



Part 1 -----

Half a century ago, cricketing life in Shropshire was centered on competitive friendlies. Much-valued, hard-fought, one-offs, against traditional rivals who were opponents of choice, mainly local derbies. A slightly different kind of pride and status was at stake in those days.

Back then, many senior clubs weren't keen on the league game. They thought it would encourage gamesmanship because of the knock-on effect involved in a league structure. That attitude was a big stumbling-block for the pioneers who tried, largely unsuccessfully for several years, to change clubs' perceptions.

Another problem was that many of those main clubs were scattered around the edge of the county, and had traditional fixtures against clubs from nearby counties – Cheshire, North & Mid Wales, Staffordshire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire. Cars were unreliable back then, roads were poor, bypasses and the M54 didn't exist, why travel to play someone new 50 miles away, when you could play a club you've always faced less than half that distance?

An informal league of sorts did exist during the 50s and 60s at one time; it included Coalbrookdale and Madeley Miners. It might have been a local league based around the Telford area, but any records of it have been lost in the mists of time.

So caution was the initial watchword when clubs considered the prospect of "league". They took to it in dribs & drabs, but after taking the plunge, almost everyone – often to their surprise – found it both invigorating and intoxicating. It created a greater appetite for the game, and clubs' ranks swelled as a result.

So from uncertain – and sometimes unwilling and contentious – beginnings, league cricket took off and flourished. In particular the top section enjoyed high standards and keen competition.

It was initially called the Premier Division of the Shropshire Senior Cricket League (pre-1972), then Division One of the Shropshire Cricket League (1972-1996), then the Shropshire Premier Cricket League (1997-2011), and now the Premier Division of the Shropshire County Cricket League (2012-present).

It's generally accepted that the halcyon years came in the decade before the late 80s when a large number of excellent players competed alongside and against each other, and then a further decade when these ranks became increasingly swelled by 'overseas' and professionals.

The strength can be gauged by the success of its Representative sides during the golden 11-year era of 1979-89, in which the Shropshire League won the Midlands Knockout six times. They also won the National Knockout (known as the President's Trophy) in 1983.



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It was no coincidence that the Shropshire County team were doing well at the same time, and probably the county's greatest-ever triumph was defeating Yorkshire in 1984 at St Georges in the NatWest Trophy. Details:

<https://www.espncriinfo.com/series/8629/scorecard/417847/shropshire-vs-yorkshire-1st-round-national-westminster-bank-trophy-1984>

The opportunity for further progress came when the Birmingham District Premier League opened its doors, and from 1998 Shropshire's best expanded their horizons with new challenges.

Shrewsbury have proved themselves the outstanding team of county league history, winning the title 12 times during their 28 years of membership. That included six successive titles from 82-87, and they also won the National Knockout twice (1983 and 2011). A good read can be found here:

<https://www.wisden.com/stories/your-game/club-cricket/the-wisden-club-cricket-hall-of-fame-john-foster-ed-foster>

Shrewsbury joined the BDPCL ranks after their last county success in 2000, won its top division in 2010, 2013, and 2015, and consequently took the one-off "Club of the Decade" award last year. It doesn't get much better than that.

Wellington have also won the BDPCL's Premier Division title twice. They won it in both 2003 and 2004, beating Barnt Green and Knowle & Dorridge to top spot on both occasions. Wellington were the first Shropshire side to leave the county after winning the SPCL crown in 1998, and gained further promotion along the way.

Shifnal, Bridgnorth and Oswestry are also lengthy BDPCL members, and now Wem are back as well. Others have been Whitchurch, Sentinel, Newport, Worfield, Quatt, St Georges, and Wroxeter.

It's all a very long journey, and quite an acceleration from those formative league days of the late 60s and early 70s. Back then a group of county stalwarts – Lloyd Thompson, Bill Stallworthy, Leslie Blackshaw, and Frank Fowler – saw this as the means to improve the Shropshire Minor Counties side.

The quartet, all members of the early executive committee, tried to encourage senior clubs to join, but their efforts fell largely on deaf ears and despite considerable effort, in 1971 only five clubs contested the embryonic league – Newport, Wem, Rolls-Royce (now Sentinel), Shifnal, and Whitchurch.

