

SEASON OPENER SEES MARSH LANERS STRUGGLE

21 April 2007: Micklehurst v Shepley

By Dave Wooding

Having spent much of the winter months and close season writing about the history of Shepley Cricket Club, 21 April 2007 brought my first chance to see the current crop of players in action. A quick glance at the fixture list informed me that I would be travelling to Mossley to watch the team take on relative newcomers to the Drakes League, Micklehurst.



Match action

A picturesque journey from Huddersfield, through the Colne Valley and past many sheep grazing on the roadside, including the occasional one searching for grass on the road, brought me eventually to Micklehurst Cricket Club, situated in the rather thin and hilly Castle Lane. A quick glance at my newly acquired league handbook informed me that, upon arrival at the ground, I was in fact at an altitude of 620 feet. The views that greeted me were enough to rival the stunning vistas I had witnessed at Shepley's own Marsh Lane, with clear views of the surrounding valleys.

Having just found a bench, near to a couple of familiar faces in Trevor and June Curtis, I witnessed the two teams take to the field, in a match where the debut of Australian Trent Copeland added excitement to the occasion. True to the word of the local forecasters, the weather remained dry, if not a little chilly due to the overcast conditions and the, at times, blustery wind. However, given that many opening games of the season have been washouts in the past, the conditions could hardly have been better.

With followers of both teams still slowly filtering into the ground, Ashley Littlewood got Shepley off to a great start, cutting a loose delivery away behind point for four off only the second ball of the match. The superb start was met with a polite round of applause from those who had arrived early enough to witness it. The glorious start was to slowly evaporate, with the openers finding runs hard to come by in the following overs. Indeed, by the time Sam Haigh fell in the sixth over, edging behind off opening bowler Rashid, the team I had grown familiar with over the winter had made only seven runs.

Again, a new batsman brought about renewed optimism. The new batsman, Phil Heaton, was also among the runs in his first few deliveries, as he despatched only his second ball to the boundary. Sadly, another setback was to occur shortly after, as Littlewood was also removed cheaply, again caught behind, having made just six runs from 23 balls. News that Copeland was in at number 4 had already reached

those of us in the crowd, who looked on with hopefulness as he strolled from the pavilion onto the pitch.

By the time Trent made it to the wicket, many of the familiar faces of the non-playing staff at Shepley, such as David Hall and his wife Vivienne, had made themselves as comfortable as possible on the benches that ran around the perimeter of the Micklehurst ground. His arrival brought much excitement, as many at the club had heard rave reviews from former Shepley batsman Tim Rees, who had spent a season watching him tear apart Australian opposition with both bat and ball. Along with this excitement came nervousness from many of the Shepley followers. And the words "I hope he doesn't get out first ball" could be heard being muttered by many of them. They need not have worried as Trent tucked away his first delivery in English cricket through the leg side for an easy single, also meaning he pinched the strike off his captain for the next over. His second shot was even more delightful, as he followed the trend of Shepley batsmen hitting fours from their second delivery. In the same over, with considerable ease and a flick of his wrists, he calmly tucked away a ball through mid-on for another boundary. We in the crowd were starting to see why Tim had highly recommended him, even though in Australia he is considered to be a bowler!

But just as everyone started to realise what a good player Shepley had acquired, the new signing somewhat threw his wicket away. An average delivery was popped up by Trent straight into the hands of the close fielder, much to the jubilation of the home team, who were only too aware that they had removed the dangerman. The lift that wicket gave the team could easily be seen during the overs that followed, as the hosts became even livelier in the field, eager for run outs and constantly threatening the batsmen by getting the ball to the keeper quickly. As Phil Heaton hit a very well timed four through mid-off I began to wonder if that was the shot that would spark the Marsh Laners into life. With the score at just 29 after 12 overs I doubt I was the only one hoping that was the case. The 14th over saw the best shot of the innings so far. Phil moved the score up to 37 with a huge six, hit straight back over the bowler's head, and met with rapturous applause from the Shepley faithful.

Just as he and Craig Glover appeared to be leading Shepley towards a more respectable run rate, disaster struck. A mix-up between them, with Phil calling for a run before changing his mind, saw bails fly in the air with Craig nowhere near his crease. Even if Phil had not changed his mind, it is highly likely one of them would have been run out. The score was now 38-4, and Shepley were on the ropes.

Following soon after was the first bowling change, with youngster Greg Buckley being introduced. He was touted by supporters of both teams as a potential match-winner, and was certainly going to be one to watch in the coming overs. The 21st over saw a further change and with both openers gone, would now be the time Shepley kicked on to post an imposing total? The new bowler may have wished he had not begun at that stage, as Phil despatched two balls from his first over to the boundary. Was the fact that this was simultaneous with the emergence of the sun from behind the cloud cover purely coincidence? As drinks were served at the halfway point in the innings, with Shepley at 59-4, I hoped it was not.

