

# The Club Corner



Phil Meek, Chairman of the now-closed Westinghouse Cricket Club in Chippenham, Wiltshire, talks to us about what the club was and why it is no more.

*It is with great sadness that I heard about the fate of one of our member clubs, Westinghouse Cricket Club. They had been members of the Grassroot network since the start of 2013 but a couple of weeks ago I heard from Phil the club was to close its doors in advance of the new cricket season. I've never been involved with a club that had to take this final and most drastic action, and I spoke to Phil about what had happened. At the most difficult time for a Chairman of any type of club, Phil agreed to share the story of the club to show people who are interested just what happened, and why it could potentially happen elsewhere if the club does not receive the support it needs. It's a story not just about money, but commitment too, or a lack thereof.*

*As I've mentioned before, I have a grand plan that I am working on to reduce the likelihood of this kind of*

*thing happening to our member clubs (and non-member clubs for that matter), but it's a long term vision. We will get there though as this is just too important an issue to not address. I am steadfast in my belief of how important community sports clubs are to the people involved with them, I know I wouldn't have gone down the path my life has gone if I hadn't had the experiences I have in those important formative years of mine - there were many options open to me where I was growing up, a lot of them negative, but (without me realising it at the time) being involved in a sports club helped steer me away from the not-so-good options. It gave me an outlet, it helped me gain social skills that benefitted me in all aspects of my life since, it helped me stay grounded.*

*Over to Phil and the story of Westinghouse Cricket Club (1937-2014).*

On the evening of Tuesday 25th March 2014, as Chairman of Westinghouse CC, I had the sad duty of e-mailing our league to advise them of our immediate resignation from this season's competition & with it our decision to fold as a club.

This deeply upsetting situation brought to an end our 77 year history and became the defining moment in what had already been a dramatic fall from grace.

*“...in our prime we were more than holding our own in the WEPL...”*

We were by no means the best side in the County. We never had been, were never likely to be. However in our prime we were more than holding our own in the West of England Premier League set up. We had two strong Saturday sides, a youthful but competitive Midweek XI, a Sunday XI that played exclusively for enjoyment & cared not about the result, only for how cold the beer was afterwards. We had a thriving junior section, with teams in three different age groups, & over 40 junior members

attending training each week.



*The club in happier times; an u9's cricket festival*

Alongside the on field successes, we had an army of volunteers, all committed to maintaining our status as one of the hardest teams to beat, with one of the nicest grounds on the circuit. Each one dedicated to driving the club forward, to provide the very best opportunities for the next generation. Committee roles were often hotly contested, & the lead up to the AGM was frequently more like an American election preamble than a group of friends sharing one common goal. Arrive at the ground on any given evening, & there would always be at least one person either strimming weeds, or rolling a track, or doing some other small task purely because “I had half hour spare so thought I'd pop up”.

So where did it all go wrong? Well, in simple terms we only had five players for this season. In the last

three seasons alone we have lost 26 players. Good players. Players that had taken us to the WEPL pyramid. We lost volunteers. Those same people that would give up their every spare moment to do their bit on the ground slowly but surely began to disappear. As a consequence, the burden of duty began to fall entirely on the same five or six people. By the time our demise was confirmed, only one of those people remained at the club. Me.

The warning signs had been creeping into the club for the last four or five years. As players left it became harder & harder to find replacements. As volunteers reclaimed their free time, it became impossible to find others willing to step up. Committee roles became something people recoiled at the thought of.

*“...our youth system crumbled virtually overnight...”*

Our youth system crumbled virtually overnight. Over thirty children attended the final training session of 2012, at which the Head Coach announced that he was stepping down due to work

commitments. Only four attended the first session of 2013. Nobody had stepped up to take on the Coaching role at the AGM. By the time I had persuaded someone to take the role on in an interim capacity it was too late. The birds had already flown to new nests.

Our 2nd XI folded early in the 2013 season. Finding players from novel & increasingly diverse places was by no means a new challenge for the 2nd XI Captain. For the years before it was not uncommon for at least one of the 2nd XI players to arrive at the ground, mobile phone glued to their ear, trying to drag a mate along to make up the numbers. Somehow we had always managed it. Always found eleven people to fill gaps in the field & try & score a run or five. But as our regular numbers dropped, so too did the database of potential temporary signings. Playing with eight or nine became the norm, the defeats got heavier, moral got lower, and ultimately the fairest thing to do for the club & for the league was to fold the team.

By this stage, we had already slipped from WEPL to Wiltshire League cricket. In 2012 the 1st XI were relegated to Division 2. The lowest standard of cricket in my 20 years at the club. The Midweek XI had long since gone; a combination

of young players going off to Uni & the older players not able to make 6pm starts after a day at work.

*“... players that took us to a good level of cricket, & ultimately back down again, upped stumps & abandoned the club when it most needed them...”*

With relegation came a further glut of players departing. Those same players that took us to a good level of cricket, & ultimately back down again, upped stumps & abandoned the club when it most needed them. The final nails were being despatched from the tungsten factory ready to be hammered into our coffin.

