

Cricket on the Hill

EARLY DAYS

In 1925, a group of cricket enthusiasts, all members of the Cimla Sunday School started a cricket team. Under the direction of R.T. (Dick) Davies, they were initially known as the “Cimla Sunday School Cricket Club” but the “Sunday School” part of the title was later dropped.

The leader of the group Dick Davies was a schools attendance officer and something of an all-round sportsman as he had played rugby for Neath before the Great War. His war service suggests that he was a true Christian leader of men too for, having earned the rank of sergeant, his obituary in 1936 held that “he was responsible for obtaining an organ for the Western Front(where it)brought great cheer to the troops”.

The Armistice having been signed, Dick Davies was once again able to concentrate on peacetime pursuits and it was he who captained Cimla during the Club’s crucial first two years before moving on to Neath where he became their secretary. His organisational ability immediately bore fruit for the Town as he was instrumental in bringing county cricket to The Gnoll in 1934.

Dick Davies led Cimla into action for the first time on May 2nd, 1925 against now-defunct Melyn Welfare at Pandy Park. Opening batsman David Tucker scored 32 and, with the captain and David Roberts sharing the wickets, the first victory was achieved by 24 runs. Tom Roberts was scorer in that game, a role he carried out for some 60 years before retiring in 1985.

Tom’s long-service is typical of many of the Club’s officers. Prominent among them in the early days were Alderman John Davies (President), Joe Bevan (Chairman), the noted musician Matthew W. Davies and D.J. Richards while the active Ladies Committee, then as now, saw to it that the team and opponents never lacked refreshment.

In industrial South Wales, religion had long played an integral role in society and many of Cimla’s early fixtures were against other church or chapel-based institutions. From the outset, Cimla had strong civic links too with John Davies becoming Mayor of Neath in 1936 - an honour matched by the man who was to become the Club’s leading light, T.E.C.Molland whose name became synonymous with that of Cimla Cricket Club.

Ernie Molland joined Cimla in 1925 shortly after that first game and gave the Club a lifetime’s service as player, captain, secretary, treasurer and, ultimately, president. A sound batsman and medium-paced bowler, it was he who moulded the Cimla Club and it is safe to say that he, more than any individual, ensured the Club’s survival from its formative period, through World War and beyond.

Ernie’s first game for Cimla was in 1925, his last in 1959, and in all he appeared in 442 games, scoring 4,428 runs, taking 885 wickets and holding 103 catches. His best score was 79 at Ton Pentre and he was the first player to pass 500 runs in a season for

the club when he scored 596 runs in 32 games in 1932. Including the extensive midweek Sunday School League fixtures, he captured 100 wickets in a season three times including a best of 119 in 1933 and he captained Cimla for nine seasons on either side of the war. Ernie Molland also played for Cimla RFC and became its long-serving treasurer doubling his duties with the Neath & District Rugby Union.

Other prominent contemporaries of Ernie Molland during the early days were Harold Bevan, Edgar Evans, Tom Williams, wicketkeeper John Bruce, Tom Parry, Gwyn Tate, Idris Davies and Jeff Jones. Another leading player was Eric Hartridge, manager of the Neath Labour Exchange, who scored the Club's first half-century against Bethlehem Green in 1928 before moving to live in Portsmouth.

As the 1920's gave way unto a new decade, Cimla's Saturday fixture-list became more club-orientated but they maintained their religious connection by entering the Neath & District Sunday School League which was played midweek. In 1934, Cimla won what was a very prestigious local tournament, featuring many of the top League players in the area, when a solid 44 from Molland and 5 for 10 by Victor Davies helped them defeat Graig (Briton Ferry) in front of a four-figure crowd at The Gnoll.

