

SHEVINGTON YOUTH CLUB MEMOIRS OF A FOUNDER MEMBER

Maurice Allen

An item during club week a few years ago was a shop window display of photographs of former village football and cricket teams. Among these were a photograph of a cricket team dated 1904 and a soccer team of 1911. The footballers wore leather shinguards outside their stockings, covering the leg from just below the knee to the instep and secured by leather straps with buckles. It is safe to assume that organised sport was enjoyed in the village in the early part of the century. My mother could recall as a young girl setting out after tea on summer Saturday to meet the cricket team returning by Wagonette from an away game at Croston or Mawdesley. The football teams played on various fields around the village but the cricket field was still known locally by that name until the arrival of the M6 motorway, which cut right through it. One corner, now a part of a housing development, still remains called appropriately "The Oval".

My own recollections date from the early nineteen twenties. Broad o'th' Lane was the only built up area, and there was a crop of oats on what is now the Recreation Ground. The parson and the schoolmasters of Crooke and Shevington schools were the local dignitaries. Shevington school, by the way, was titled Broad o'th' Lane Council School though situated in Miles Lane. Its headmaster, Mr "Billy" Blight lived near the school in Miles Lane. The headmaster of Crooke School, who was also an astute businessman, was Mr James Lyon who resided in Gathurst Lane. It was the far-seeing Mr Lyon who bought the field in the centre of the village when it came on the market. He promptly offered it for sale to the village community as a potential recreation area. The price, I am told, was £50. A village committee set about the task of raising the necessary capital, and with subscriptions, interest free loans, and dances, etc., held in the school, they were able to buy the land and build the parish room, now the St Anne's Parish Church Hall.

So far the village community had worked harmoniously together; but now a disagreement arose over the title and the administration of the project. Mr Lyon and some members of the committee reasoned that, as all denominations had assisted in the project, it should be titled Shevington Recreation Ground and Parish Room and administered by a Village Committee or by the Shevington Parish Council. On the other hand, the Vicar, the Reverend G. Blagden Hopkins, and some members insisted that it be called Shevington Church Recreation Ground and Parish Room and administered by Trustees appointed by the Parochial Church Council.

The dispute went to law, and the hearing was at Liverpool. The judge ruled in the Vicar's favour as follows. The Recreation Ground and Parish Room were

the property of the whole village community, except that the property must be titled "The Shevington Church Recreation Ground and Parish Room", and be administered by Trustees nominated by the Parochial Church Council. The Trustees must be members of the Church of England, and must live within a five mile radius of Saint Anne's Church. The current Vicar of the Church to be the Chairman of Trustees. The trust deed contained restrictive covenants, viz. any portion of the land could only be sold to cover debts incurred in the administration of the property, excepting that part reserved for the extension of Saint Anne's Graveyard. Organised games were not permitted on the Recreation Ground on Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day, or at any other time which might interfere with Church Services. This ruling virtually gave control to the church and was a body blow to what had been a good Community spirit. The villagers were divided and support was now confined to the Protestants in the village. Mr Lyon still attended church but now he left his collection in the pew and went home before the Vicar began to preach his sermon!

In later years the Parish Room became a millstone around the neck of the Trustees and the problem was not resolved until the arrival of the present Vicar. The Parish Room was sold to the church leaving only the Recreation Ground to be administered by the Trustees. More recently the Trust Deed was amended to allow members of the Parish Council to be nominated as Trustees.

Cricket and football had been played on the Recreation Ground, and at least part of the field had been drained, mostly by voluntary labour. I remember as a small boy watching a cricket match on the Rec., when two of the Shevington batsman, both rather portly figures, collided when running between the wickets. They both fell and a box of matches in the pocket of one of the batsmen set alight! I don't remember if they made the crease, but the spectators enjoyed the fun.

Football was played in the Wigan Sunday School League where one of the rules was that the players attend Sunday School, but how strictly it was adhered to, I wouldn't know. I do know that most of the players were better known by their nicknames. The earliest one I recall began:

Goal Turner (Lugs)
R. Back Speakman (Spitty)
L. Back Osborne (Bally)

Around this time the hero of the village boys was the Shevington goalkeeper, Tommy Tyrer. Tommy was a big young fellow with hands like a collier's spade and a most unassuming manner.

