

THE HISTORY OF CRICKET IN STALBRIDGE

Cricket has been played in Stalbridge Park for at least 180 years, the original Club being known as the Anglesea Cricket Club, named after the Marquess of Anglesea, one time Lord of the Manor. In 1827 Anglesea beat both Blandford and Shaftesbury and for the next 15 years was the most prominent Club in Dorset.

The Stalbridge Estate paid a subscription to Anglesea Cricket Club from 1828, though there is no known record of a member Lord Anglesey's family being a player or anything more than even the most occasional of visitors¹. At this time, a list of members is reported to have included several Rectors and Curates and members of the landed gentry in the area¹. In a letter of 1827 requesting a subscription from the Estate, Rev. F. Luke believed the club would be useful in forming a 'political connection in the county', much to the skepticism of the Estate's Agent at the time, William Castleman.¹

On 23rd August 1829, during a two-day match in Stalbridge Park against Lansdowne, Anglesea scored innings of 70 and 60. The visitors from Bath scored 54 in their first innings, and were at 40 for four in their second innings when controversy arose over a disputed ball (which would probably have been an underarm delivery in those days). Still requiring 37 to win, Lansdowne refused to play further and went home; a distant home too, in those pre-Somerset and Dorset Railway days.

The local prominence of the Club was such that it even received press notices. Accordingly, one match in 1832 played in Stalbridge Park against Stonehenge Club, was won by Anglesea "after a very severe contest", though the return match was reported as having been lost "after two days' hard fagging"!!¹

In 1853 "The Gentlemen of Stalbridge" were the first team to play on Sherborne School's new upper pitch, a pitch still used for Dorset County Cricket Club fixtures.

The cricket 'pitch' in The Park was originally about half a mile due west of the main house, then an impressive Elizabethan mansion not unlike Montacute House in Somerset. Demolished in 1822, the original house was replaced by the current farmhouse a few yards to the north of the old site (which is now visible as a series of mounds adjoining the old walled garden). The pavilion used by the cricketers was originally the archery pavilion erected for the Anglesea Archery Club in about 1700. The wicket in front of this pavilion was very rough, moles were a constant problem and scores were very low! There was a small copse in line with the wicket, a hit into which counted as 3 runs. A hit into the ditch bordering the copse was counted as a 2.

In the early days of cricket the success of most clubs depended very largely upon the interest of the big country houses, which provided the fields and raised the teams. Thus some quite small villages such as Horsington, Cucklington, Charlton Musgrove and Yarlinton had strong teams. More locally, the houses at Inwood and Thornhill also had cricket grounds. Due to the long hours worked by most men, getting a team was rarely easy; it was not until 1899 that shops shut at 2 pm on Wednesdays, the weekly half-day, and on Saturdays, only at 10pm instead of 11pm! In those days, many of the games started at 10.30 am, as there was no summer time adjustment to lengthen the evenings.

At Thornhill House, General Parkes would occasionally raise a combined team of Stalbridge and Marnhill players to play visiting teams. In Stalbridge itself, Major Bennett lived at Grove House from 1880 to 1900, and captained the Stalbridge side for a number of years at that time. He would usually open the door of Henry Hobbs' tailor's shop on the morning of a match, and call out "Hobbs! Three players for today's match!" which would include Henry himself and two of his tailors. Henry Hobbs, who also captained Stalbridge for a while, was a most enthusiastic cricketer, and loved to tell how, as a spectator, he once caught the famous W.G. Grace over the boundary line.

In 1907, Stalbridge, captained by Henry Hobbs, played Colonel Ridley's side at Mapperton

House. Before the match, an alarmed Hobbs is reported to have complained "Oh! My tender sides" when Colonel Ridley told him that the England Captain L.C.Palaret would be playing in the Mapperton team. On going to the wicket to bat, Palaret told Galton (the Stalbridge Postmaster, erratic fast bowler and hard hitting batsman) that he would give him half a crown if he bowled him in the first over. Galton reportedly knocked Palaret's middle stump out first ball, and presumably picked up half a crown as a result!

In 1928 records show that the Club ran on an income of less than £10 per annum! Balls cost less than 50p, and a best bat was priced at 2 guineas (£2.10p). In the 1930s most Stalbridge matches seemed to be evening games played at such places as Handford, Holwell, and Child Okeford, though there was an annual Saturday fixture against Fosters School in Sherborne. This game came about chiefly through the efforts of Percy Dike, ex-pupil of Fosters, Stalbridge player, umpire of renown, long-time chairman and life-long supporter of the Club!

Pre World War II, the main competitions entered by the Club were the occasional local knockout-cups and the Blackmore Vale Cricket League, which was formed in 1921 to compete for the Pitt Rivers Cup. Stalbridge went on to successfully win this trophy in 1949.

