

Hockey On The Sands At Minehead

Managing A Club

When hockey was played on grass pitches, most clubs had difficulty in co-ordinating their fixtures with the local cricket club, football club, school, or even polo club, and negotiating rents annually gave committee members headaches over many months. Clubs like Minehead which played on the sands did not have these problems. They did have other ones though. Clubs that played on the sands needed to know the tide times before arranging fixtures, there was no rent to pay, but a friendly beach hut owner was needed and the home side had obvious advantages. It also meant that the pitch needed careful marking, that another one might have needed to be prepared at half time if the first one cut up badly, and it helped if you played youngsters on the wing who didn't mind going into the incoming sea to collect the ball.

Minehead Ladies became an affiliated club in 1924 and continued to play on the beach, although using the secondary modern pitch and the Convent pitch on occasion, and then moved to the West Somerset Comprehensive School grass pitches in the early 1970s. This remains their home, now known as the West Somerset Community College, on sand-based astroturf.

About Minehead

Minehead is located on the north coast of Somerset and looks across the Bristol Channel to Wales. This part of the country is mentioned regularly in the news in connection with nuclear power at Hinkley Point just up the coast before Bridgwater, and with harnessing the power of the sea. The Bristol Channel experiences one of the highest tidal ranges in the world with the rise and fall being as great as 14.5m, second only to the Bay of Fundy in Eastern Canada. Although the rise is more marked the further up the estuary you go, people on holiday in Somerset remain deceived by this surge of water, being caught out on the mud flats and the vicious currents in the channel, and often require the services of the lifeboat crews of Minehead, Burnham and Weston.

The town is overlooked by North Hill and is just outside the boundaries of the Exmoor National Park. In 1990 much of the beach was washed away during heavy storms. A £12.6 million sea defence system by the Environment Agency was designed to reduce the risk of erosion in the future and these were opened in 2001. The new wall, the boulders, the groynes and the imported sand gave the beach a new look. The town is known for its Butlins Holiday Camp, the West Somerset Railway – the longest heritage railway in Britain – and its Hobby Horse.

Hockey From The Papers

The history of the Minehead Ladies Hockey Club has been kept over the years by club members collecting reports in the local paper, *The West Somerset Free Press*. The Club still maintain this record of their matches which was started almost 100 years ago and a number of quotes are included in this account. I wonder who came up with the idea of keeping this record. It will be

wonderful for any researcher examine in the years to come and follow, from the reports, the development of the club from all points of view. This article concentrates on the games which were played on the sands. The records show that in 1919-1920, 31 (mixed) matches were played, and in 1920-21 that the opposition included the Minehead Wednesday team – Wednesday was the day for early closing. In 1921-22 matches were played on every day of the week, but never on a Sunday. The newspapers listed the home and away teams. Among recent custodians of the records have been Sally Daw, Margaret Gliddon, Denise Lancaster and Carol Matravers. *The West Somerset Free Press* continues to report local hockey games; the club still supply them with copy so hockey remains on the sport pages of this paper.

Most hockey reports started with a weather report sometimes championing the beach over an away team's grass pitch. "The weather ruined the match on the recreation ground on Monday. The first half was played in a downpour of very cold rain, and the light during the concluding stages was very bad." And, away again, "the ground was rather on the heavy side." However, at home, "played on the Minehead sands in glorious weather on Monday", and "the weather and pitch were both favourable to a good exposition of the game."



Hockey players on the beach at Minehead with North Hill behind¹

¹ Photo by Alfred Vowles. Original available on request from Minehead Ladies Hockey Club archive.

Marking The Pitch

Marking the pitch was an art. This was perfected in the early years by Mr A S Bligh, and carried on as the 1936-37 AGM Minutes show by Miss J Holdsworth and Mr Swann. The thanks to these two were tempered by the fact that it was “a regrettable fact that the majority of players themselves studiously avoided doing anything in that line if they could possibly dodge it.” Miss Holdsworth became Mrs Ferguson in 1942 and carried on marking the pitches until 1971 when she left for South Africa. She had a very sturdy English head stick to do it with. When she left, a committee of six agreed to mark pitches on the beach when necessary.