He was invited to join one or two of the Football League Clubs, but his mother kept quite a tight hold of him. Almost every Saturday, when we were watching the Teams changing, some of us would be told to go and remind

Tommy that it was nearing kick-off time. We would invariably find him working in the garden or the poultry pens. He would hastily grab his gear and just about make the kick-off. Playing at Kitt Green one Saturday, he emptied his bag to find that he had grabbed his sister's drawers from the clothes-line instead of his shorts! He was a great goalkeeper and a grand lad. Sadly, he was killed in a mining accident when still a comparatively young man.

At this period, and for many more years, the Rec. was used as a pasture during the summer. The Highfield Farm house and buildings stood on what is now the Gathurst Lane shops. Football was played in winter. I became involved personally in the 1935 – 1936 Season. Some of the teenagers had got a team together and asked one or two of my pals and myself if we would help them on the non-playing side. We agreed to give it a try, and, on reflection, this was perhaps the origin of the Youth Club. The team was called Shevington Juniors A.F.C. and made good progress. No village team had ever won a football trophy, but in 1939 the team won the Excelsior Cup. The final was played on the Monday evening and being on afternoon shift I swapped turns. The result of the match was a draw, replay - Friday evening, when I was at work. When I finished work at 10:00 some of the lads were waiting at the Works Gate with the good news. I was whisked up to our headquarters, the Plough and Harrow, where the landlord had put on a celebration meal in the upstairs club room. At last we had something to celebrate!

The war had now begun, and football was suspended for the duration. When the books were closed we had a balance of £5, which was deposited as an interest-free loan with the Recreation Ground Trustees, to be recovered on the reformation of the football team after the War.

Whilst abroad in 1946, a letter from home told me that the lads were kicking a football around on the Rec. again, and were asking when I was due back home. By the time I did return the field had been cleared of six years of neglect, and a team kitted out and entered in the league. Before the War the teams had changed in the stables in the Plough and Harrow yard. Now, however, the tennis courts on the Rec. having gone beyond repair, we were able to patch up the old tennis hut to use as changing rooms, and as a meeting room for the committee, often by candlelight. Later, we were allowed to use the Parish Room for this purpose.

This was a time of great enthusiasm. There was a great feeling that everyone wanted to help, and very soon we were running two soccer teams and a cricket team. This naturally brought accommodation problems. A new Council housing estate was now being completed adjoining the Recreation Ground and, together with a large increase in Private house building, the Committee realised that the need for a suitable building was becoming acute. The local people took a keen interest in our activities, and we had always tried to keep them informed of both our plans and our problems. A direct result of this interest helped to

solve the problem, albeit temporarily. My mother, passing through the village of Aspull, had noticed an ex-army hut which was apparently not in use. The Committee decided to take a look. It proved to be an ex-army hut, 1914-1918 vintage, 30ft x 20ft, which had been in use as a British Legion Club at one time. When we had finally traced the owner, he was agreeable to sell the building for £200. Our resources were very limited, but as always the public were ready to help with small donations and interest-free loans, and we were able to purchase. We agreed terms with the Recreation Ground Trustees to release a site adjoining the parish room. The site was cleared and prepared. The work of dismantling the building and re-erecting it on the new site was a formidable one for the volunteers - Club members and Committee working Saturday and Sunday over two weekends, completed the job. It was hard work, but we had a lot of fun too. The old men watching at Aspull said it would never get down intact, as it was not in sections, was nailed and not bolted. They were right about the nails, and we had to make our own sections, but we did get it down. We had removed the roof and sides apart from one corner where a tap and wash bowl were fitted. We couldn't find the stop tap, so we asked the old men if they knew its location. They said it was in the street outside, but had been covered with the road. One of the lads went underneath the building to knock up the lead pipe. After one or two hammer blows, all we could hear was his laughter. When asked why, he said: "Watter's broken in and every time I strike, I get drowned in a fresh place!" He got really wet, but he sealed the pipe.

