

On 27 July 1930, 'Purchase hen manure at 1/- per load.'

Kirkheaton C.C. - one arm of Kirkheaton Cricket and Bowling Club - is a rather distinguished cricketing venue, and it remains 'a pleasant outing for an afternoon's cricket', as one league handbook put it a few decades ago. And even now, when the talk turns to G.H. and W.R., there is mention of the village and the club. For example, on 8 May 1998, cricket writer David Warner reported on a special anniversary: 'It will be exactly 100 years next Tuesday since Wilfred Rhodes, Yorkshire's greatest all-rounder, made his debut for the county against MCC at Lord's...To mark this special centenary Yorkshire are holding a lunch at Headingley...to which relatives of Rhodes have been invited, along with relatives of two other Yorkshire greats of that golden era, George Hirst and Schofield Haigh. It is quite remarkable...Rhodes and Hirst should both be born and brought up at Kirkheaton. Officials of Kirkheaton C.C. have also been invited.'

Extract from P.Davies, *Pennine Pitch* (2004)