However following renewed canvassing, everything changed at a clubs' meeting in the 1971-72 close season, and suddenly, after some inter-club discussions, 12 further clubs applied to join what was a single entity that included a mirror-image 2nd XI section.

The successful applicants were Wellington, Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth, Oswestry, Ludlow, St Georges, and Wroxeter. The unsuccessful ones were Market Drayton,



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Madeley, Broseley, Lilleshall, and GKN Sankey, with Worfield having expressed interest as well.

The league executive recommended that all of them be incorporated in the near future, but the minutes state this was rejected by a 9-1 majority, presumably by the new clubs themselves, and they remained en bloc for 27 seasons.

The new set-up took a little while to bed itself in properly. Owing to the shortage of numbers previously and to ease clubs into an unfamiliar new reality, the inaugural 1972 season allowed for optional fixtures, so there was much picking-and-choosing with one club playing only five 'official' games. The 'title' was decided on a points average, which was clearly unsatisfactory to many, especially Wellington as they were the only club to play all 22 matches.

So in 1973 it became compulsory for each club to play every other home & away. Many matches were played on a Sunday, and some rules were flexible. It was not until 1975 that clubs had to play all games on a Saturday, and start at 2pm with 100 overs in the main months and 90 in April & September.

The village clubs were also part of the new-look league, and actually got started earlier, with ten sides competing in the Silhouette Division of 1971. Subsequent developments have been many and varied.

It's probably fair to say that, back then, those clubs were happy with their lot. That was to change within a decade because league cricket altered a lot of clubs' perceptions and ambitions.

Part 2 -----

Clubs from the villages and smaller towns eased into Shropshire league cricket more easily than their senior counterparts.

Fifty years ago, their existence was lower-profile, their sole XI comprised local players, they had little desire for change, and the inaugural 1971 ten-team division covered only a small area.

Nevertheless these teams contained then – as now – many fine players capable of playing at a higher level, but who chose their local club.

Back then, Fenns Bank were probably the pick of the bunch. They had a very good team, and proved it in 1971 by beating several 'big' clubs in what was then an open knockout – the Shropshire Journal KO competition. The secretary's report, penned by long-serving John Rees, says:

"The final, played at Rolls Royce between Newport and Fenns Bank on Sunday September 12 in perfect weather and before a large crowd, resulted in an extremely



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exciting tie – 149 runs each as a result of which both clubs will hold the trophy for six months.”

Fenns Bank also triumphed very easily in the first properly-constructed league season in that same 1971 season – the Silhouette Division – winning 15 and drawing the other three.

Almost all of the teams were either from Shrewsbury or north Shropshire – the others were Coton Hall, Prees, Shawbury (then SALMET), MEB, NALGO (now Quayside), Allscott (then BSF, as in British Sugar Factory), Frankwell, Monkmoor, and Roden.

Over the next 25 years, divisional numbers increased as more and more clubs and XIs joined the ‘lower divisions’.

Further entrants in the 70s included Frankton, Bomere Heath, Pontesbury, Alberbury, Ellesmere, Acton Reynald, Cae Glas, Much Wenlock, Overton, Church Stretton, Craven Arms, Bromfield, Calverhall, Albrighton, Cathedral, and Wellington and Ludlow 3rd XIs – known as ‘A’ sides until 1987, curiously a term that used to apply to 3rd XIs of the top clubs and future 2nd XIs of the other sides.

In the 80s, the SCL continued to expand. In came Forton, Quatt, GKN Sankey, Harcourt, Hodnet & Peplow, Church Aston, Hinstock, Hanwood, Tibberton, Edgmond, Glynwed, St Georges 3rds, plus others with short-lived existencies and plenty of other 2nd and 3rd XIs.

Knockin & Kinnerley switched from the neighbouring Border Counties League, and in 1991 Cound and Whittington followed. Newly-formed Telford Moslems joined in 1992 and Bishops Castle arrived from non-league in 1993.

