



CHAPTER FOUR - SPORT.

Both cricket and football have had their ups and downs. Of the two, cricket is more constant, chiefly I think because the players are able to carry on longer and so the teams do not change so often. In the early days of this century the local club produced a well-known county player, a member of a real cricketing family who kept the standard very high for a village club. Of recent years it has been gradually building up to this standard again.

The cricket ground is owned by the Lord of the Manor and is now only used for cricket. In days before the village boasted a recreation ground, some of the big public functions took place on it, notably the Coronation festivities for King George V, and the Peace Celebrations in 1919. A few years later saw a big spectacle one Sunday when the local branch of the British Legion was presented with its banner.

It was a sad day for the ground and club when the army took it over in 1940, for it has a good pavilion, which housed the men who looked after the search light planted right in the middle of the pitch, which is over four hundred feet above sea level. It was there only for a short time when the Battle of Britain started, for the Church with its ninety foot spire stands in the next field and when the lamp was swung round, lighting up the steeple, what a wonderful guide this was for enemy planes.

All signs of this unpleasant sight have gone and the green level turf welcomes the running feet and the crack of the willow once more.

Football over the same period has had a rather more chequered life. Quite a number of fields have at different times been used for play. At one time about 1913/14, the game was played at Romford and the Institute in Lower Green was used as a dressing room; this meant that the players had almost a mile to trot before and after the game.

Several of the club members at that time, were also in a territorial company of the Royal Engineers in the neighbouring town, many of whom were lost with H.M.S. Hythe which sank after being in collision with another of our own ships, while on their way to the Dardanelles.

When the war was over a new start was made with such enthusiasm that in the first season the first team won the district cup, then for some unknown reason the whole club went slowly downhill until it finished completely, and for one or two seasons there was no club at all.

In 1925 a young paid lady Church worker came to the village and straight away she got in touch with a small band of young people, of whom I was one. One evening after she had been here for some months, she told me that, generally speaking she was well pleased with the results of most of her efforts, but she could not get to the lads of the village in any way. Had I any ideas which might interest them?

Now I have never been any good at any sport, and as far as football is concerned I don't know the first thing about it, but I did know that these boys she wanted to get hold of were just mad on kicking a ball about, so I suggested that she should try and start a football club. But how? She knew less about it than I did and she had no money to finance it. However the next evening, on my way home from work, I saw an ink written notice on the back gate of the Manor House, where, she was living, announcing that a meeting would be held in the kitchen on Monday night, when any boys between twelve and sixteen who were interested in football would be welcome, and then I nearly fell flat, for it also said that I should be in the chair! I went straight in to see her and protested, but it was no good, there was no getting out of it, for she was prepared to do any donkey work if I would get it started.

That Monday evening was one I shall never forget, for when I arrived the big old-fashioned kitchen was full to overflowing, although there had been only this one small notice put up. The noise was just terrific, but from the moment I stood at the end of the table you could have heard a pin drop, while I told them what the young lady had in mind. As soon as I sat down they all wanted to talk at once, for they all knew that she and I were both quite ignorant on the whole business, but from them we soon found the names of men who did know something about it. They also knew where the goal posts and nets of the now defunct club were stored, but there was no ball and no money.

Our lady friend then had another brain wave. The school was closed for the summer holidays and she knew where there were loads of blackberries and the next day, with the help of some of the younger boys, she picked and sold enough fruit to buy the first ball, with several shillings to spare. And now, where to play?

It took quite a long time to get this question answered, for a letter was sent to the farmer in whose field the old club had played. He was rather a shy, retiring bachelor, who lived more or less on his own and to him a letter from a lady, especially from the Manor House asking for a field to play football in, just didn't make sense.

Anyhow, after another letter he called at the Manor to see this person, and was greatly surprised, for as he said "She wasn't much more than a gal!" But her keenness got the field, rent free for the season, with a donation. The football club was off again, and except for the years 1939/45, has gone on without a break ever since.

In 1928 the Parish Council bought and have since maintained a first class Recreation Ground where football is now played and there are also tennis courts and bowling greens with strong clubs using them. Over the years the Bowls Club have at times won some really coveted prizes and trophies.

Brought about by general change of circumstance and the almost complete absence of gentlemen of leisure from the big houses, the winter sports of rabbit and game shooting as a regular weekly affair have almost disappeared. When I was a boy these gentlemen went around in parties on Saturdays and over the Christmas holidays with their guns and dogs, some shooting over their own land while others would pay for shooting rights on various farms in the district. They would employ quite a number of the bigger boys from the village school to go beating for them. The "guns" would stand at vantage points at the end of a wood or rough thicket and the beaters would enter the other end in as straight a line as they could make and drive right to the "guns", shouting and beating with sticks to turn out the birds and rabbits. It was often wet and cold, the brambles and thorns tearing skin and clothes, but at mid-day they were given a packet of sandwiches and at the end of the day a shilling. One party paid one and threepence, but they were a bit choosy about whom they had. If the sport was good, then they were sometimes given a rabbit. No doubt they had then had a good day.

Another thing which used to take place on the comparatively empty roads was an organized paper chase. Two runners would set off with good big bags of torn up paper hung on their shoulders and with this they would leave a thin trail and one would sometimes break off and leave a false trail, the object would be to get as far as the paper would allow and then hide, to be hunted for by the following party. The two finding them were awarded a prize generally one worth having and because of this there was usually some damage to pay for on property or buildings for they hid in the most unheard of places.

Now of course, such a crowd would not be safe on the road.