During the pre-war period, Cimla played home games, both on Saturdays and in the Sunday School League, on a variety of fields of sometimes dubious pitch quality and the most regularly employed was "Teague's Field" which was near the site of Cimla Hospital. Cimla were also spreading their wings and their travels took them as far east as Cardiff, north to Brecon and west to Llanelly. An attractive innovation, first introduced in 1927, was the annual tour to Devon (fixtures against the Raleigh and Westward Ho clubs) where Ernie Molland had family-links with the Shepherds (David played for Gloucestershire and became a Test umpire) and these trips usually necessitated a ferry-trip across the Bristol Channel.

Under Ernie Molland's stewardship, the Club was in a generally healthy state not least financially. In playing terms, like all teams, Cimla enjoyed their highs and endured their lows - the lowest being a humiliating 8 all out "achieved" against Bethel in the Sunday School League in 1935. Generally though, playing standards improved and Cecil Roberts who joined as a schoolboy and played rugby for Neath captured 9 for 9 against Margam in 1937 while George Davies, Reg Phillips, Bert Rees and Bryn Morris emerged as consistent performers. Among the interesting characters to play occasionally pre-war were Ivor David (who later set the record for international refereeing appearances), schoolboy rugby cap D. Hedley Williams and David Parker who played both union and league.

But war clouds were gathering again and Hitler finally forced a break after a post-Dunkirk win at Ynysygerwn on July 6th, 1940. Cricket did not resume until August 18th, 1945 when Ernie Molland led Cimla to victory over Eaglesbush (Cimla's own V.E. Day ?) and in the first peacetime winter a special presentation evening was held with awards made to all members who had married or got engaged during the war-years.

ON THE ROAD

Teague's Field had now disappeared under bricks and mortar so, despite the rigours of petrol rationing, Cimla became established as a "travelling" side and was frequently described in the local press as "the club without a home". Usually, transport would be by bus, packed with families and supporters, and the success of these ventures owed much to the fund-raising of Ernie Molland whose encyclopaedic knowledge of South Wales fish and chip shops provided a fitting end to a hard day's cricket !

Destinations like Cowbridge, Southerndown, Miskin Manor, Radyr, Abergavenny, Brecon and Builth Wells were visited while Cimla also entered the short-lived Neath Challenge Cup which they won at The Gnoll in 1950 against George Kent's (later Cam Gears) and in 1951 against Skewen.

Notable achievements during the post-war era included Arthur Dunford (who formed a two-pronged off-cutter attack with Cecil Roberts) taking 9 for 28 against B.I.S. Kenfig Hill in 1952 and then bettering it with 9 for 21 against Tretower in 1954. The batting was headed by probably the Club's greatest-ever player Billy Morgan who debuted in 1947 and became Cimla's first centurion in 1953 at Pontnewynedd, a feat he was to achieve some 10 times during his career.

Between 1947 and 1983, Billy Morgan compiled over 10,000 runs for Cimla often on untrustworthy pitches. His record speaks for itself and his talents soon attracted the attention of larger predators nearby but he remained loyal to the Cimla cause and continued to pile up the runs and he took wickets with his deceptive leg-breaks too.

Morgan's regular opening foil was Roy Dunford, a Football League referee, who may have lacked his partner's attacking dash but was a highly consistent accumulator of runs and he registered two centuries, a feat matched by another fine player Jeff Tremain. The Morgan-Dunford partnership headed the Cimla batting for nearly two decades and perhaps their most remarkable achievement (certainly in terms of mathematical symmetry) came when they compiled an opening stand of 180 at Southerndown - Morgan got 120, Dunford 60 and there were no extras so presumably little passed the bat that day !

Other stalwarts of the time included : Jack Rees, Dai Charles Davies, wicketkeeper Allan Benjamin (later secretary of Neath RFC and MBE), Bill Jenkins, Tom Teague, Tom Heale, Russell Hopkins, Glyn Griffiths, J.H.Jones and Ieuan Jones whose son, A.L., became Cimla's most advanced product when he played for Glamorgan and toured the West Indies with England Young Cricketers (Gooch included).