Sadly GKN Sankey and their excellent ground were lost, following a very creditable second place in 1987’s second tier, when the company withdrew its funding for its sports facilities.

The seven sections of 1990 represented the final season of orderly and orthodox ‘follow-on’ divisions. The next decade got complicated.

The glut of newly-formed 2nd XIs contained mainly youngsters, who struggled against adult sides. So all reserve sides were placed in a stream of their own from 1991. The senior clubs’ Reserve Division became Reserve One, while the next three all incorporated promotion and relegation.

The same system operated from 2012, but for 2nd (and 4th) XIs only, and with promotion and relegation throughout. This was a key reason for the SCL and SPL merging, because the SPL wanted better competition for their 2nd XIs. It also prevented clubs with multiple sides ‘running into’ each other, with 1st and 3rd XIs competing in the mainstream.



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The 'separate streams' of both eras each lasted seven seasons before reverting back to a linear system. The 90s model ceased because the reserve players became more experienced. The more recent one ended because strong 2nd XIs were returning from the BDPCL and the best SCCL 2nd XIs needed a better standard.

Meanwhile back in '92, after the BCL folded, bulk applicants were accepted into the SCL, and amalgamated into the structure via a 'parallel' third tier.

Entries here included Shrewsbury Hospitals (who in 1996 merged with Cathedral to form Shelton), Conover, Willey, Chelmarsh, Newtown, Montgomery, Welshpool, Guilsfield, Llanidloes, and Trysull & Seisdon.

But the clubs refused entry into 1972's formative top section – Madeley, Market Drayton, Lilleshall, Worfield, and Broseley – opted for the Staffs League.

Broseley's stay there was short. Shawbury's demise gave them an SCL spot in 1994.

These clubs at various stages had joined the BCL which was created around 1974, and some of them continued to apply for membership of the top SCL tier for many years.

1996 was the final SCL season for the 'original 12' who broke away with all their XIs to form the Shropshire Premier League.

The lower division clubs now had the SCL to themselves. 1997's new-look committee changed a lot of rules, and introduced bonus points and the WDL system that basically still exists today.

All the county clubs that played in other leagues were invited to join them, and when in 1998 Worfield and Market Drayton did so, they became part of a top division of 20 sides created to accommodate the newcomers while avoiding any harsh relegation.

Lower down all the 2nd XIs re-integrated into a single structure by contesting a 22-team section. In both big divisions, each team played every other once with divisions split back to normal numbers at the season's end.

More change in 1999, when the BDPCL expanded. The SPCL champions were promoted, and their door opened for the annual SCL winners. The Premier's 3rd XIs were accepted back into the SCL, and another parallel division was used to integrate them.

Madeley finally made it 'home' in 2001, after receiving invitations from both leagues. They chose the SPCL, which had an extra vacancy that year because Shifnal went up alongside Shrewsbury into the BDPCL which was forming an extra division.

A couple of drop-outs from the foot-and-mouth season of 2001, which included the successful Telford Moslems, gave Lilleshall the vacancy to join the second tier in 2002.



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During the Noughties other newcomers were Beacon, Wheaton Aston, and Corvedale. This decade it's been Harpers, Column, and Chirk.

All in all, the 'lower divisions' have experienced an eventful existence since those pioneering days of 1971.

- For a full list of when all current clubs & teams joined the SCL/SPCL/SCCL, see the [Henshalls SCCL website](#).

Part 3 -----

It's been a long and eventful road since league cricket became the powerful driving force, against most initial expectations, that turned the game into a boom sport in Shropshire, and there's been a few potholes along the way.

A truly united league was finally achieved in 2012, 40 years after the old Shropshire Cricket League got on its feet, and the catalyst for eventual unification was – perhaps surprisingly – the Birmingham District Premier League.

Not everyone was in favour when, after a lengthy series of club votes, the BDPCL cut 75% of its divisions in 2018 which sent ten teams back to the SCCL last year.

However around 20 years earlier, when the ECB introduced its pyramid system, the BDPCL expanded its membership and offered annual places to the champions of the Shropshire Premier Cricket League along with their contemporaries from Worcestershire, South Staffordshire, and Warwickshire.

