



# Unbroken Partnerships

The wonderful story of Spondon Cricket Club's tea ladies is one of many told as part of a new MCC project on community cricket, says [Emma Peplow](#)

**S**pondon Cricket Club, in a village just north of Derby, has a lot to thank its tea ladies for. In the 1920s the club's ground in the heart of the village came up for sale. The club had first refusal but the sum required, £300, was something of a hurdle. Not to be deterred, in 1924 Spondon's President Mr Follows loaned the club the money at 4.5 percent interest. Nine years later, £200 was still outstanding when the Ladies' Committee became involved and turned their hand to whist drives, smoking dances, benefit matches and teas. By the end of the Second World War, the ladies had finally paid off the debt and the ground at Royal Hill Road became the property of Spondon Cricket Club.

Over the years, Royal Hill Road was loved by generations of Spondon CC players and supporters. A small, enclosed ground with a great atmosphere, it was the stage for tense matches, great victories and the blossoming of young players (including a few who later played for Derbyshire). In 1970 Brian Clough opened the new pavilion. Yet by the 2000s the ground was too small for the club to play in the Derbyshire Premier League and neighbours were increasingly hostile to the number of cricket balls invading their back gardens. The club needed to move, a process made so much easier by the tea ladies' efforts. The then Chairman, Paul Tainton, remembers: 'We were so lucky really... we had an asset. I'm sure you've heard the story that the asset was bought by the tea ladies for £300... Well, that £300 turned into a site now that's worth £3.5m, £4m. Phenomenal.'

As owners of their own ground, Spondon were able to sell Royal Hill Road to a developer in return for fantastic new facilities at Locko Road, including a purpose-built pavilion and two pitches. Locko Road is now home to a new generation of members: the 160 children in the junior section who take over the club every Wednesday night; the first team riding high in the Derbyshire Premier League; the volunteers who spend hours raising money for the club and community. Now the ladies of Spondon also help to coach the juniors

and run teams. Despite the changes, the club has kept the same family atmosphere.

Spondon CC's story is a characteristic example of the changes grassroots cricket has undergone in the UK over the past 100 years or so, which is why it's a great introduction to MCC's new project, Taking the Field (TTF). In partnership with the University of Glamorgan, TTF aims to create a collection of digital stories – short oral histories complemented with music, video and photographs – that reflect the importance of grassroots clubs to their

when the greats turned up, the characters around the ground. Furthermore, we don't just look at the cricket itself, but at what is happening behind the clubs in the communities they belong to – a look at British social history through the 'English' game. In early 2012, we hope to expand TTF to Sri Lanka and build on MCC's strong links to the country. As cricket has developed so differently in Sri Lanka, the project there will not only be fascinating in itself but will produce stories that will act as a great comparison to those of the grassroots game in the UK.



**Opposite** A photograph from 1952 that shows the key members of Spondon Cricket Club's Ladies' Committee – Mrs Benniston, Mrs Dally and Mrs Walker-Smith – who were responsible for the 20-year campaign to repay the loan that bought Royal Hill Road ground for the club

**Above** Past and present sides from Blaina Cricket Club line up – and roll over – in a recent photograph

communities in the UK and Sri Lanka, and Spondon joined the project in the spring of 2011. As a Research Associate for MCC developing the project, I've spent the last year travelling around UK clubs, chatting to old members, and collecting photographs and stories that will be shared in special displays at the MCC Museum and online at [www.takingthefield.com](http://www.takingthefield.com). The great asset of oral history is its ability to capture events that aren't written down. Our stories help to recreate the drama of club cricket that just scorecards or minute books cannot capture: nail-biting cup finals, the times

We've already captured some great tales. Our first club – Blaina, from South Wales – started researching their history after a chance sighting of a 1920s-era photograph in a nearby park. Darryl Davies, the club's opening bowler for years, realised the photo was of Blaina's ground, Central Park, but was amazed by the thousands of people watching. This photo sparked two years of research that uncovered Blaina's illustrious history: the club was a founder member of the largest league in Wales in the 1920s and had thousands regularly turning up to watch them play. Old fan Ernie Barber



told me his childhood memories, such as getting to the ground by sneaking through the local pit and getting in trouble with his mother for staying out late to watch the whole match. Ernie would share a packet of peanuts with his friends instead of going home for his tea. Although the mines have now closed and Blaina has changed almost unrecognisably from the crowded mining town it once was, the cricket club still prospers. A small club certainly, but one that has always looked after the youth of the town and has had some great periods of success, especially in the otherwise turbulent 1980s; despite the economic upheaval in the Welsh Valleys as the mines closed, Blaina had an extremely successful side during this decade, encouraged by the club's commitment to keeping costs down and the efforts of local people who gave up their time to encourage young players. These traditions continue today.

