‘The sound of a cricket ball striking them was like a church bell ringing on a Sunday morning’

In Aigburth, a cricket community gets a new lease of life

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Dear members — we hope you had a lovely Bank Holiday weekend.

Today’s story by Robin Brown is about a cricket club which faced eviction last winter. The stakes for the community at Aigburth Cricket Club were high. Even if you’re not a fan of the sport, by the end of this piece, you might be.

This newsletter is going out to 365 paying members. If you’re new around here, leave us a comment telling us what you want to see more of on The Post. Many of you joined us after reading Ethan Croft’s excellent weekend read about the quiet decline of Chinatown. Thanks for all your comments, including this interesting thought from Paul Bryan: “Is the downward trajectory really the inevitable arc of history? Can Chinatown reinvent itself?” In case you missed it, read that piece here.

Leave a comment

Local news in brief

- **How will the balance of power** on Merseyside change? Clare Hamilton, BBC Radio Merseyside’s political reporter takes a look at how voters might react to increasing council tax, fears of green space development and council spending at the voting booths on Thursday. Council seats are up for grabs in the Wirral, Halton, St Helens, Sefton and Knowsley. “Some issues go beyond the traditional local election staples of bins and potholes,” she writes. More here, and we’ll be dropping in your inboxes with a roundup and analysis of the results this weekend.
- **Franklin Graham**, the American Evangelist known for saying gay marriage is a sin and calling Islam a “very evil and wicked religion”, is due to speak at ACC Liverpool next Saturday. Ahead of his talk, Steve Rotheram has called for Stagecoach and Arriva buses to remove the adverts of Graham, calling him a “known hate preacher”. Graham said this opposition was “familiar and predictable”, adding there was nothing offensive in the adverts. ACC Liverpool challenged the event taking place in 2020 but says it received assurances that next weekend’s event will not be “discriminatory, disrespectful or negative towards any particular communities”. More here.
- **The two UK aid workers** captured by Russia in Ukraine have been named as Dylan Healy, from Plymouth, and Paul Urey, who is from Warrington. The BBC understands they were trying to rescue a family from a village in north Ukraine when they were captured. Urey’s mother said: “I miss him, I can't cope with it. Please give him back, he's a family man, he's my carer.” More here.
- **Sound City 2022**, Liverpool’s city-centre music festival, gets the Guardian treatment in this review. Critic Patrick Clarke writes it was a great way to see the up-and-coming indie bands and guitar acts in Liverpool, but not enough variety left the experience lacking. More here.
- **Covid-19 cases** are falling. The case rate for the Liverpool City Region is 125.5, down 36.3% from last week. England’s case rate is 131.7, down 39.2%. Cases are highest in Sefton, lowest in Liverpool.

Post Picks

🎞️ There’s a screening of local artist and director Louis Jeck Prestidge’s new film *Accurate at the time of Recording* at Arena Studios and Gallery in L8 this evening. The film reimagines the seventeenth-century artist Rembrandt van Rijn, casting him in the middle of a modern-day Sefton Park. More here.

🗞️ An excellent long read in the Guardian about the cultural importance of weekend schools for children of different heritages, which give them a way to connect with their background and celebrate their identity. It features some beautiful shots by the photographer Craig Easton, including some portraits of the children at Nicolae Iorga, a Romanian school on the Wirral where children create art, read Romanian stories and make puppet shows. Read more.

mrcraigeaston

A post shared by Craig Easton (@mrcraigeaston)

🎙️ How are literature and the visual arts responding to the climate crisis? A free talk by University of Liverpool lecturers, plus Mariama Attah, one of the leading photography curators at Open Eye Gallery, will discuss the changing art world in the face of global heating and plastic pollution. It’s at the Yoko Ono Lennon Centre this evening. Book here.

🎷 A free gig at the Pen Factory on Hope Street tonight: regular fixture Liverpool Jazz Club will be playing a smooth blend of jazz, blues and funk. Try some of the natural wines and artisan cheeses on the menu. More here.

Liverpool council funds under scrutiny

As you know, every so often we return to the high-octane world of audit committees and council meetings. The audit committee’s last meeting of the municipal year might not have been circled in your diaries, but when elected officials are spending public money, we should know the details. Here’s the top line from last week: is the mayoral neighbourhood fund, the amount each Liverpool councillor is allocated to spend on voluntary and charity sector organisations in their wards, delivering best value?

The mayoral neighbourhood fund is a £1 million budget split between each Liverpool ward. Wards with higher levels of deprivation receive more: Woolton won’t get the same amount as Walton. How do councillors decide where they want the money to go? Apparently, there’s a lot of freedom. Scroll through the agenda reports and you’ll find a County ward councillor donated £4,500 towards monthly cabaret events at Walton Village Residents Association in 2015/16, for example. During the pandemic, a lot of spending went towards food banks and church schemes towards fighting social isolation.

How does the council check in on these organisations who receive large chunks of public money? The simple answer was, it doesn’t, or hasn’t been, until now. Deputy Mayor Jane Corbett said “we are all busy and short staffed at the council” and officer Chris Lomas admitted the council doesn’t have the resources to perform aftercare check-ins with organisations when they get a grant.