Few saw that coming. So when Wellington became the first SPCL club to accept after winning the title in 1998, the SPCL in turn guaranteed a place to the annual SCL winners in order to maintain 12 clubs in its division.

That ended 27 years of top-tier unbroken membership, and ironically came just two seasons after these clubs split from the rest of the SCL to end the escalating row over promotion and relegation involving the top flight.

The progressive lower-division clubs argued they were losing some of their own ambitious players to the top sides, were improving their facilities, and could not fully realise their own ambitions and potential if the rules prevented them from being promoted.

It was a stand-off that had existed in some form or other virtually since the league took off in the early 70s and never fully went away, despite some spirited efforts by the joint league committee which held many talks with all parties at various times over 25 years in an attempt to end the impasse.

A re-election system operated for a decade from 1985, comprised of a committee head-to-head vote between the first tier's wooden-spoonists and the second-tier



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champions, where Frankton, Allscott Heath (then British Sugar), and Welshpool were multiple winners.

This resulted in several close calls, which included two chairmen's casting votes and one single-vote majority.

Latterly there were two EGMs on the issue that contained some acrimonious debates.

Eventually it became clear that agreement could not be reached when the elite clubs demanded that all talk of integration be scrapped. When that failed to materialise, notice of the breakaway was given in May 1996. The withdrawal statement read:

“Over recent years, many of the 12 founder clubs have invested heavily in playing facilities and development of young players.

“Clubs are anxious as far as possible to safeguard that investment, and not unreasonably wish to control and determine their own affairs and destiny.

“The First Division clubs fully respect the ambitions of those seeking to play at a higher level. But the issues of re-election and promotion have often been confused. They were mutually exclusive.

“The unanimous decision to withdraw has been taken with much regret but it was believed to be in the interests of all concerned that both sides went their separate ways.

“The Liaison Committee has worked very hard in trying to maintain the existing fabric of the League, but promotion and relegation could never be imposed. It could only be achieved by negotiated settlement.”

The league committee, buffered between clubs on both sides of the debate, had done its best. It had recommended the compromise of 14 sides for the top division in 1971 and again in 1993, but this was rejected by the top clubs who felt this would mean too many matches, especially for their 2nd XIs.

However 14 was the number with which they, as the SPCL, eventually ended up – for a combination of three reasons. The annual invitation to the SCL was set in stone, relegation back from the BDPCL was also a reality, and then, three times in four seasons, the SPL winners declined the move up, largely because the 2nd XIs didn't want the extra travelling (Sentinel in 2008 & 2011, Madeley in 2010).

This twice led the SPCL to seek a second division. The SCL interpreted this as an attempt to poach their better clubs, and suggested the merger. The SPCL agreed – largely to the satisfaction of all concerned, and so the Shropshire County Cricket League was formed.

The battle for parity had been the major overall problem for the league as a whole, but there were plenty of other hurdles along the way, and some still exist today.



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Lack of umpires is one. The umpires' panel was formed in 1986, but despite strenuous efforts it has never been able to extend below the second tier.

Indiscipline is another. The minutes of ongoing AGMs over 50 years contain chairmen's lament regarding bad behaviour in the top division and the need to find a solution.

Parallel and double-sized divisions were used as stop-gaps after 1996 to establish equality following upheavals.

Uneven overall numbers have caused huge headaches for the committee, especially the fixtures secretary, and have usually affected the bottom division. Here, over-large rather than under-strength was usually considered the better option, in order to provide maximum matches. But now, with less player availability, ten per division is increasingly finding favour lower down.

The boom years of membership were a boon for the league, but around 60 sides have been lost over the years, almost all because of declining numbers or the expulsion that resulted from lost players.

Right now, the SCCL faces what is almost certainly its biggest challenge of all – the future. Concessions have been rife during the last decade, and many teams have gone to the wall – nine in 2018 alone.

But the 125 teams that were due to take part this year is still as high a number as any that has ever contested either SCL or SCCL, so hopefully the current league will continue to thrive and prosper.