Other clubs playing on the beaches in Somerset appeared to having problems marking out their pitches. Against Burnham Ladies in 1946, “the fact that the pitch was many yards too short at times caused considerable congestion.” Again in 1950 “the pleasure of this match at Burnham on Saturday was largely marred by the fact that the pitch on the sands was many yards under regulation size with the result that open play was out of the question, the players in consequence having to move about in confused crowds.”

Weston had its problems too. In 1939 when Minehead visited Weston “the match was not without some touches of comedy. It was originally staged for the Recreation ground, but the calls of cricket vetoed this, so it took place on the sands. The first pitch marked out consisted of exceedingly soft sand which blew in all directions and made play somewhat farcical: but before half time the incoming tide had reached the goal posts. A second one was accordingly made nearer the shore, but this proved somewhat weird in measurements, and furthermore, to add to the difficulties there were intermittent inroads by horsemen, pedestrians, dogs and even donkeys”!

Dealing With The Pitch

Usually the pitch was marked out running parallel to the shore line. However, in 1935 the weather was recorded as being “most unpleasant, there being a bitterly cold and very strong wind. To counteract the latter the pitch – incidentally a very good one – was marked out at right angles to the usual direction: but although it made it a little warmer for the contestants, it did not serve to a large extent to defeat the machinations of Eurus [east wind]”.

In addition to marking a second pitch out at half time, it was possible to have a number of games going on along the beach at the same time. In January 1956 Minehead club “made history when three matches took place simultaneously on the sands. To celebrate this record it would have been hard to have chosen a colder day – a strong and bitter north east wind blew continuously down the pitch, and excusably varied were the colours and ensembles worn in self-defence.” During the 1961-’62 season four games took place at the same time.

It was difficult for visiting teams to get used to the surface of the sand. In 1932 “the pace at which the ball travelled proved too much for Ditchat Ladies and their defence were frequently all at sea.” Barnstaple in 1934 were “let off lightly” as they had never previously played on sands but Exeter University in 1936 “paid their maiden visit with disastrous results. It was for many of them an initial attempt at playing on sands and they found the occasion too much for them.” In 1951, “Barnstaple ladies found the pace of the bone dry Minehead pitch far too fast for them and they were quite lost on it.” Pouring rain occasionally obliterated the lines as soon as they were drawn.

Dealing With The Weather

The wind blew from all directions – from the town end and from the golf club end, and “on one occasion it was blowing straight from Swansea.” In 1934 both sides turned up for a match, but “driving rain made the conditions very unpleasant so a plebiscite was taken and the postponements won by a narrow majority.” The hockey reports gave information that for one match, “the weather was appalling, a SSW gale being accompanied by driving rain.” On another day, there was a “perfect pitch in dry weather, with a strongish [sic] WNW breeze being the only adverse factor”, and on another “a coldish NW wind blew from the town end which proved a handicap to run against, but on the other hand helped to keep the pitch moderately dry.” The report of one match in 1936 describes “there being an intermittent drizzle, but although the pitch was very wet on the surface it was solid underneath, so that the ball ran quite nicely.” Stinging sand was blown up on occasions; there were pebbly pitches to contend with, worm casts, loose patches of sand in the middle of the pitch, and one day “a mixture of sleet and cold rain being driven horizontally across the pitch from the Welsh coast.” In 1939 “a strong but warm wind blew from the town end straight down the pitch, which was very wet, but Minehead adopted the correct tactics for the occasion by cutting out the clever stuff and giving the ball plenty of ‘stick’.”

