

PAUL KAYE

# COTTON, CRICKET AND FOOTBALL



# BILLY COOK

the Life of a Lancashire League Legend

PAUL KAYE

COTTON, CRICKET  
AND FOOTBALL

BILLY COOK

the Life of a Lancashire League Legend



# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Prologue: Centre Vale, Todmorden, 4.32pm, Saturday, 20 June 1914 . . . . .	9
Introduction. . . . .	11
1. The making of a sportsman. . . . .	13
2. First-class cricketer, second-class citizen (1905–1907)	29
3. The golden decade at Burnley (1906–1915): winning titles, making firewood . . . . .	58
4. Billy's boots – the beautiful game turns ugly . . . . .	87
5. The call to arms: an army career of two halves . . . . .	112
6. Back in the league. . . . .	145
7. A different league – same Billy Cook. . . . .	164
8. Mill town maidens – women's cricket in Lancashire	191
9. The amateur finale – raging against the dying of the light . . . . .	205
10. Beyond the boundary: life outside the Lancashire League . . . . .	220
Epilogue: Centre Vale, Todmorden, 4.37pm, Saturday, 20 June 1914 . . . . .	232
Appendix One: Fantasy Lancashire League . . . . .	244
Appendix Two: Statistics . . . . .	254
Bibliography . . . . .	263
Index . . . . .	265

## Chapter 1

# The making of a sportsman

HOW DO you choose a career? How do you decide to become a professional sportsman? To anyone born at the end of the 19th century these questions would never even have arisen. Young men followed in their fathers' footsteps. In Lancashire these usually led to the local cotton mill as soon as they were old enough to leave school. Most women were encouraged to find a husband, not a job.

In any event, when Billy Cook was born, on 16 January 1882, professional sport didn't even exist – at least not in the way we know it today. The two institutions that would provide the majority of his employment, the Football League and the Lancashire Cricket League, were not even formed until 1888 and 1892, respectively.

Billy's father, William Whalley Snr, was the groundsman at West Cliff, the home of Preston Cricket Club. On 26 February 1876 he married Jane Alice Hodge at St John's Church in Preston. They set up home in Ladyman Street, close to Fishergate, in the centre of town. Billy was the second-born of nine siblings – an unusually large family even by Victorian standards. All of the children subsequently changed their surname to Cook around 1901 or 1902. When and why they no longer went by Whalley remains a mystery.

Like most working-class children, Billy didn't have much of a formal education and didn't read many books. He almost certainly never read anything by Charles Dickens, but the famous writer had visited Preston around the 1850s and it provided the inspiration for his novel *Hard Times*. Dickens was seemingly not too impressed with what he saw.

Preston's population had risen rapidly from around 12,000 in 1801 to nearly 70,000 at the time of Dickens's visit. This growth, as elsewhere in Lancashire, was directly related to the textile industry. The workers required housing, ideally as close to the mills as possible. Much of what was built, in the absence of any planning and building controls, was grossly inadequate and barely fit for human habitation.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens describes a northern manufacturing town, 'Coketown', which is loosely based on Preston:

Coketown was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it: but, as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same

pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and next.

It was truly grim up north according to Dickens and, arguably, young Billy's first big achievement was making it to adulthood. Child mortality in Preston in Victorian times was significantly higher than other major towns in England. Preston had suffered more than others from the Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861–1865 and was almost entirely dependent on the textile industry for its prosperity.

The famine had resulted in unimaginable poverty for many Prestonians. Another regular visitor to the town, Edwin Waugh, the famous poet, published graphic accounts of the suffering:

I hear on all hands that there is hardly any town in Lancashire suffering so much as Preston ... The wail of sorrow is not heard in Preston Market-place; but destitution may be found almost anywhere there just now, cowering in squalid corners, within a few yards of plenty – as I have seen it many a time this week. The courts and alleys behind even some of the main streets swarm with people who have hardly a nail left to scratch themselves with.

Fortunately for Billy, and for the other residents of Preston, the last two decades of the 19th century saw significant improvements in living standards. The construction of Preston Dock and the Albert Edward Basin, which opened in 1892, gave a major boost to trade. Ships could now sail 16 miles from the Irish Sea, down the River Ribble and unload at Preston in the largest single dock basin in the world. The project guaranteed employment and prosperity for

the town for the foreseeable future and reduced its reliance on the cotton industry.

Billy and his many siblings were thus spared the extreme hardship that the previous generation, including his parents, had been forced to endure. Without a thriving commercial sector, it's doubtful that William Whalley Snr would have found employment as a groundsman. Sport only flourished in the industrial north when the factories were running and people had jobs.