Moving into England, Astley Bridge CC is a traditional Lancashire league side with a committed, close-knit membership. One of Bolton's 28 clubs, Astley Bridge has a long tradition in the Bolton League and its members have played against some greats. One old member, Fred Guest, remembers playing a cup match

**Above** A glorious view of a match at Blaina Cricket Club's ground Central Park, which is set deep in the South Wales Valleys

“Even during tough times, many clubs have done all they can to make sure everyone who wants to can play a game of cricket”

as a teenager against a rival club with a professional, a West Indian who, rumour had it, was 'a good bat, but he just bowls a few chinamen and googlies'. After Astley Bridge scored 80, the West Indian took the ball. The Astley Bridge players were pretty surprised at the run up he took for someone only bowling spin. Some chest injuries and eight Astley Bridge wickets later, the team were pretty clear that they had been misinformed. The pro causing this destruction? One Garfield Sobers.

In the upcoming year TTF will work with more and more clubs, like Marple CC who, despite being placed in a charming commuter town just outside Stockport, have had some ups and downs. The club disbanded in the First World War after most of the team signed up and the pitch was ploughed up for farmland. Refounded in the 1950s, the club emerged from some lean times in the 1990s to win ten trophies last summer. Others lined up to take part around the country include Hertfordshire's Chorleywood CC, playing their 160th season this year.

Any club can sign up to TTF themselves via the dedicated website. The site is filled with advice on how to



**Clockwise from above** Spondon Cricket Club's first team receive a cup for their efforts in 1962; the successful 1910 team of Astley Bridge Cricket Club, which was founded eight years earlier; Brian Clough, then manager of Derby County Football Club, opens the new pavilion at Spondon's Royal Hill Road ground in 1970



start collecting the club's history, as well as how to create digital stories, and each club is given their own page to share their material. If you belong to a cricket club, take the plunge and join the project, like Rodley CC in Yorkshire. Rodley are the first team to add their history and photographs to TTF independently, sharing their 50 years of 'cricket beside the canal bank' in one of Leeds' suburbs – a history current club President Michael Wright knows intimately, having played for the club every season since 1959, just two years after the club was formed.

What have we learned so far from TTF? It is certainly too early to make sweeping conclusions, but some themes have emerged already that reflect both grassroots cricket and wider British society. Firstly, attitudes to youth cricket have changed. While it was always important (for example, Blaina's Ernie Barber remembers how the Blaina team coached boys in the evenings when he was young), it has grown massively. Spondon's Chairman Neil Kellogg remembers being picked for the first team as a 16-year-old mostly to run around after the ball in the field; now Spondon's first team opener is only 16

years old. The same picture surfaces elsewhere. A second common thread is that these clubs have always existed to play rather than to raise money: Blaina's membership charges are only £2 for the year, and members of Astley Bridge remember their subs being paid for by committee members if their parents could not afford them. Even during tough times, many clubs have done all they can to make sure everyone who wants to can play a game of cricket. Thirdly, women are no longer relegated to the tea rooms – all of our teams have girls training with the boys, and Spondon, as one example, have one of the strongest girls' sections in Derbyshire. As their coach, Sarah Fisher told me, 'Girls' cricket brings cricket back to its roots... they know the ethics and the ethos of the game', although 13-year-old Chloe Bunting undermined this slightly: 'I like playing with the boys though, especially when we beat them.'

Finally, and most importantly, club cricket in the UK is in a strong state despite the challenges it has faced, and it often has a welcoming face. Yes, clubs have to open up their bars and clubhouses to the community to raise that awful thing any club needs: money.

Yes, often teas are now professionally catered rather than provided by busy wives, and yes, drink-driving laws have changed how teams socialise after a match. But most clubs are proud of their open atmospheres and thriving, more professional youth sections. Spondon CC members told me with some pleasure of their battles in the 1980s with certain committee members who didn't want the club to open up to the community. One member of Marple CC defiantly responded to the question 'what do you say to those who think club cricket is dying?'

'If you mean that the club cricket of the old days, of white men in dark smoky pavilions, is dying, then yes – it's dead and I'm pleased to say it is. In its place are clubs who welcome in women, children and the community as a whole and they are thriving. I'm proud to be part of that.'

**To learn more about Taking the Field and the stories of clubs around the country, or to find out how to get involved, please visit [www.takingthefield.com](http://www.takingthefield.com) or contact Emma Peplow on 020 7616 8734 and [emma.peplow@mcc.org.uk](mailto:emma.peplow@mcc.org.uk)**