Several first-class players were encountered including the legendary Glamorgan star J.C.Clay who was apocryphally given out LBW by umpire Bruce at Cowbridge while tours brought Cimla up against R.C.Kerslake at Paignton and D.R.Shepherd, a nephew of Ernie Molland, at Instowe.

LEAGUE CRICKET

The “friendly” days are still happily recalled by participants but by the early 1960’s the clamour for competitive cricket was growing as other clubs formed into leagues. Cimla obtained use of its present home the former Eaglesbush/Metal Box ground at sloping Cefn Saeson (English translation is “*Saxon’s Ridge*”) and Cimla entered the South Wales Cricket Association in 1964 and won Division 4 at the first attempt.

Billy Morgan, a reluctant captain, led from the front with 537 runs opening with Roy Dunford while other leading lights were David Steer, Gerald Pavey, Ron Lovegrove, Mervyn Evans and Ernie Brooks.

Relegation promptly followed but David Steer led Cimla, again leaning heavily on the runs of Morgan and Pavey, to another title in 1970. This ought really to have been the launch-pad for better things as Cimla had by now attracted the attention of the private property-developers and had nearly trebled in size.

Yet, in council care, the Cefn Saeson wicket was rapidly declining and the sharp slope of the ground meant that the Club found it difficult to attract new players of sufficient calibre to replace some of the old soldiers. Occasionally, Cimla would flatter to deceive but generally cricket times were tough although the 2nd XI (formed in 1965 to maintain the Club’s “friendly” tradition) survived and it received a boost upon entering the Morgannwg League where a best-ever runners-up spot to Neath 3rds was attained in 1975.

Still, the Club could call upon a staunch group of committeemen including many players from the 1925 team and the officers included three local legal sportsmen in A.V. (Tony) John (later secretary of Aberavon RFC and assistant secretary of the SWCA), Robert Thomas (later chairman of Neath RFC) and Robert Williams (later chairman of Neath Athletic RFC).

THE SECOND COMING ?

By the late 1970’s, playing standards had dipped to an all-time low and the 1st XI bounced uneasily along at the bottom of Division 4. Had it not been for a large influx of younger newcomers (mainly ex-Neath juniors), the Club might well have ceased to exist. The new generation soon set about retrieving the situation and proved themselves every bit as enthusiastic as those pioneers in the early years. Cimla cricket suddenly blossomed again and the table was gradually climbed as an attractive and full Sunday list was installed, Midweek and Junior sides were formed and, in 1987, a 3rd XI was introduced and has flourished under the persevering leadership of Peter Walton, Stuart Jones and recently Adrian Beeforth.

Throughout all this, Cimla remained amateur to the core. Cimla could never be described as a “pot-hunting” club yet on-field success came in 1987 when they finished runners-up to Porthcawl and were promoted to Division 3 but this was followed by instant relegation and in 1993 the Club found themselves in Division 5.

The new breed of stalwarts did not despair though and, in 1998, the 1st XI took the Division 5 title, winning 11 of the 13 games played and the Nineties saw three 2nd XI

titles find their way to Cefn Saeson too : in 1991 (captained by Steve Lewis), in 1996 (captained by Paul Howells) and in 1999 (captained by Adrian Beeforth). In 1993, Cimla won their way through to the final of the "Neath Guardian" Editor's Cup only to lose narrowly to big neighbours Neath and in 1994 the Under-13's reached the final of the SWJCL Cup.

In 1st XI League terms, Cimla registered their highest score of 280 for 5 at Ynystawe in 1984 and in 1989 they bowled out poor Llandeilo for just 16 to set up an amazing 142-run win. The 2^{nds} best total is 275 for 3 against Drefach in 2009 and in 2012 they bowled out Llandarcy for just 18.