William and Jane Alice's nine children did not spend long being educated. Billy left school aged only ten in 1892, the year before the government passed the Elementary Education (School Attendance) Act, raising the school leaving age to 11.

The nature versus nurture argument is often brought up when discussing professional sport and there's no doubt that Billy benefited from his father's role at Preston CC. He spent a lot of his time at the ground and was inculcated into the game of cricket from an early age. Having five brothers with whom to hone his skills was also an advantage. Billy was also blessed with some enviable physical attributes: broad shoulders, innate strength and limitless stamina – all essential ingredients in a fast bowler.

Billy's younger brother Lawrence, known to all as Lol, was similarly built and would follow Billy into a professional cricket and football career. Two of his younger brothers, James (Jim) and John (Jack), would also turn out to be useful cricketers, both representing Cheshire in the Minor Counties competition in the 1920s. Billy, Lol and Jack would all, at some point in the future, be engaged as professionals in the Lancashire League.

When he was not playing sport, Billy's first job as a young man was as a 'blacksmith's striker' in Preston. This was still the era of horsedrawn transport and each village had a blacksmith. Wielding

a hammer helped Billy to develop his broad shoulders and the strength to propel the cricket ball at a great speed.

### **The emergence of league cricket**

Billy was only a child, however, when in 1890 representatives of 13 clubs – Burnley, Nelson, Colne, Bacup, Todmorden, East Lancashire (the Blackburn-based club named after their association with the army regiment), Enfield, Church, Haslingden, Ramsbottom, Lowerhouse, Accrington and Rawtenstall – met in the Commercial Hotel in Accrington and decided to form the North East Lancashire Cricket League. Rishton were added to the fold at the second meeting in February 1891 and the ‘North East’ part of the title was quickly dropped.

The clubs themselves had been around for many years, Burnley since 1834, with most of the others founded in the 1850s and ’60s. Todmorden are today the only Yorkshire club in the Lancashire League. The club crest of a white and a red rose bears testament to the fact that the boundary line between Yorkshire and Lancashire used to bisect their Centre Vale ground before the administrative border was changed in 1888.

Todmorden resigned their membership in February 1891, without playing a game, and joined the South East Lancashire Cricket League, which became the Central Lancashire Cricket League in 1893.

They were replaced in the Lancashire League by Bury. After winning the Central Lancashire League in 1896, Todmorden replaced Bury in the Lancashire League.

After those early comings and goings, the 14-strong membership of the league remained unchanged from 1897 throughout the 20th century. Several teams applied to join shortly after its formation, including Padiham, Great Harwood and Burnley St Andrews.



Padiham were knocked back again in 1901 and 1904, and had to be content with remaining in the Ribblesdale League.

The surge in interest in Lancashire in the 'gentlemen's sport' of cricket had been fuelled by touring professional teams, such as the United England XI, the All England XI and the Clown Cricketers. One commentator wrote somewhat patronisingly:

One of the most surprising developments of 19th Century England was the transformation of the Northern manufacturing towns like Bacup and Haslingden from sluggish and sullen places into energetic and enterprising communities. The last outpost of civilisation acquired a strong sense of identity.<sup>1</sup>

Even before the creation of the Lancashire League, local derbies used to attract huge crowds where hooliganism and boorish behaviour were not uncommon. In a match between Bacup and Haslingden in 1879, the *Bacup Times* commented:

A bitter spirit of rivalry exists between the two clubs, and whenever a match takes place, the game is attended with deplorable ill spirit and ungovernable excitement on the part of the spectators.

One of the keenest rivalries was that between Accrington and neighbouring Church, which Accrington had been trying to incorporate by an act of parliament. The boundary line between the two towns was marked in whitewash and each season, after the game between the two cricket clubs, the scores were whitewashed

---

1 *Gone Cricket Mad*, Chris Aspin,

either side of the boundary line. After the second league match between the two on 24 June 1893, the *Northern Daily Telegraph* reported:

The whitewash line with the respective totals of both clubs in the 1892 game has been there all year. [Church beat Accrington in 1892.] On Saturday, Church were beaten by Accrington 90 to 54. Church supporters waited until 2.00am before Accrington supporters arrived to tar out last season's figures and whitewash the new ones. Church supporters set about them with stones, the Accrington men beat a hasty retreat and Church supporters restored the 1892 figures.

