
FEATURE ARTICLE

Sport and Leisure in East Ilsley

By Eric Saxton

Today, Sport and Leisure are global institutions, and it is possible to travel to most parts of the world in a matter of hours. World renowned musicians and actors can be listened to, and plays and other entertainment accessed from the comfort of one's own home and whilst walking along the street or over the Downs. Employees today have statutory paid holidays, free health care, and education.

How different it was two centuries ago! Working classes endured long hours with little time for leisure. Christmas Day was a holiday, and was sometimes the only day free in the year to get married on. Sunday was a day of rest but was not supposed to be used for much beyond attending church. It was rare for someone of the working class to travel far from the place of his or her birth, unless they were enlisted in the military. They would have to rely on walking everywhere. Lack of transport and the state of the roads would have left little alternative.

The ruling classes fared better. They had sporting pursuits such as hunting with hounds, shooting game (in season and on possession of a licence), and hare coursing.

William Hewett in his 'History & Antiquities of the Hundred of Compton, Berks' 1844, writes

'Ilsley and its vicinity have ever been noted as a fine county for sporting, a reputation by no means diminished at the present day, every kind of field-sport, but more especially hare-hunting, for which the open downs are admirably adapted, being prosecuted with unusual ardour. Coursing meetings, supported by the leading gentry of the county, were held here for many years. This club was established in 1802, but the first cup was not given till the year 1806'.

Hare Coursing was not only legal then, but runners (hounds) and their pedigrees were prized in the same way as racehorses, and betting was an integral part of the 'sport'. The 'Ilsley Coursing Club' activities were regularly reported in the Newbury Weekly News throughout the 19th century and results and winners named.

What was not legal, however, was the trapping of rabbits in snares and anyone caught poaching would be severely punished.

The village of East Ilsley created various initiatives to alleviate the lives of working folk. The Royal Ilsley Society was formed in 1834 and initially received a subscription from King William IV of £10 a year and £5 from Queen Adelaide. The society was established for the purpose of "*inciting agricultural labourers, and servants to habits of honest industry*", and garden culture. Though centred on Ilsley, the activities encompassed all the surrounding villages.

In the 1850's the annual event, which included a ploughing competition, rick making, thatching, and a flower and vegetable show, was the great event of the year, it was a day's outing for the labourers of the district and their families, and also a pleasant assembly for the clergy, farmers and landowners and local MPs. By 1880, however, attendance and support had declined and it became merely a ploughing competition and a dinner for about a dozen gentlemen, and ceased to function that year.

The playing of cricket in East Ilsley is first mentioned in *The Reading Mercury* in 1830, describing a game played between East Hendred and East Ilsley at East Hendred. Another contest is recorded in *Bell's life in London and Sporting Chronicle* 1839 Cricket was first reported in the newly published *Newbury Weekly News* in 1868. It is known that a public house called 'The Cricketers' was once located on the Compton Road on the outskirts of the village, and a OS map of 1877 clearly shows a marked cricket pavilion in that area, which indicates where the cricket ground was situated. Between 1840 and 1870 there was another pub on the High Street also called 'The Cricketers'.

In May 1872 the NWN reported, *'The opening cricket match of this season was played upon the East Ilsley ground on Friday, the 17th inst., between the East Ilsley and Hermitage Clubs'*.

In 1876 a Working Men's Club was founded to provide working men with somewhere to spend their leisure time. Books and newspapers were provided and social evenings and the occasional concert organised.

There is a long history of home-made entertainment in Ilsley. Newspaper reports, dating back over a hundred and fifty years, show that local people often got together to perform in public concerts and variety shows for the pleasure of their friends and neighbours. Though no pictures survive of these early shows, we know that a wide cross-section of the social spectrum was involved.

In 1890 the East Ilsley Amateur Dramatic Society gave a performance, and around the same time, concerts were organised by the Working Men's Club and the Temperance Society. There are repeated reports of concerts over the rest of the century performed by local and visiting brass bands. The East Ilsley Brass Band often gave concerts in the open air at various venues around the village. The Brass Band was formed at the end of the 19th century, and performed for the entertainment of the village and beyond. They had uniforms and played both indoors and outside. This type of musical entertainment must have been popular, as there are accounts of visiting bands, including the military band from Churn.

Sports Days have been held in East Ilsley for over a hundred years. A newspaper report of 3rd September 1868 tells of a party on the Downs, at which, among other things, activities such as dancing, cricket, and quoits were played. This is followed by further reports over the next few years of annual sports days which involved races for men and women over various distances. In 1870, it was reported that Sports were

held on Easter Monday, with about 1000 people in attendance. As well as Pony Races there were foot races over half mile and 150 yards hurdles, and on 2nd August 1906, an Athletics meeting was held *'on the Downs to the left of Gore Hill in good weather. A large number of people assembled giving the occasion the feeling of a picnic'*. Races were over the distances from 440 yards to one mile.

More recently, Sports Days have become regular events on the Recreation Ground. The emphasis is now more on fun than serious competition.

With the dawning of a new century, football seems to have eclipsed cricket. The Football Club was formed in 1900, and was originally called the Union Jacks. They played in Red and Black colours. Their first match was against Compton Reserves in October of that year.

For younger members of the village the East Ilsley Scout Troop was formed in 1911 but was a casualty of the First World War, during which it was disbanded. At least six members enlisted, including the Assistant Scoutmaster, Reginald Wells, who was killed in action. Around 1940 a guide troop was formed and led by Miss Parry, one of the teachers who accompanied evacuees from London to Ilsley in 1939. It is not known how long it continued to function. The Youth Club was formed in 1947 but struggled in the early years to attract members, but from 1949, when Maudie Cross took over as organising secretary, the club went from strength to strength, winning the Berkshire Annual 'Club of the Year' competition in 1958.

The churches organised outings for choir members and members of the congregation. The seaside and towns of interest were accessed by rail and later by motorised transport.

In 1962 the 'Diamond Club was founded for the over 60's, and a year later became the Silver Circle Club. There was a one-off fee for joining. Coach Tours and parties were organised for members, the cost of which was met by donations and fund raising events.

The Sheep Fairs were Ilsley's greatest claim to fame. Regular markets, at first weekly, then fortnightly, started in 1620, when Sir Francis Moore, born in Ilsley, obtained a charter from James I to hold markets every Wednesday from February to August. With the exception of Smithfield, Ilsley held the biggest sheep markets in England, leading to its former name of 'Market Ilsley'. The last of these markets was held in 1934.

In 1975, the conservation group committee decided to hold a 'sheep fair festival' in Pen Meadow to commemorate the old fairs. Sheep dog, and sheep shearing demonstrations, and spinning and weaving exhibitions were included in the festival. Similar 'fun day' fairs have continued to be held almost every year since, the most recent being in 2015.

Unfortunately the advent of Foot and Mouth disease meant that in recent years, actual sheep have not appeared but the theme has lived on, and many other attractions were brought in to compensate for their absence.

Postscript

On 8th October 1868 The *Newbury Weekly News* announced that a circus was to visit Ilsley, but the actual advertisement in the same newspaper does not list East Ilsley among the three performance venues. It is quite likely, however, that the circus would have passed through the village on its journey from Newbury to Wantage, and must have presented an extraordinary and exotic procession for the delight of the residents, as it included a performing hippopotamus, '*Chang the Chinese Giant*', a double brass band, and '*hordes of horses and ponies*'.

It is not known if anyone from the village managed to attend an actual performance in either, Newbury, Wantage, or Abingdon. If they did, it would have been a unique day in their lives.