The ground itself, so strongly heralded as a beautiful setting in which to play, began to fall into greater & greater disrepair. The list of work required became too exhaustive for what remained of our volunteer force to contend with.

The few that remained committed tried numerous things to engage the members. We introduced incentives for those that gave their time for the club. We joined a Time Credit Scheme, rewarding each volunteer with a “credit” for use in the local community for every hour they volunteered. We bought a ride on mower for the outfield. For years people had complained the outfield was too long. Only two people ever used it. People had complained that our track was too slow, too low & deteriorated dramatically mid innings, particularly when batting 2nd. We invested £250 at the end of the 2012 & 2013 seasons in hiring the Channel 4 trailer to carry out square maintenance. It was beginning to make a difference. Only one member volunteered to assist with the work on the day the trailer came, & the square & outfield had not been cut between the day the trailer came (four days after the last game of the season) & the day I folded the club. We began a weather lottery & joined Grassroot Media to generate much needed revenue. Only three current members joined our lottery scheme. People had complained the social events had become predictable & repetitive. So we arranged a night at a local comedy club. Only six people went. Our end of season presentation

evening, for years the highlight of the social season & the scene of many a high jape evening, was cancelled in 2013 as only three people booked a place. We acquired our own alcohol licence, in order to sell drinks in our pavilion after a match. We invested in a projector & set top box to provide televisual entertainment. More often than not it was the opposition outlasting our own members in the bar.



*The club house*

So where did the apocalyptic apathy spawn from? Well, in 2008, Westinghouse Brake & Signals Ltd, the owners of our ground & the Company from which our club was born, sold an option to build on the site to a property developer. Within 48 hours of that deal going through, the recreation club on site had been boarded up & stripped out, taking with it a thriving indoor skittles league. A week later, the

bowls club, resident for as long as the cricket section, also left, robbed of its centrepiece & main facility. The tennis courts that frame the cricket field, for so long an integral part of a warm Saturday afternoon, became empty & barren & unkempt.

Closing the rec club ripped the soul out of the club & the community. For many a year, it was the meeting point for bowls players & cricketers to merge, share a beer, & to chew the cud of the afternoons fortunes.

There was however hope on the horizon. A bright new dawn beckoned. Due to the extremely hard work at the time of our then Chairman & a small subcommittee, together with the ECB, Sport England & The Playing Fields Association, a mitigation package was agreed. This would see us move to a brand new ground, based at our local rugby club, just a few hundred yards from our historic home. A ten track County standard square was promised. A new pavilion, covers, electric scoreboard, three lane floodlit practice nets. Everything you could possibly wish for as a cricket club was included in the package. It was even agreed that there must be continuity of cricket, removing the need for a temporary home.

Initially this situation was viewed positively within the club. It had been talked about for years, accelerated by the global recession undoubtedly, but now at last the speculation had stopped & we could look to the future with confidence. In the first year after the deal had been agreed, availabilities were at an all-time high, the 2nd XI finished as runners up to gain promotion, & the 1st XI missed out on a return to WEPL cricket by just three points.

*“...as time ebbed away, doubts started to creep in...”*

But as time began to ebb away, with no further action or forward movement, so the doubts began to creep in. Rumours of deals breaking down didn't help matters, but ultimately the river of enthusiasm that flowed so freely began to grow stagnant.

It was three years before a planning application finally went in. In construction terms, probably not a long time, but for us as a club it was an eternity. The indecision, the “not knowing”, the silent stench of doubt, slowly but surely was corroding our club.

When planning was approved, after a tense & highly charged hearing by the strategic planning committee, we all thought, myself included, that this would be it. That we'd endured all the rain & we would now see the rainbow. That was in November 2011. Since then I have had just one moment of contact from the developer. In an e-mail, in December 2012, in response to my request for an update on schedules & build programmes. The short response merely stated that the build was “part of the long term plan, & no date was under discussion to commence works”. I read that as: we've got the important bit, the precedent has been set in granting the permission, we'll build when we're ready & to hell with whatever consequence that leads to in your club.

No further contact was made between then & my pressing send on the e-mail to the league.

But as much as we can pinpoint the cause of the apathy, & believe me I do share the feelings of our members, it cannot hide the cold facts. Not enough of our members cared enough about the club to see it through to the end. Too many egos skulked behind rocks & into hiding when a once proud club was relegated not once but twice in the



So if you are reading this, & you don't already value your club, perhaps it is time to evaluate your involvement. We went very quickly from lots of people doing a little bit each, to a couple of people doing everything. Don't let that happen in your club. It will only end one way.

Be the change you want to see. Don't be the one who sits at the back tutting & criticising. Get involved. Others will follow.

Love your club, love your sport.

Nobody ever died because you scored less runs than they did, so play with a smile. Enjoy what you do & you'll never work a day in your life. The same applies to volunteering.

At the very least, if you cannot get involved, if you do nothing else, be sure you support those who are trying. Support the events, the get togethers, the requests for a hand now & again.

But above all, cherish what you have. As I know only too well, one day, it might not be there.



*Westinghouse Cricket Club - closed for the last time*