



The Wychwoods Local History Society



HOWZAT! Cricket in the Wychwoods

Carol Anderson June 2024

(This article was written to accompany an exhibition of photographs held in the Wychwoods Library in June 2024.)

Village cricket has been played in the Wychwoods for more than 160 years with Ascott, Milton and Shipton all fielding teams. In April and August 1856 Jackson's Oxford Journal records games involving Shipton. In July 1860 a '*capital game was played at 'The Lawns', Rangers Lodge, between two elevens from Finstock and Ascott in which Ascott was victorious.*' In August of the following year Ascott played Shipton who enjoyed a resounding victory scoring 89 to Ascott's 35.



Cows grazing on the Green in Milton

In the past pitches were often little more than a rough grazing field. Cricketers in Milton often found themselves having to remove livestock and cowpats from the



recreation ground on the Green before play could begin. It seems that Milton may have been fielding a team as early as 1870, when rules for the use of the green listed cricket amongst the recreational activities that might take place there. Milton continued to play on the Green until the 1970s when the club closed. Although stock might be kept off the wicket, without the use of modern mowers and rollers, long grass and uneven ground meant scores were low.

Ascott played on just such a field between the railway and the drive to Manor Farm, with the station platform providing an elevated viewing platform from which to view the match in the field below. The scorer's hut is just visible in the field at the bottom of the railway embankment.

In 1953 play moved to the Memorial Recreation Ground off the High Street, where land had been purchased from the Cornbury estate in 1951 with funds raised by public subscription in memory of the four Ascott men killed on active service between 1939 and 1945. The pavilion was a pre-cast concrete garage.

From the late 19th century, having previously played in a field, Shipton enjoyed the privilege of playing on a pitch levelled and drained by the Pepper family (owners of Shipton Court) and the Club's striking wooden pavilion dates from this period.

In 1947 the sale of the Shipton Court Estate enabled the Club to buy their ground.



Shipton's original wooden pavilion. Image courtesy of the Club

Over time the fortunes of the three Wychwood village clubs varied enormously. In the 1930s Shipton's performance was enhanced by the famous Hartley brothers from a local farming family. Dick was a fine batsman who played for the MCC, whilst Frank was a fast bowler who also played football for Tottenham Hotspur and England. Ernest was a batsman and superb fielder who captained England at hockey.



The three Hartley boys as sportsmen about 1905

Matches continued to be a regular feature of life in Shipton in the post war period. In the 1970s the Club played in the Cherwell League and in the following decade summer tours were arranged to venues as far flung as Lancashire and Corfu.

The Club went from strength to strength, reaching the finals of the National Village Knockout Competition in 1997 with a team that included film director Sam Mendes, but losing to Caldy of The Wirral (in a match overshadowed by the death the previous evening of Princess Diana).

The new century saw the Club twice win the National Village Knockout Competition and gain promotion to the Home Counties Premier Cricket League. Youth cricket expanded until in some years player numbers exceeded 200 and there were four senior sides playing League cricket. The Club continued to gather trophies and awards reaching the Lord's final again in 2010, when they were defeated by Sessay, and in 2011 received the accolade of being Oxfordshire Sports Team of the Year. Most recently, in 2022 they were the Oxfordshire T20 Champions.

Neither Ascott nor Milton were able to reach the heights enjoyed by Shipton. Between 1878 and 1881 the Reverend York, vicar of Ascott recorded the activities of the Ascott team in the Parish Magazine. From the names mentioned it would seem that the cricketers were not drawn from the labouring classes but were farmers and craftsmen. In October 1878 the cricketers played their last match of the season, followed by dinner at the Churchill Arms. The tradition of the cricketers gathering here, and the footballers in the Swan, continued well into the 20th century.



Gamesmanship was not unknown. On one occasion, following Ascott's defeat the Reverend York noted with some annoyance that Chadlington had called *'two bowlers to their side who were not from the parish or members of their club'*.

Milton fielded a village team in the 19th century and in July 1881 the Chipping Norton Deanery Magazine included a report on two matches played that month by the Milton Cricket Club against Charlbury and Chipping Norton. The results being lost one, won

one. Milton continued to field a village team through the first half of the 20th century, winning the Witney League Cup, defeating Witney Swifts in the final match of the season. The village retained its cricket team until the 1970s, but the increasing use of the Green for various other activities created challenges.

Ascott continued to play throughout the 20th century and in 1948 won the second division of the Witney League, beating Milton in the final match of the season. In the post-war years the players came from all walks of life. Fred Russell, writing in the Ascott Grapevine Issue 58 Spring 2008, recalls that most of the team had cricket boots, but few wore white cricket flannels, most played in dark grey trousers and a white shirt. Bats and pads were shared.

By 2010 Ascott was playing relatively few matches and became dormant for a decade before its revival in 2020. The Club, known as The Martyrs, is now flourishing and in 2022 the league XI became Division Champions.

Surviving photographs show that the villages were fielding women's teams by the early years of the 20th century, when women faced the additional handicap of playing



in long skirts! It seems that the Great War may have signalled the end of women's cricket in the same way as women's football teams were discouraged after the end of the conflict. But Ascott was certainly fielding a women's team again by 1938 when clearly, they no longer needed to share one bat! Shipton also encouraged women to play and had a women's team from the early years of the 20th century. In 2015 Shipton became Oxfordshire Women's Champions, a victory they repeated two years later. We don't yet have the evidence for a women's team in Milton. If there was one, please tell us.

These are just a few highlights from the history of cricket in the Wychwoods. If you have information and photographs to add to the Archive please get in touch.

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