During the Second World War, the old thatched roof on the archery pavilion collapsed and the wicket also suffered. At the end of the war, Mr. Harry Dufosee agreed in 1946 to let the Club play at its current location, alongside the spot where the Football Club had first played in 1895. After the war, under the captaincy of Cyril Dike, the number of fixtures played gradually increased. In 1967 the first Sunday fixture was played, with Clive Moore by this time captain of the Club. The national village knockout competition was also keenly contested, and before Stalbridge officially became a town, the Club reached the County final, losing to Shillingstone in 1974.

It wasn't however until 1977 that Stalbridge first achieved success in the county-wide Dorset Junior Club Championship, topping a table of 39 Dorset Clubs, with Pete Moore as captain. The following year this competition, previously won on averages, was re-organised into leagues and eventually into the current separate Saturday and Sunday league competitions in the mid 1990s.

In 1988, Will Dike captained the 1st XI to the Division Two title. For the following nine years, the Club competed in Dorset League Division One, with Will Dike, Phil Calcott, Hayden Williams and Matt Chant all filling the role of captain at various stages. This competitive division involved the club in many memorable games against strong village teams such as Cattistock, Cranborne, Marnhull and Puddletown, as well as some of the larger clubs in the Bournemouth area.

Under the captaincy of Matt Chant, Stalbridge eventually won the Division One title in 1997, thereby achieving promotion to the Dorset Premier League, the top league in the county. Competing against teams from the major Dorset towns such as Weymouth, Poole, Dorchester, Wimborne and Sherborne, Stalbridge went on to be Runners Up in 2001 - a remarkable achievement for what is in many ways still a village cricket club.

The number of players available in Stalbridge meant that a second eleven was viable from the late 1970s, and the team entered the Mid-Wessex league, achieving success in 1982 as the Runners Up of Division 3. The 1983 Dorset League re-organisation saw the 2nd XI join the Dorset League Division Six. For the 2007 season, Jon Forshaw is taking over as captain from Andy Hoskins, and the 2^{nds} will be competing in Division Five. As well as showcasing the skills of some of our keenest, most sociable and well-matured members, the 2nd XI has over the years proved valuable in providing competitive senior cricket for a large number of talented young players in the Club.

In addition to the two Saturday sides fielded by the Club, a Dorset Sunday League Side has also been fielded for ten seasons. After a rapid climb through the Divisions, in 2004 the side were promoted Division One under the leadership of Jason Forsey. After some changes in personnel, rebuilding is underway in the Sunday XI, and Chris Hedges' side will compete in Division 2 in 2007.

Mid-week, an Evening League side has successfully competed for more than sixteen seasons in the sixteen-eight-ball-over competition of the Ranston Evening League and Knockout Cup. The team have finished as League Champions in 1985, 1986, 1989, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005 and 2006, and Cup Winners in 1989, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005 and 2006.

Within the Club, a great deal of effort has been made since the late 1970s to introduce youngsters to cricket, with a number of Club members and helpers voluntarily giving up their time to run teams and practice sessions. In 1983, the very successful Under-15 team managed by Rob Chant and Clive Moore won the Dorset U-15 Knockout Cup, going on to beat Cheltenham in the Area Knockout Competition, before eventually losing in the South West Regional Finals at Weston-Super-Mare.

Subsequent Under-15 teams have gone on to be Runners-Up in the Dorset U-15 Club Championship in 1999, and winners of the U-15 North Dorset League and Cup double in 2001. In the younger age group, the 1992 Under-13 team won the BV Magazine North Dorset Championship. Currently the Club has Under-11, Under-13 and Under-15 sections, and even an up-and-coming Under-8 section.

Over the years, a number of junior players have gone on to representative cricket, playing for full County or North Dorset District teams. At senior level, both Steve Forshaw and Matt Chant played for Dorset County Cricket Club whilst playing for Stalbridge 1st XI. Steve in particular was a first choice opening bowler for the county over a three or four year period.

In addition to the crucial development of junior cricket and home-grown talent, a major factor in the continuing vitality of the Club, has been in the ability to field sociable yet competitive teams that, whilst based on the loyalty of stalwarts from Stalbridge, have also been able to welcome committed players from outside the town. In recent years these have included members from 'across the frontier' in Henstridge, from the depths of Marnhull, the highlands of Ashmore, and even the wilds of Beaminster. Furthermore, in 2001 and 2002, the Club also welcomed the overseas talents of Dierdrick Harmse from South Africa, and Steve "Stan" McCabe from Australia.

Away from the pitch, since 1965 the end of each season has usually been marked with a dinner. The guest speakers have included numerous local cricketers and friends of the Club and in 1975 a certain eighteen year old Somerset cricketer on his first public speaking engagement – a Mr. Ian Botham! In 2002 the Club celebrated its 175th Anniversary with a Cricket Week during the summer and a Dinner held at the Stalbridge Hall on Saturday 28th September. Over 120 members, sponsors, vice-presidents, supporters and friends of the Club attended.

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With extracts taken from 'Stalbridge Peyps' by Percy Dike, and additional references ⁽¹⁾ from 'The Stalbridge Inheritance 1780 – 1854' by Irene Jones.