In the snow of 1962-‘63 no matches were played from 15 December to 23 February. It had always been Minehead’s boast that the sands were playable whatever the weather, but that year the claim was withdrawn. Ice, snow, frozen sea and honey-combed sand prohibited play. Even in the 1968-‘69 season – modern times – “to put it bluntly, the match on the beach on Saturday was a complete wash out. With the blinding rain and near gale raging, everybody was drenched and frozen before the game started, but start it did. However it was decided to play a short game.” There were some very good days too. “Perfect sand – it was just the day for the seaside.” “The pitch was as near perfection as it could be, and the weather was at last spring-like.” “The game took place in beautiful weather on a perfect pitch.”

Dealing With The Tide

In spite of close attention to the tide timetables problems arose with the height of the tides and delays in teams arriving for matches. One day an unexpectedly heavy tide delayed the start for fifteen minutes, but “the pitch rapidly dried.” On another the sands were in a very rough state owing to the low tides. Teams arriving late caused some games to be completed just before the tide reached the edge of the pitch and on a number of the occasions “the tide was defeated as the game ended just in time.” In 1949 a game was played, “knowing the risk of the incoming tide but when the final whistle sounded, the waves had reached one of the circles so that the game was enjoyed in not too serious a spirit.”

Equipment, Beach Huts And Teas

The club had need to store their goalposts and corner flags and provide some sort of shelter for the home and visiting teams. This is when use was made in the early years of friends’ beach huts which

were positioned at the end of the prom near the golf course, away from the harbour end, where the sand was best for games. Public WCs were also nearby. When the pitch was being marked out the flags, goalposts and back boards were put in position. There was obviously no barrier to pick up any shots which did not result in a goal so there was a lot of running to do to collect the ball. Minehead had a very good record of encouraging local girls to play club hockey – perhaps there was a reason for this.

At the AGMs at the end of the season, thanks were expressed to hut owners who loaned their huts to the club for storage and among others these were Mrs G E Knapp Fisher, Mr Ray Foy for many years, Mrs W J E Phillips, Mr and Mrs A T H Hosegood, Mrs Gliddon and Mr Batten. The coming of Butlins in the early 1960s meant that many of the older huts were pulled down and new ones put up in their places. This meant that the club's housing problem was again highlighted "although Mr Batten's hut remained until all but one other remained." The Golf Club came to the rescue providing a hut on their premises for storing flags, goalposts and back boards.

For a number of years tea after the games was at Newcombe's Café in the town but then the Minehead Lawn Tennis club pavilion was used for teas and changing rooms. As the 1960s ended, AGM thanks for the use of the Golf Club and the Tennis club continued – and for Mrs May's teas.

In 1945-'46 the captain Mrs W E Redd arranged practices every Wednesday when the tide was favourable; 15 in all, and under her captaincy in the later years hockey continued to flourish on the sands. For example in the season 1962-'63 almost forty fixtures were arranged including attendance at the Knowle Rally in Bristol, and the inter club tournaments. Every year she was mentioned at the AGM for her work in organising the Jumble Sale at which she had no equal and without which hockey clubs playing on grass or on the sands would not have managed.

Tide And Time ...

Nevertheless, more and more games began to be played on grass especially when the "bitter east wind made the thought of the beach rather unattractive" or "the tide was doubtful" or 'conditions were too arctic on the beach". At the Club AGM in 1971, Mrs Ferguson announced she was leaving for South Africa after 35 years of devotion to hockey in Minehead. Not only was she the main marker out of the pitch, her enthusiastic and unflagging energy as Hon. Secretary had been the backbone of the club. She kept the club going through the war years and it is recorded that 61 games were played in 1940-'41.

Today, it is hard to imagine the fortitude of those who played hockey on the sands in all weathers. The contemporary game benefits from an astroturf surface, secure surrounds, sheltered dug outs, warm changing rooms and club houses, and cooked teas after matches. But the game developed from many different beginnings and continues to depend on the dedication and commitment of those involved, as exemplified by the records kept by this Somerset seaside club.

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