Such occurrences continued for several years. The *Northern Daily Telegraph* of 9 July 1900 published the following report:

Improvised concerts and a mouth organ band composed of Church and Oswaldtwistle youths paraded the street. The crowd promenaded until 4.00am. The Church whitewash brigade turned out with buckets and brushes. Anyone objecting to the whitewash was saluted with dirty whitewash brush across his face. One unfortunate individual had a whole bucketful poured over him. Crowds later visited the boundary line.

In the early years of the Lancashire League, these fierce local rivalries often ended in clubs disputing results of matches, requiring the league committee to intervene. In June 1893, the committee ordered posters to be displayed on grounds asking players and spectators to abide by the umpires' decisions. The 'Corinthian

spirit' never took hold in Lancashire, where playing to win remains the overriding ethos.

The original format for league games was 'time' cricket, with matches commencing at 1.30pm and finishing at 6.30pm, then subsequently from 2pm to 7pm. This start time allowed for the Saturday midday finish which was the norm for the mills and factories in this era. The vast majority of spectators made their way straight from work in the summer to the cricket grounds (in winter it was a similar story with football).

In the first weeks of the new league there was a strange points system with one point awarded for a win and one deducted for a loss. Draws were ignored. The final league table, however, was based on a percentage of points from the number of games played. As in the County Championship at that time, teams completed a variable number of fixtures. In 1891 East Lancashire were declared champions with a win percentage of 69.23 per cent.

At the start of the 1893 season the conventional points system of two for a win and one for a draw, was adopted. That year also saw the inaugural Junior League (for club second XIs) with Burnley doing the 'double' by winning both titles. The brass band was busy at Turf Moor that year, welcoming home the victorious teams as they made their way down Manchester Road.

The Lancashire League could never be accused of having too much humility when it comes to a view of its status within the cricket world in England. As early as 1891 it challenged Lancashire CCC to a match against 16 of its best players – it never happened. In 1893 a similar challenge was laid down to the touring Australians who were invited to take on the league's best at Burnley.

The 'Colonials', as they were often referred to, asked for £200 to fulfil the fixture, but no agreement was reached. Regular matches did, however, take place against the Central Lancashire League,

who were considered worthy opposition, in contrast to some of the other leagues around. In May 1898 the Lancashire League took on a Lancashire CCC XI at Burnley. This was again a mismatch in terms of numbers, with 16 league players to 11 from the county. The rain-affected game ended in a draw on the third day.

Photographs of this era often depict players in ringed caps and striped blazers, obvious class symbols of the public schools and army regiments whose colours the players sported. Working-class amateurs often appeared in 'civvies' until a league ruling in June 1894 that players must wear flannels on matchday until 6pm. Professionals would be photographed in their whites, county caps being given only to signal that they were employees of the club.

The majority of players in the Lancashire League were working-class men who were not subject to the social apartheid of the gentlemen and players doctrine, which decreed that paid players should change in separate rooms and even enter the field of play by a separate gate.

East Lancashire were the only club in the Lancashire League that could be regarded as part of the establishment, with their roots in the 2nd Lancashire Rifle Volunteer Company. Prospective members were closely vetted by the committee and two black balls meant rejection. The Blackburn-based club quickly earned the nickname of the 'Cuff and Collar' brigade.

A.N. Hornby, nicknamed 'Monkey' for his agility, ferocity and simian jawline, was the archetypal establishment figure and the most famous of East Lancashire's members. An alumnus of Harrow, and the MP for Blackburn, Hornby is best remembered for his stint as England captain. The home defeat of his England side to the Australians in 1882 gave birth to the Ashes.

Even before the formation of the northern leagues it was common for clubs to employ professionals, particularly in

important games against local rivals. In 1891 Haslingden used five professionals when playing Bacup. The league committee decided to act, first permitting only two paid players and, after 1900, restricting clubs to engaging only one.

After three seasons with only one professional, some Lancashire League clubs were prepared to go further and in September 1902 Burnley and Haslingden proposed having no professional after 1903. Burnley's league representative complained that:

This Saturday professional business is simply killing off the object of the League 'to foster and develop amateur talent'.

Fortunately for Billy Cook, Burnley didn't maintain this position for long and soon came to recognise the financial rewards that a top professional could bring to a club.

The first professionals were often ex-county cricketers, with a strong contingent from Nottinghamshire, which had a reputation for producing good bowlers. In the 1890s, eight out of the 14 original clubs employed players from the county. Being a professional in league cricket was considered a more secure form of employment than county cricket, where a man could be dropped at any point, often at the expense of a 'gentleman' amateur.