The role of the audit committee is to ensure best value: to improve the best possible outcomes for the public, and ensure the council's expenditure is lawful. It also identifies vulnerabilities in policies and enhances controls to see what can be done to reduce the risk of fraud.

“The fund itself is a good thing and councillors use those funds for good things in those communities,” says Kris Brown, Lib Dem councillor for Woolton and the chair of the audit committee. “It’s been great for little things the council can’t do. But there’s so much freedom with it.” The upshot is, there are more safeguards in place now. A new review has begun to ensure processes are in place to stop potential misuse. David Harris, grants and performances manager, added you can never “eliminate risk entirely”.

By Robin Brown

It’s September 2021 and the sun is going down as the cricketers bring in the scoreboard. Joe McLarnon shakes his head when asked if there will be a big party to mark what could be Aigburth Cricket Club’s final match of its 133-year history. “A little get-together tonight. We’ll just be telling stories.”

Telling stories is arguably what sports clubs are best for and Aigburth CC has had plenty over the years. But it looks like the final chapters are being written. The club — which also hosts crown green bowls teams, darts, chess and bridge alongside art classes and a brass band — has not heard from its landlord, PR Investments, all year, beyond receiving a notice to vacate the premises by November 2021. Joe and Mark “Billo” Bagot — both playing today in the club’s first X1 — are not optimistic about the chances of an extension.

“It was only when I sat down today to think about it that I felt sad,” says Joe. “I’ve been here 13 years and I’ve never been in a school, a job, or a house for that amount of time. I’ve never been committed to something for so long — not sure my wife would like to hear that…”

Aigburth Cricket Club following the final game of the 2021 season against Birkenhead St Mary’s. Photo: Robin Brown/The Post.

Billo agrees, shaking his head. “We never actually thought it would come to this point.” Both seem resigned to their fate, but for Joe it’s not the cricketers who will feel the brunt of the club’s closure but the people for whom the club is a community asset.

“That’s who I feel sorry for,” he continues. “There are people down here five or six days a week. People who depend on the place, live by themselves, will be hurt the most. I’m like a pup compared to some of the people who come here and even I won’t know what to do with myself.”

Club secretary Peter Pearcey is more hopeful, but strikes a realistic tone. “At the moment we have to assume that November 21st is the last day. On the 22nd we could turn up here and find the gates padlocked, but I still think we’ve got a chance.”

Peter gestures around the cast of people who have turned up to what might be the last day’s play at Aigburth, faces from around Liverpool’s sports community who have played here over decades. Arthur Blayes is here, who played for Aigburth in the ‘50s. The cricket club itself has been going since 1888, with crown green bowls at the club since 1911.

Thoughts are turning to fond memories as members contemplate one final close of play at the ground, hemmed in by a train track, allotments and new housing, built on the site of the Liverpool Garden Festival in 1984.

“When I first joined there were no trees here,” recalls Peter. “There were massive oil tanks 30-40 feet high in the area between here and the river (the so-called Cast-Iron ‘Cazzy’ Shore of iron works, slag and shipwrecks, memorialised in The Beatles’ Glass Onion) — people used to try and hit them during a game. The sound of a cricket ball striking them was like a church bell ringing on a Sunday morning.”

Back then the pavilion was an old wooden hut, reputedly built as a snack bar for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887. “That was the pavilion here for nearly 100 years,” chuckles Peter. “When we were raising money for the new pavilion we’d put a big marquee up full of beer and food. We had to do tours of duty all through the night, sleeping in the old pavilion, to ensure it wasn’t pinched!” He squints across the ground. The view stretches for miles down the river towards the city centre. “Can you imagine this view disappearing?” he says. “It would destroy me, to be honest.”

Sam Palmer has played cricket at ACC for three years. With son Asher sat in the crook of his arm, he reflects on the role beyond sport that such clubs offer the community. “South Liverpool has lots of nice bars but proper community-focused places seem to be disappearing. This is a place where people can come and do activities: cricket, bowls, bridge, darts — but not everyone socialises with alcohol. This is a place for all people and all ages. Yes it’s a cricket club, but it’s a lot more than that.”

Billy Pinto and John Stead will attest to that. The pair have been friends for the best part of 70 years and joined Aigburth 50 years ago, having met on the streets of Toxteth. They sit down with pints, facing the pitch, and commence a great old scouse tradition: reminiscing, joshing and teasing. They weave a tapestry of pubs, cricket, people and places — some long gone. Gary Ablett played at Aigburth; Ken Dodd was a frequent visitor (at his first turn he opened with the words “I’ve played in some places but never in a Wimpy hut”); Arthur Askey played tennis here.

John Stead and Billy Pinto. Photo: Robin Brown/The Post.

Many of the stories Billy and Steady tell are frequently hilarious: often unrepeatable; possibly libellous. A story involving a toilet, built for the Wavertree Show, Princess Margaret and a French polisher will certainly never see the light of day in print.