Transport and drivers were supplied free of charge by two local haulage firms to take the building to Shevington, where, on its arrival, the old men said that we would never get it up again. We did. A small brick extension was added, to house the boiler, and the coke fuel.

We were now able to provide a wider range of activities. A billiard table, table tennis, dartboard, etc. had been installed and the club was open to members five nights a week with supervision by voluntary stewards. The stewards, principally members of the committee, worked in pairs on a bi-weekly rota, with members of the ladies' committee doing duty in the small canteen. A small committee room was an added facility, which was also in use each morning as the local Doctor's surgery. This was a boon to the patients, who now had a spacious and warm waiting room, and where there was even room to park the pram.

The one snag to this arrangement was that the Inland Revenue were now demanding tax on the small amount we charged for its use. It took many visits to the tax office before we were granted an exemption, and a full year before we received a refund of the tax paid, £16. Meant a great deal to us at that time.

Maintenance work on the building was done by Sunday morning working parties, and our caretaker and boilerman did a good job. The building was almost always warm and cosy in winter, and there was a great atmosphere about

the place. The cost of materials and equipment had strained our finances, and a special effort was needed to repay the last few pounds owing to our friends.

The club was already bursting at the seams, and, with continued housing development in and around the village, it was obvious that the present building would be totally inadequate in two or three years' time. It was agreed that we should now concentrate our efforts in raising cash to provide a purpose-built club, and we began to plan with this in mind. One of the early decisions made was that we join the National Association of Boys' Clubs. This was to prove invaluable. We now had a source of information and advice on all aspects of club business, and the practical help of the Secretary of the Lancashire Association. One innovation was our participating in the N.A.B.C. annual club week held in October in each year. During that week, members activities were confined to fund raising efforts with a target usually set at £1 per member. A special Sub-Committee would set out a program of events covering the week and every one was flat out to beat the set target.

The Youth Club Darts Knock-Out Competition was a feature that would commence a month ahead of the Club Week. Entries from pubs and clubs in the area, at ten shillings per team went a little way towards the cost of trophies. The only condition of entry was that we be allowed to sell tickets for a raffle during games, which were on a home and away basis, and this is how we were able to show a useful profit on the venture. This proved a popular and profitable event for many years. It sometimes proved to be hard on your own pocket if you had to attend as the Club's Official at two games in one week, especially as the nights were usually Tuesday and Thursday.

A great deal could be written about Club Week - its panics and its pleasures. There was never a quiet moment. It always seemed to be a hectic time. Memories spring readily to mind. The member who had to chase up Back Lane to retrieve his coat, inadvertently sold as jumble! Our Club Week Treasurer, who was worried sick at having the custody of so much cash, and his insistence on its being correct to the last halfpenny. The Dominoes and Hot Pot Supper that was so popular we had to use the Parish Room for the overflow - and how the ladies overcame the consequent need for additional hot pot! They quickly mustered enough pressure cookers for the job. Our village butcher went back to the shop and cut the meat. Fred was dispatched with an enamel bucket to the house of the village greengrocer for the potatoes, who handed them over and waived the cost. Crossing Broad o'th' Lane on his return, he met Martha, who was carrying a bucket full of prepared potatoes from her home to the Fish and Chip Shop. Fred said, "I'll swop you, Martha". When he had explained, she promptly swapped buckets, and retraced her steps for a fresh supply! Many such spontaneous acts of support did much to help one over the times of despondency.

One other means of publicity we had decided to try was a monthly club newspaper. As well as items of Club news, we included items of interest from the Church, the Schools, the Pubs and the Clubs. Also included each month was a profile of an old Shevingtonian. These older people had some good stories to tell of their early life in the village. Though the paper was enjoyed by a great number of people, the cost of having it printed made it uneconomical, and we could not at that time spare money to buy a duplicator.