75 YEARS ON – THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Season 2000 saw plenty of runs scored on the improving Cefn Saeson wicket; a new home highest of 264 for 4 was recorded against B.P.Llandarcy in May and Cimla's best-ever league "chase" of 242 for 1 was attained against Hirwaun in July. Neil Baggridge passed Billy Morgan's long-standing league season's aggregate in the latter game, adding 182 for the first wicket with Nigel Gunter (120 not out). Paul Crocker (104 v DVLA/Mond) became the third player in consecutive weeks to score a 1st XI century. Baggridge finished the season with 822 runs, a new SWCA record.

In 2001, Cimla were denied a second successive promotion when they missed out on a return to Division 3 by just five points. In many ways, it was a sad year for the Club as three wonderful servants, all Life Members, were lost. Bill Morgan, Tom Roberts and Bill Jenkins passed away but their deeds will not be forgotten. And it is tempting to imagine that the distinguished trio has since been watching over the Club's fortunes. For, in 2002, the unbeaten 1st XI won the Division 4 title and the 2nd XI, led by Mark Evans, were champions too. Then, in 2003, the 2nd XI, again led by Mark Evans, did even better and won the Division 3 title and the 3^{rds}, inspired by three centuries by Nigel Gunter, won their first silverware in the WWCA with skipper Stuart Jones the leading wicketkeeper.

2004 brought further success when Anthony Davies skippered the Midweek XI to the Neath Guardian League title for the first time. This was no mean achievement as the "Guardian" League is recognised as being one of the strongest around with most clubs from higher divisions and Cimla just missed out on the "double" after losing to Ynystawe in the Editors Cup Final. Stuart Jones' 3rd XI brought some consolation though as victors in the Final of the West Wales Plate Competition.

In 2005 and 2006, Cimla came within an inch of earning promotion to Division 2. In 2005, Anthony Davies' team lost to Port Talbot for a third Editor's Cup final defeat, then finished runners-up in the League in 2006 when the 3^{rds} also lost in the Plate final. After struggling in 2007, Cimla were relegated in 2008 when the 25th consecutive tour to the north-west was completed, a week after Mike Price led a young 2nd XI to another title and played his 1,000th game for the Club at Briton Ferry Town (he was earlier first to reach 500 games).

Season 2009 saw batting records fall as the 1st XI registered a top 292 for 8 at Winch Wen and 282 for 5 against Felinfoel. Nigel Gunter passed another Bill Morgan record when he scored his 11th century for the Club against Winch Wen 2^{nds} and, in a

thrilling last-day finale, both 1st and 2nd XI's won the Division 4 titles. 2010 was a season of consolidation and runs aplenty as Craig Kelly hit a blistering 108 (9 sixes, 13 fours and just 2 singles) against Llandarcy, Nigel Gunter got a 12th ton for the 2nds (129 not out v Drefach) and Jon Pryce took 8 for 18 against Bronwydd 2nds. 2011 saw Cimla relegated though as a result of the knock-on effect of Swansea's demise from the new South Wales Premier League. However, Martin Rees' side bounced back quickly in 2012 when they again won the Division 4 title, Arun Rengaswamy taking 44 wickets which is a club record since bowling restrictions were introduced in 1998.

INDIVIDUAL HIGHLIGHTS

In individual terms, best SWCA 1st XI bowling figures of 8 for 16 were recorded by Martyn Jenkins against Ystradgynlais in 1983 and in 2009 Gavin Pugh hit 150 not out against Felinfoel to eclipse the previous highest score of 148 not out by Jon Pryce against Hills Plymouth in 1992. In 1982, Hugh Williams was awarded a bat by the sponsors for the outstanding performance of the round in the Girobank Welsh Cup when he took 6 for 18 against B.P.Llandarcy.

