

Crookes History Booklets

These short explorations of local history topics were compiled by Constance Hallwright

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Recreation, Sport and Leisure in Victorian Crookes

During the entire Victorian era, there was no public transport of any kind to Crookes. There was a horse bus to Broomhill from 1852, and later, a tram to Commonsides. This meant that to get to any sport or entertainment venue, you either walked, or if you were rich, you had your own horse, but all entertainment had to be local. However, Crookes was a place of recreation for the people of Sheffield. In contrast to grimy, smokey Sheffield, Crookes was blessed with clean air, fresh water and spacious open fields, so was considered a healthy place to go for a day out, especially when the fruit was ready for harvesting. So middle-class people would take a 10-seater charabanc trip to Crookes for a nice day out, picnicking and relaxing in the sunshine. As demand grew, it was popular to hire a horse-bus from the Market Hall in town, which was pulled by two horses, travelling via Upperthorpe to Steel Bank (which would now be called Commonsides, at the bisection of Springvale Road), carrying 20 people.

The Botanical Gardens opened in 1833, having purchased 18 acres of farmland from Wilson's the snuff-maker. The gardens were not open to the public, but were rather exclusive, for gentlefolk to perambulate in genteel surroundings. You paid an annual subscription, of 15 shillings and sixpence, and you were given a 'token' to show you were a member. This continued until 1898, when the gardens were purchased by the Town Trust. Weston Park opened to the public in 1875, after the grounds of a substantial house were purchased for the enjoyment of the townspeople. It was a 'promenading' park, for 'being seen' in. There was no public open space in Crookes itself, and certainly nowhere for children to play in, until 1886, when the Bolehills was gifted as a public park.

The Turkish Baths on Glossop Road opened shortly after the Cholera epidemic of 1830, and were rebuilt in 1877, when they expanded to include a replica of a Turkish Bath. This also was considered to be an exclusive preserve of wealthy folk.

There was plenty of formal entertainment down in the town. Built in 1823, the Surrey Street Music Hall flourished, at the location of the Central Library now. The very large Theatre Royal, on Tudor Street had just been re-built in 1855; the Alexandra Theatre and Opera House on Blonk Street dated from 1836. On Barkers Pool was a grand musical hall, the Albert Hall, at the location of the delightful garden with a statue in it. Most elaborate of all was the Surrey Theatre on West Bar, built in 1858 by Tommy Youden. This was the largest in the town, and included a museum, a waxworks, and a menagerie.

Although not strictly entertainment, shopping was a respectable pastime for ladies. Copying the success of earlier ventures in other towns, John Cole's department store opened in 1869, the first in the town, on the corner of Fargate. This was followed by Atkinson's in 1872, originally as a drapery shop, but soon expanding to meet the ever-growing demand for household goods and furnishings.

Sport was not organised formally until after 1850; before this, 'kicking a ball about' was something that farm labourers might do in their leisure time, but from 1850ish, sport was considered to be a healthy way of promoting 'manly vigour', ie it wasn't something that ladies engaged in.

The Sheffield Football Club was founded in 1857. There's something to be said for being the first to write down the rules of the game, it means it's more likely that others will adopt yours, rather than re-writing them. In due time, their rules became the foundation of the modern game. In 1860, the Hallam Football Club was formed, and they are still playing on their original ground in Sandygate Lane. In 1867, Hallam won the first football cup, sponsored by Tommy Youdan (from his fortune made in musical halls).

Cricket is even older than football, and, like now, was only played in the summer. The first record of a formal cricket club in Sheffield is 1820, when the Wednesday Cricket Club played at Highfield. Most cricket clubs played on fields loaned or leased from a local pub. In Crookes, the Howard Hotel, (located at the bottom end of Steel Bank, actually just over Howard Road, in what is now the top entrance of the Birkendale estate) was recorded as sponsoring a cricket club. Football developed as a means of keeping the cricket players fit over the winter.

One of the few games ladies could take part in was croquet, along with archery. Neither of these sports involved any running around or great physical exertion; anyone who has worn a corset will understand the reasoning behind this.

A game that has disappeared was whipsey, an early variant of golf, which was played in Sheffield, but the location of any course is unclear.

Longsword dance teams were active in both Handsworth and Grenoside from the 1870s, but no morris dance teams appeared to meet in Crookes.

Bowling as a sport has been traced back to the 13th century. The world's oldest surviving bowling green is in Southampton, first used in 1299. At one time, it was so popular that the king tried to ban it, fearing it would distract men from practicing their archery! This was unsuccessful, of course. In 1864, a Glasgow cotton merchant published a "Manual of Bowls Playing" – obviously the game was more organised in Scotland than it was in England, and Scotland had a bowls club established in 1740. It took the invention of the first lawn mower in 1830 to stimulate the widespread playing of bowls. Crookes is home to the first bowls club in Sheffield, the Hallamshire Proprietary Bowling Club, started in 1863. As they were the first club, matches had to be played between 'internal' teams, like "Over 50s vs under 50s" or "Committee vs other members". They had to wait four years until another club was formed in Sheffield, the Nether Edge one starting in 1867, but soon prizes and cups were being commissioned for matches. The word "Proprietary" in the club's name gives a clue to its constitution; members bought a 'share' in the club for one guinea, so the club was owned by its members, and the number of shares was strictly limited. In addition, members paid an annual subscription, initially of 15 shillings (the equivalent of about £78 in today's money), which rose to £1 a year by 1871. By comparison, the green-keeper was paid 5 shillings a week. Members of the HPBC were all local well-off people, hardly any lived outside of a three-mile radius, as they would all have

had to walk to the clubhouse. Almost all the members were 'professionals' either in trade or the formal professions, like accountants and teachers. The bowling club was a social place where gentlemen could go to avoid having to interact with the lower classes they saw during the day, to have a game of billiards, smoke a cigar, sing songs, play cards, or even go on a social outing. From the beginning, the HPBC thrived financially and socially; beer was bought in in large quantities, concerts and balls took place, and on Thursdays, members could sign in a lady as a guest. The HPBC still operates under the same constitution, ie women cannot join in their own right, and no new shares are issued, placing a strict limit on the number of members.

The majority of entertainment in the Victorian era took place at home; dancing and playing music, playing cards and other 'board games' were all popular ways of spending time together. Crookes had its own brass band from 1873, which played at many local events such as the Annual Flower Show on the Bolehills, Whit Monday processions and the Crookes Feast.