“I heard him before I met him,” says Steady, of Billy. The pair are a garrulous, familiar and well-loved double-act on the south Liverpool circuit. “We were at school together,” adds Billy. “We’ve been together most of our lives. We’re still together.” “Two rag-arses” is how Steady describes the pair when they turned up. In their first game, back in the ‘70s, Steady put two car windscreens through with some big hitting. Billy courted his wife here.

Back in those days Aigburth was something of an upstart in the Liverpool cricket leagues, bringing in lads from the streets of nearby Toxteth. “Ours is a proper cricket club because it’s a working-class cricket club,” says Billy. “Kids came here because they couldn’t afford to go to big clubs.”

In the trophy room, Billy scans the old pictures, full of familiar faces, some no longer with us. Billy is distinguished among his peers by always appearing clean-shaven on the team photos. “That's the celebration of us winning the cup. Happy days up there…”

We wander outside. The game has ended in defeat for Aigburth, but it seems like small beer, given the context. The greyish cloth strips on the sight screens have been taken down and the scoreboard packed away. There’s a good chance cricket will never be played here ever again.

Billy Pinto looks out at the pitch, populated now only by magpies.

“One for sorrow, two for joy,” he muses. “I’m gutted. I hope that it doesn’t go.”

‘It’s their way or the highway’

In late November Peter Pearcey is summoned to a meeting with the landlords. With days left on the remaining lease (the club had to go to court in 2015 to pursue an application for the grant of a new tenancy, which it received in late 2016) and against all hope, the club wins another five-year lease. When he later tells members that they’ve won another lease, the place erupts.

Peter reflects on what seems like an unlikely turnaround in fortunes: “Everyone was very despondent, very down: the cricket finished, we played the last few bowls matches, everybody felt it was going to be gone next year. On the 21st November we would have had to lock the gates.”

“Massive relief” is how Peter describes his feelings, but he’s mindful that the club may have to go through the same process again in five years’ time. “Hopefully, I won't be dealing with it by then…” he chuckles.

Peter Pearcey guarding the gates of Aigburth Cricket Club. Photo: Robin Brown/The Post.

The club's players and members are grateful above all. And they’re not the only ones.

Green Party councillor Tom Crone, who represents St Michael’s, says Aigburth’s survival is great news for the community too. But he strikes a note of reality when it comes to the ground’s owners, the enigmatic PR Investments. The company also appears to own the Olive Mount “Manweb” playing fields in Wavertree, also seemingly stuck in limbo but known to be a target for development for successive owners (the Manweb Sports and Social Club burned down in 2014).

Crone says that while the lease extension is welcome, Aigburth needs a lasting result if its survival is to be guaranteed. “The lease extension was a relief,” he says, “but we still don't have that long-term solution.” He likens the situation to a football manager taking a win but instantly moving on to planning for the next game. “PR Investments don't really want to engage in a dialogue, so we are left hanging. There's no negotiation, no discussion, no kind of flexibility about what the future might look like. It's their way or the highway.”

Crone says PR Investments has a business model of acquiring land and increasing its value, often through development. Certainly the view of some at the club is that the company wants to sell the land for development, not aided by the fact that the 2014 notice to quit was so the landlord could demolish the pavilion. Aigburth CC has offered what it believes is a fair price for the ground, based on an independent valuation; PR Investments refused the offer. The change-of-use that would be required for the development of the land to proceed seems unlikely, but Liverpool City Council’s options for protecting the club are restricted. Club and landlord seem stuck with each — for now at least.

Another five years

It’s the first day of the 2022 season. For the cricketers, the moment is tinged with joy and disbelief. Joe McClarnon and Billo are donning whites once again. The latter, not renowned for his batting, sees his stumps cartwheeling upon the very first ball of the Aigburth innings. He doesn’t care. There’s cricket again in St Michael’s.

A cricket match at Aigburth. Photo: Robin Brown/The Post.

I ask Billo how he felt when he heard the news that the club had won another five-year lease: “Oh God, another five years playing cricket!” he replies, with a laugh. He’d planned to do an umpiring course and had resigned himself to the end of his weekly commute down from Anfield. But the game, the club, the camaraderie always pulls old players back in, just when they thought they were out.

While the Second XI folded last year, as players drifted away due to the likely closure, there is a healthy First XI — and the Second XI should make a comeback. Social membership is at 400. New players have turned up to play this year and a recent crowdfunder raised £5,000 to reinvest in the ground. There’s a real sense that the community has realised what an asset it has on its doorstep — and how close it came to losing it.

“The only way I thought we’d still be here playing cricket is if we were squatting!” Billo admits. But now the club is looking forward. “I've been coming down here for 25 years and I’m seeing more and more faces than I’ve ever seen before,” he says. “That's really positive for the future of the club.”

8 5 Share

Write a comment…

Richard Davies May 4 Liked by Mollie Simpson
Great piece!
2 Reply
1 reply

David Coombs May 4 Liked by Mollie Simpson
Lovely article. I played for Aigburth with the old pavillion and oil tanks back in the 70's whilst at school and university. Great bunch of people back then. I remember John Stead and Billy Pinto but as I rarely progressed out of the third team not sure they'll remember me.
Would be a great shame if the club had to close. Good news for the next 5 years at least.
1 Reply
2 replies

3 more comments…

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