The 2nd XI highest score is held by Neil Baggridge who scored 150 not out at Ystalyfera 2nds in 1997, a summer in which Jim Harper and Keith Williams compiled an opening partnership of 199 against Ystradgynlais 2nds. The Swansea Valley side was also on the receiving end of the 2nd XI's best bowling figures when Craig Parsons recorded the best post-war effort of 9 for 15 in 1999. Since the SWCA introduced its 2nd XI competition most runs have been scored by Jim Harper with Steve Lewis taking most wickets.

The 3rds too have enjoyed their moments not least when Brian Fisher lashed an unsurpassed 258 not out against Llangennech 3rds in 1989. With 22 sixes and 16 fours, Fisher's assault is believed to be a record for any club cricket in South Wales. Not surprisingly, his display of hitting inspired the 3rds to their highest score of 318 for 3 declared. Best bowling for the 3rds was the 8 for 84 recorded by John Glendenning against Neath 3rds at The Gnoll in 1993. Richard Law has scored most runs for the 3rds with Gareth Harris the leading wicket-taker.

The Midweek XI's best befell Neil Baggridge who scored 106 not out at Landore in 1997 - the only midweek century before the rules were changed to force retirement at 50 - and the top bowling return was Andrew Blackmore's 6 for 15 against Neath at The Gnoll in 1998 while, in 1990, Mike Price took four wickets in four balls at Ynysgerwn, the only such occurrence in the Club's history.

Club loyalty has always featured strongly at Cimla and 21 players have made over 100 SWCA League appearances for the Club to the end of 2012. Stalwart Mike Price tops the list with 395 (well over 1,000 games in all) while chairman Nigel Gunter is next with 270 and Steve W. Jones has 235.

In 1998, Nigel Gunter finally overtook Billy Morgan's record League aggregate of 3,236 runs and has now reached 4,653. He in turn has been overtaken by his "apprentice" Neil Baggridge who has 4,747. Mike Price, Malcolm Woolfe, Paul Crocker, John Rosser, Martyn Jenkins and Ron Lovegrove have all passed 2,000.

Martyn Jenkins is the only bowler to have taken 300 League wickets, Steve W. Jones, Allan Davies, Mike Price and Wayne Thomas have over 250, Anthony Davies and Paul Crocker over 200.

Cimla have been well served by many sturdy glove-men. Johnny Bruce in the early days and Allan Benjamin in the post-war period set a high standard. John Rosser holds the SWCA record for dismissals with 164 (98 catches and 66 stumpings) and, in a friendly against Swansea at St. Helen's in 1992, he set a club-record of six dismissals including five stumpings. Recently, Keith Perkins has continued the tradition with over 100 League dismissals. In fielding terms, Mike Price's 151 catches puts him way ahead of the SWCA lists, Steve W. Jones being second on 71.

Probably Cimla's most famous cricketing resident is Glamorgan and England bowler Steve Watkin whose brother Paul played for the Club. Cimla's occasional junior sides have produced no little talent. In 1991, Darren French and Jon Finn scored over 1,000 runs between them and Paul Gittins became the first to represent Wales Schools from Cimla juniors at Under-16's although Steve Meredith (later captain of Swansea) represented Wales Under-11's whilst keeping wicket for Cimla 2nds in 1979. Recently, Cimla have tended to introduce young players into their senior teams on a regular basis with Matthew Pryce and Stuart Hornby winning international honours.

As with most clubs, many Cimla cricketers are winter sportsmen too and thus continue the tradition of founding father R.T.Davies. Among the luminaries are rugby players like Steve Tandy (Neath & Ospreys), Richard Johnston (Neath), Anthony Edwards (Neath & Aberavon) and footballer Ian Hillier (Tottenham Hotspur, Luton, Newport). Mention has already been made of some leading rugby administrators, a tradition which continues with Mike Price also being secretary of Neath RFC. He is a past secretary of the Neath Guardian Cricket League and was succeeded by Steve P. Jones who fulfils a number of roles presently being secretary of both the SWCA of the South Wales Premier League and assistant secretary of Cricket Wales (formerly the WCA).