The paid professional at most league clubs was considered a 'servant of the members'. He was expected to bowl at nets (usually held twice weekly) and to clean and maintain the members' boots and kit. Professionals also often took on the role of groundsman at their clubs. In the 1890s, the professionals tended to do the majority, if not all, of the bowling for a team. In Nelson's 1892 championship season, their two paid players, Joseph Hulme and Willis Cuttall, bowled 935 overs in 24 games. The amateurs of that Nelson side bowled only 52 overs between them.

In the early years of the Lancashire League the ball tended to dominate the bat. Not only were the best players bowlers, but the pitches they played on were not always of a good standard for batting. This improved quickly over the years in line with agronomy methods and machinery, although many clubs still had stables and horsedrawn equipment up until the 1930s.

Cuttell became the first Lancashire League player to play Test cricket when he was selected to tour South Africa with England in 1897. Generally speaking, however, clubs at this time did not recruit well-known names and tended to employ local men of the right ability and temperament.

This policy quickly changed towards the end of the 19th century, as clubs realised the commercial value of a 'superstar' professional. Not that recruiting a known top performer was always sure to prove successful. In 1898 Accrington signed up Bobby Peel, the Yorkshire left-armed, once described by Archie MacLaren as 'the cleverest bowler of my time'. The previous summer, Peel had been sacked by Yorkshire for being drunk on the field at the start of a match against Derbyshire and 'using his own hose' to water the outfield.

Those were the days before Lord Hawke had transformed Yorkshire into the dominant team of the era. One commentator described the Yorkshire side that Peel played in as 'ten drunks and a parson'. The parson was lay preacher, teetotaler and sometime skipper Ephraim Lockwood. Despite taking 80 wickets for Accrington in his first and only season, the club committee agreed that Peel should only be paid one-third of his salary, referring somewhat vaguely to 'trouble with the professional'.

In 1895 Rishton pulled off something of a coup by signing 25-year-old Sydney Francis (S.F.) Barnes. Although Barnes had played county cricket for Warwickshire the previous year, he

had performed indifferently and was not selected again after the first couple of games. No one in 1895, least of all the Rishton committee, could have possibly known that S.F. Barnes would go on to be regarded as one of the greatest bowlers of all time.

Barnes signed a contract with Rishton for £3 10s a week, his duties including those of groundsman. He was also entitled to 7s 6d if he scored 50 and 10s 6d if he took six wickets or more. This was a good living in the days when beer cost three halfpence a pint and you could buy five cigarettes for a penny. Barnes would go on to have a significant influence on both the northern leagues and Billy Cook for the next 40 years.

Barnes was one of the first star signings of the Lancashire League and paved the way for future top county and Test players. It was only in 1910, however, that the first overseas professional arrived in the league – Australian Alex Kermode at Bacup. Barnes was already a county player (albeit with an indifferent record) when he was recruited. Billy's route to the world's premier cricket league followed a more conventional path. He had first attracted attention with his performances for Penwortham in Preston while still a teenager. On 3 August 1900, the *Clitheroe Advertiser and Times* reported on Billy's six wickets against Barrow, although at that time he was still known as William Whalley.

At the turn of the century Billy was then offered the role of cricket instructor, alongside former Yorkshire player Thomas Wardall, at Rossall School on the Fylde coast near Fleetwood. Rossall had been set up as a sister school to Marlborough College and was the first major Church of England school in the north of England. In 1874 Rossall became the first such school to play a Catholic school in an interschool sports fixture, when they came up against Stonyhurst College, based in nearby Clitheroe. Protestant newspapers criticised the arrangement and advised parents of

pupils at Rossall to be wary of ‘encroaching papism’. By the end of Queen Victoria’s reign, Rossall was considered to be one of the top 30 schools in England.

Rossall had an enviable fixture list for cricket, playing against many of the strongest school sides of the time with their games often reported on in national newspapers. In July 1903 they played a two-day match against a strong Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) side, captained by Albert Neilson (A.N.) Hornby. The annual game against MCC was a highlight of the season, and ‘Monkey’ Hornby, being a local man (his family were wealthy mill owners in Darwen), was the usual captain of the visitors. In one such match in July 1908 (long after Billy had left the school), the *Bolton Evening News* reported an unusual incident:

During the Rossall v MCC match, a hare started from side of the field, and careered among the players, who, of course, initiated a hunt. Jack Hearne hurled the ball at the animal, but it was a ‘wide’. A.N. Hornby threw his Trilby hat at it, causing it to double back between his legs; Spooner made a rush and A.H. Hornby [Monkey’s son] did a sprint, while the hare dodged in bewildering fashion, and by the time it had left the playing pitch half the MCC team had sprawled in various positions on the turf in their endeavours to capture the game. A couple of dogs eventually ran the hare down in an adjoining hayfield.