Shortly after, however, the sun disappeared and so did Ellis. A patient innings of 6 runs from 45 balls was at an end and the visitors were 62-5. Phil Heaton, though, was beginning to look comfortable in the middle, and with him at the crease there was still hope among those around the boundary. Perhaps I spoke too soon, though, as the sixth wicket soon fell. Phil had played a straight delivery straight back into the bowler's hands and Shepley were in deep trouble at 78-6. Having seen through my

research that the new batsmen, Danny Glover, had won the Reg Haigh trophy for being a promising youngster, I began to think perhaps there was something left in this innings after all for Shepley. A sweetly-struck six by Danny in the 34th over seemed to confirm this. As he began to get his eye in, Danny cracked another shot through mid-off, only to see the fielder take a simply breathtaking catch, plucking the ball out of the air as it fizzed to him.

Nigel "Nev" Hoyle was the ninth batsman in, and he, along with Rob Denton, began to build a solid partnership. In true cavalier fashion, Rob took it upon himself to bring the run rate up. The 44th over in particular proved fruitful for the experienced batsman, as he cracked two sixes in quick succession and the scoreboard rattled up to 133. Shortly afterwards, the partnership, which had brought 43 to the total, was at an end as Nev was trapped lbw by a resurgent Buckley. Rob, realising he may run out of partners, continued to pick out boundaries, hitting a four over square-leg in the 46th over before his partner Walker was also trapped leg-before. Eventually, as the sun became prominent again, Rob's luck ran out and he was caught in the 48th over, bringing the Shepley innings to a close. The scoreboard read 141 all out, a score that did not always look possible with the score at 38-4.

Tea brought with it a roller onto the square, and the sound of aeroplanes passing over towards nearby Manchester Airport. The teams then made their way to the field, with the belief that 141 was not too bad a total to defend, particularly if the Shepley bowlers could get some early wickets. A tight few overs brought three runs but no wickets. The third over, however, bowled by Danny Glover, gave the visiting fans, including myself, the first thing to cheer about since play resumed. Hesford was bowled for just 7. One down, hopefully nine more to follow. A second was added to Danny's wicket tally in his next over, thanks to stunning athleticism by young wicketkeeper Sam Haigh, taking a catch low down to his right to remove Lonergan. Micklehurst were 14 for 2.

Time now for Trent to join the Shepley party. His first wicket in English cricket saw the home side reduced further to 16 for 3. Shepley were rampant, and were not finished yet. The following over saw Danny Glover bowl a peach of a delivery past the bat of Buckley, smashing into his middle stump. Victory was a realistic possibility now; Shepley had four of the wickets they were after, at a cost of just 25 runs. Their luck was soon to change though...

The next few overs saw no further breakthroughs, and Phil Heaton decided to bring himself into the attack, replacing Trent. After seeing several of his balls beat the edge of the bat, one connected. Haigh behind the stumps was unable to hold it in his gloves, though, and a chance had gone down.

At the end of the 18th over the scoreboard read 77 for 4, and it had become clear that overs were no longer to be the major factor in the outcome of this match. Shepley would need to take the remaining six wickets in order to win. With Craig Glover, who had earlier told me he took five wickets in the corresponding fixture last year, now in the attack, it was possible. Indeed, he struck in the 22nd over, as Whittle, who had survived the earlier dropped catch, drolled the ball up in the air, and then down into Copeland's hands. A crucial partnership of 72 had been broken, and Shepley appeared to have the edge again. They had even more of an edge two overs later, when Craig Glover struck again, this time trapping Whitehead in front of his stumps. 102 for 6, and real belief was starting to spread its way around the Shepley supporters on the boundary.

What followed was a crucial and intensely frustrating period for the fielding team, with runs coming slowly, but wickets not falling. This was not through lack of trying, particularly by skipper Heaton, who saw several appeals turned down. Immense credit must be given to the visiting team, who never let their heads go down and battled away. Eventually, Micklehurst eased over the finishing line. Rashid, who had had the better of the Shepley bowlers for much of the innings, brought up his 50 with a super shot wide of the fielder at long off. A single the next ball took the score to 140, and this was hastily followed by Forrester glancing away a delivery off his legs for four, meaning Micklehurst would take away all six points from a match that at various points could easily have gone either way.

Despite the loss, there were many positives in the Shepley performance, and I am sure that the rest of the season will bring more luck and success to the Marsh Lane boys.