Throughout its existence, Cimla has been fortunate in the quality and longevity of its officers. Ernie Molland and Tom Roberts rendered a remarkable 60 years service each. Currently, Nigel Gunter, Mike Price and Stuart Jones have each served for over 30 years and have been made Life Members. Chairman Jon Finn has been with Cimla for over 25 years. The Club, like so many, is very fortunate in having a small but hard-working Ladies Committee, chaired by Anne Gunter, and their teas invariably attract favourable comments from visitors far and wide.

Off-field, the re-building of Cefn Saeson Pavilion which was completed in 1996 proved a great boon to the Club and the walls of its constituent Clubroom have been generously adorned with old photographs, notable scorecards and magnificent Captains' Boards donated by a Club member.

For Cimla, old fashioned ideals such as sociability, sportsmanship and general good grace remain the watchwords. Their attachment to the better virtues of the game might not always have brought them success against meaner-spirited opponents but it is to Cimla's credit that their history has embraced few wrangles with opponents or authority.

In spite of its unwelcoming location, Cefn Saeson remains a most hospitable venue. For some strange reason - perhaps it is the rarified atmosphere of the ground perched high on the hill - Cimla seems to attract more than its fair share of characters. Home players are willing hosts while the Club's rich touring tradition endures with many an epic tale written indelibly into its folklore.

Harmless fun is the rule on these jaunts. The humour ranges from the spontaneous to the more pre-planned. An example of the former might be Geoff Charlton's early-morning fight to the death with a swan whose lakeside sleep he had inadvertently disturbed in Southsea. Or there was Malcolm Woolfe's undying gratitude to a Blackpool taxi-driver for returning him to the team hotel only to discover next morning that his journey had involved an expensive detour for what should have been a 20-yard walk !

Somewhere in the middle-range, we might find Ernie Williams' remarkable dalliance with electrical equipment again at Southsea while the incomparable Hugh Williams embraces both ends of the scale with his well-rehearsed music-hall act having held many a foreign clubhouse spellbound yet needing to be set against his totally off-the-cuff, but oh so memorable single-handed demolition of a new scoreboard at Burridge in Hampshire - or was that deliberate too ?

Cricket remains a key part of these annual sojourns and Cimla have often surpassed themselves at the northern county grounds of Southport & Birkdale and Liverpool and at the lesser-known but equally as attractive venues of Fulwood & Broughton and Great Eccleston.

Anyone returning to Cimla 80 years on would find it a much-changed place. "Cimla" has no literal translation but is held to mean "common land" which it was until local colliery owners and small-scale farmers adopted and enclosed it. When cricket started in 1925, development alongside the main road ground to an abrupt halt at the Common, above which were only rolling fields and dotted cottages. A far cry then from the modern Cimla with its massive - many would say excessive - expansion of housing.

Despite the localised population explosion, Cimla has been largely neglected in terms of sporting development. The cricketers have done their best often "against all odds" but really all sporting amenities need to be expanded for the area. The levelling of Cefn Saeson itself is long overdue and there is a crying need for extra pitches to cater for the winter sports of football and rugby.

As far as playing the Game is concerned, Cimla are in a very healthy position with more than enough players to field four XI's on some Saturdays. The refurbishment of the Pavilion greatly improved affairs while grant aid has funded other facilities. With scoreboard, sightscreens, an outdoor net and covers to show, Cimla's facilities are improving and the support of two Councils – County Borough and Town – is crucial.

With presidents of the calibre of Reg Teale and Derek Vaughan (who was elected a MEP in June 2009) at the helm their committed workers have continued to put in the hard work. After all, for nearly 90 years, there has been much honest toil in the name of Cimla Cricket Club and, no doubt, there is more to come.

*** Cimla Cricket Club are always pleased to see any former players (or opponents)
visit Cefn Saeson -for fixture details, see this Website. UPDATED MAY 2013