Billy, as well as instructing the boys at cricket, took on the role of groundsman at Rossall, using skills he learned from his father, including how to handle horses (a skill he would need during his time in the army). All of this experience would be put to good use at the end of Billy’s career, but for now he was more focused



on building his reputation as a player. After his successful stint at Penwortham, where he spent a couple of seasons, Billy was about to enter the paid professional ranks.

### **Too many Cooks?**

January 1901 saw the death of Britain's longest-serving monarch, Queen Victoria, who passed away on the Isle of Wight aged 81, after 63 years on the throne. Her reign had heralded an unprecedented period of industrial, political, scientific and military change within the United Kingdom and was marked by a great expansion of the British Empire. The start of the Edwardian era coincided with William Whalley changing his name to Cook and turning professional for Preston, the club where his father was groundsman.

In his first season as a paid player (one of two employed by the club), Billy took over 100 wickets, fully vindicating his decision to give up his amateur status. In theory, Billy was the junior professional, subordinate to the 'senior pro' Sutton, but he outperformed his older colleague on the field. Preston at that time only played friendly matches but it was common practice to have paid players, even outside the leagues.

In his second season at Preston, Billy again passed a century of wickets, finishing on 106 at an average of only 8.10. This strong performance brought Billy to Lancashire's attention for the first time. He was invited to Old Trafford for a trial where it was noted, 'Cook is fast ... with the ability to make the ball swerve from leg'.

In one match in that 1902 season, 20-year-old Billy had the remarkable figures of all ten wickets for 18 runs against Carlisle at West Cliff. For this rare achievement the *Sunday Chronicle* awarded him a prize of one guinea. On the same day, his brother Lol took seven wickets for Billy's former club Penwortham against Ashton

in the newly formed Alhambra Shield competition. The *Lancashire Evening Post* of Saturday, 10 May 1902 ran the following portrait of Lol, complete with a drawn artist's impression of the young cricketer:

Though the youngest playing member of the Penwortham club, Lawrence Cook – son of the Preston groundsman – is one of the most useful. Cricketing talent seems to be the birthright of all three brothers, and Penwortham are the agents by which it is being developed. Twelve months ago, they turned out a youth [Billy Cook] clever enough with bat and ball to become a reliable full-blown professional, and now the two younger members of the Cook family look like following in their brother's steps ... Lawrence Cook shows excellent form with the bat and ball. [He] bowls right arm at a medium pace, and breaks a little both ways ... Jack Cook the youngest of the three brothers looks like developing into a good fast trundler.

In his third season as professional at Preston in 1903, Billy continued to progress, taking 115 wickets at an average of 8.24. He also scored 221 runs in his 18 completed innings. The Cook brothers' reputation was beginning to spread rapidly across Lancashire and the committees of the 14 Lancashire League clubs were always on the lookout for talent. Mid-season 1903, Rawtenstall, with their home in the picturesque Rossendale valley, were undecided about whether to retain their professional, Thomas, for the following year. Thomas had disappointed with the ball, but his supporters on the committee blamed his lack of wickets on his team-mates for not being able to catch – a common refrain of bowlers at many clubs, even to this day.

A subcommittee was set up and Billy was given a trial in a friendly match for Rawtenstall against neighbours Bacup on Saturday, 11 July 1903. He took five wickets for 41 runs in what the *Lancashire Evening Post* described, somewhat uncharitably, as ‘a creditable display’. Throughout his career, most of Billy’s victims were bowled, so he wouldn’t have been unduly worried about the Rawtenstall fielders’ inability to hold on to catches. Rawtenstall, however, decided not to pursue their interest in Billy, despite him being well on the way to achieving 100 wickets for the season at Preston – the third time in a row in his three years as a professional that he had reached this milestone.

Rawtenstall’s loss was Enfield’s gain. Tom Lancaster, a former professional at Enfield, was an amateur at the club in 1903 and still one of their best players. Lancaster had played against Billy in friendly matches and was impressed with what he saw in the young man from Preston. He recommended Billy to the Enfield committee and they offered him the chance to prove himself in the Lancashire League. Billy had no hesitation in accepting. He was about to begin a four-decade long association with the self-proclaimed ‘greatest cricket league in the world’. Why Billy prioritised league cricket over a first-class career with Lancashire, and potentially England, reveals much about the class prejudices that dominated Edwardian society.