Our Building Fund Account had now reached the stage where we could hope to go ahead with the project. We none of us, however, had any experience in dealing with Government Departments or the Local Education Authority. We therefore enlisted the help of the Headmaster of the recently opened Shevington Lane School, who kindly agreed to act as Chairman of the Committee, and as our contact with the Education Department.

The next few years were to prove the most frustrating period of all. We had, by now, agreed with the Recreation Ground Trustees on a site. The lease had been drawn up and outline planning permission granted. This was the time of the credit squeezes. One year we would be on the County Priority Building List, the next year we would not. This went on for about four years. Our chairman's correspondence file was becoming too bulky to fit in his briefcase!

At long last we had a letter from the Department of Education which said that, provided the proposed plan was scaled down by the omission of a small games room and an equipment storage room, thus reducing the cost by £600, the reduced grant would be approved. An application to add the two rooms could be made at a later date. (When this was done a few years later the cost had trebled.) One other condition was that the club must first find a guarantor for £1,000 needed to cover the total cost of building and equipment. This was an important one. The NABC had granted us a loan of £400, and the Lancashire Association had helped to secure a grant from the Skelton Bounty, but these were already included in our budget. I have said earlier that we had to abandon club newspaper idea. It had, however, proved its value in a way not anticipated. I had written to an old Shevingtonian to ask his permission to include his recollections of his boyhood days in Shevington. He replied, inviting my wife and myself to visit him at his home. We accepted, but I must say that it was with a certain degree of trepidation that we entered the room to meet Sir Frederick Emery. We need not have worried. We found a really delightful man, who was very interested in what we were doing, and who had a great love of his native village. He had begun his early education at Crooke School, his working life as a clerk at Gathurst station, had moved on to Manchester to become a Town Councillor and Lord Mayor of Salford, and Member of Parliament for a Salford constituency for many years. The outcome of our visit was that he shortly afterwards became the club's first president. As such, he was now in touch with the club's affairs.

Each year we attended the L.A.B.C. weekend conference at Blackpool in early December, and a highlight of the celebrations was that our party of Club Officials and members were the guests of Sir Frederick at his home, immediately after the conference ended. On this occasion, after he had seen his guests made welcome, he asked that he and I be excused, as we had a small matter to discuss. We went into the Library, where he sat down at his desk, added his signature to a cheque that was apparently already written out and handed it to me with the remark that it would perhaps help. It was for £1,000. That was a moment I won't ever forget. The journey home seemed unreal. Everyone seemed to be too happy to talk, until our chairman suddenly decided that we must break our journey, so that he could treat us all to a celebration drink. This we did.

Prior to this time, we had visited a few newly erected club buildings, mostly of the prefabricated type, one of which was the newly opened Wigan Boys Club. The traditional type building had so far seemed to be too costly. One of our committee, however, brought a photo cut from a local newspaper, of a club newly opened at Penketh. We arranged to visit this one Saturday morning and were very impressed, both with the building and the cost. It was our good luck that the man responsible for building the club called in whilst we were there. We were able to persuade him to visit our proposed site and prepare an estimate.

On the 11th of March, 1967, the foundation stone of the new club was laid. This honour fell to John Llewellyn, Secretary of the Lancashire Association, as a mark of our appreciation of the part he had played in carrying out the project. A small group of Club Officials and guests lunched at Parbold Hill Café.

The old club building was, by this time, unfit for use. The floor had been repaired many times over the years, but now it refused to take any more, and the building was finally demolished. It had done a good service for almost twenty years, and had always had a tremendous atmosphere.

The new Shevington Youth Club was officially opened by the club president, Sir Frederick Emery, J.P., on Saturday, December 17th, 1967. This was our red letter day, and the culmination of a great effort by everyone concerned. I think we were all entitled to feel a little proud of our achievement.

The members were now able to enjoy the luxury of a purpose and built club, complete with gymnasium, coffee bar, changing rooms and showers - a far cry from the Plough and Harrow stables! Somehow though, to me at least, it never quite recaptured the atmosphere of the old building. I don't know why, unless perhaps it was the fact that no one needed to strive quite so hard.

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