

Almondbury Casuals 1949-1969

What was the Point of Setting Up a Friendly Cricket Team?

In 2006, I joined an evening class devoted to all things cricket. Peter Davies and Rob Light from The University of Huddersfield facilitated, and twenty or so students completed the year long course. I was the only representative from friendly Sunday cricket. I imagined that the question 'What is the point of friendly cricket?' would interest my fellow students who were either die-hard league men or full-time cricket watchers, but it was never discussed. This article briefly describes some subsequent research which provides an answer relevant to the Almondbury Casuals of the 1950s and 1960s.

The post-war preoccupations in cricket have been covered by Derek Birley (*A Social History of English Cricket*). Briefly, an elite administration faced backwards to the golden age of the gifted amateur as opposed to progressive elements in league cricket and some of the counties who recognised that cricket, both playing and administering, needed to become more business orientated. Money making schemes like lotteries, raffles, gaming machines and specific events (for example benefit matches) supplemented revenue from subscriptions. Playing became a career option. Interest in results and statistics increased, perhaps at the expense of elegant playing standards. In addition, the two sides differed on access to the game. In the 1950s only 20% of boys, in public and grammar schools, were playing cricket. The elite administrators wanted to retain this exclusiveness to prevent 'denaturing' the game. On the other hand, many new clubs started up, for example in villages and companies. Coaching began. The Playing Field Association and English Schools Cricket were formed and overall access to cricket expanded.

The information about The Almondbury Casuals comes from committee minutes (two meetings per year), a commemorative brochure written in 1987 (*Cricket in Perspective 1*), scorebooks and preliminary interviews with players from the post-war era.

A Casuals team had played informally from 1949. On 23rd October 1951 a meeting was convened by four of the players to discuss the proposal 'that next Summer the Almondbury Casuals should become a small cricket club and should be put on a more organised basis'. The minutes record that membership would be limited to 25, though others might be invited if they were short of players. The four founders were to rotate the captaincy. A local cricket club was to be hired for home games and it was not the intention to seek ambitious fixtures. The opposition for that first season included other friendly teams from West Yorkshire and scratch sides put out by the local rugby and amateur soccer clubs. The headmaster of the local grammar school (King James', Almondbury) became one of the first invitees when approached about use of the school practice nets.

The following quotes, taken from *Cricket in Perspective 1 (1987)*, illustrate the general feelings as to why the Casuals were formed:

The basic idea was to form a team of cricket lovers . . . Sunday was the chosen day, when wives, fiancées and girl friends could all join together for a 'happy, convivial and social afternoon/evening together'.

Guy Overton (Chairman 1961-1964)

I first played cricket for the Casuals in the middle fifties. As a keen but most unaccomplished player, where else could one have joined a club where one was picked to play for availability rather than capability.

JB Netherwood (Chairman 1969-76)

Again using quotes, there is less agreement as to how the game was played:

Whoever won the toss, the opposition would bat first. The logic behind this being that the match would not be over before we could partake of the lovely tea the girls provided. Whatever the state of play 'stumps' were up at 6.50pm to enable us to the pub in time for Sunday opening at 7.00pm.

Guy Overton (Chairman 1961-1964) Cricket in Perspective 1, 1987.

We are indebted to Billy Bolt, Alan Priestley, Jack Taylor and others whose standards are much above average but were happy to play with the Casuals and accept with philosophical tolerance the catches put down by supporting fieldsmen.

JB Netherwood (Chairman 1969-76), Cricket in Perspective 1, 1987.

The committee agreed with the suggestion from JB Netherwood that no member should be consistently placed very low in the batting order with the possibility of missing a 'knock' on several occasions.

Casuals' minutes, 1959.

It was decided to use the winter shed for practice on the five Sundays March 29th to April 26th inclusive. The secretary was instructed to make the necessary arrangements with Mr Henshaw and inform members accordingly,

Casuals' minutes, 1953.

Bill Crossland, the current chairman, compiled the Casuals' statistics for 1952 to 1999. The *Hall of Fame* members are those who bowled 250 overs (14) and/or scored 400 runs and over (28). There are 3 bowlers and 3 batters from this early era in the top 10. All played league cricket before or after their time with the Casuals. Invited, they played mostly in the 1960s.

A small survey of the early Casuals' occupations reveals mill owners, accountants, businessmen (printers, builders, funeral directors, dyeworks) and professionals (teachers, architects). There is no evidence that the club excluded anyone on class or financial criteria. All the memories are of how genuine and pleasant they were with each other.

In conclusion, the early Casuals appear amiable duffers. The emphasis was on turning out for the fun of it and being good at cricket was not a requirement. Some might say they did not take the game seriously enough, perhaps a touch of middle class shyness about growing professionalism in sport. Others might say this was a smokescreen behind which there was serious intent if not always the talent. Anyone watching would have recognised a formal game of cricket - whites, umpires, scorer. Winter nets were provided, weaker cricketers were put down the batting order and league players appeared in the 1960s, all suggesting performance and a result were also relatively important.

What was the point of setting up a friendly cricket team? It widened access to the game of cricket, especially non-cricketers, youngsters and retirees and league men who enjoyed a social game on Sundays.

Derek Birley, (2000), *A Social History of English Cricket*, London: Aurum Press.

Cricket in Perspective I (1987), compiled by JB Netherwood.