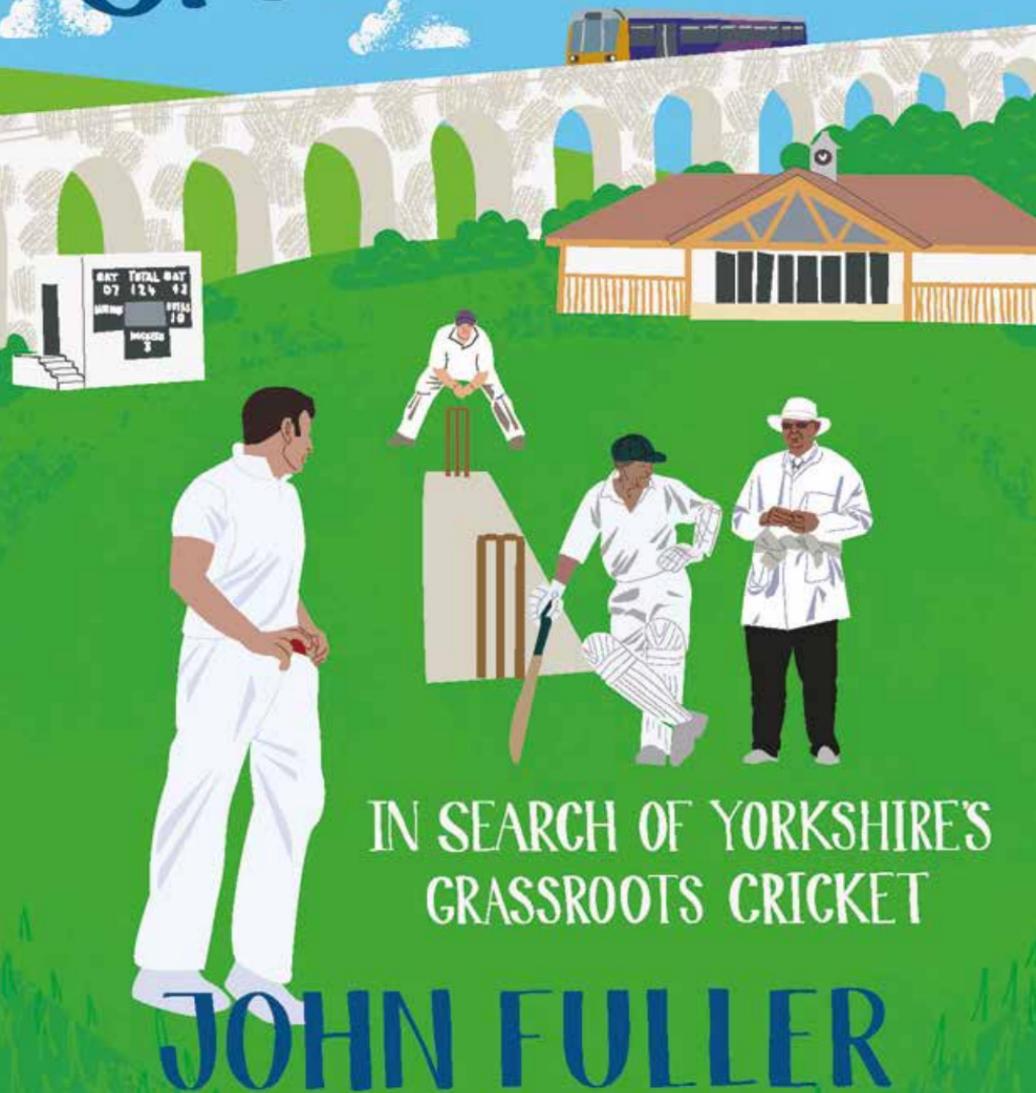


All Wickets Great and Small



IN SEARCH OF YORKSHIRE'S
GRASSROOTS CRICKET

JOHN FULLER

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Introduction

IN the East Stand at Yorkshire County Cricket Club's Headingley headquarters in Leeds, tucked behind frosted glass, lies the ground floor offices of the Yorkshire Cricket Board, the YCB; guardians of the grassroots game and governing body for all amateur cricket in the county.

On the wall is a map of Yorkshire punctuated with a blizzard of coloured pins denoting Clubmark and Focus Clubs; accreditation that recognises safe, effective and child-friendly clubs.

A group of us pore over the map, studying it intently like adventurers eager to pinpoint a bold frontier. A golden rule of exploration: soak up expertise like a thirst-ravaged sponge from those already in the know – so I've dropped in to Headingley to elicit some recommendations.

Whether for astonishing teas, a geographical quirk or an appreciation of history, my plan is to travel extensively by foot, bus and train, checking the pulse of Yorkshire cricket while teasing out stories and characters within our recreational game.

At home, the muddy walking boots are by the door, ready for our road trip from Bradford to Bolton Abbey and Skipton to Scarborough that will shine a light on how

the game is being played in the vast cricketing heartlands of Yorkshire, hearing from those who sit on committees on cold November nights to those who lovingly nurture their immaculate outfielders, come sleet or snow.

This will be a summer-long conversation with those who are cricket: the umpires, groundsmen, scorers, tea ladies, coaches, players and supporters in cities, towns and villages at every standard imaginable; all with their own brand of passion and dedication on what it takes for cricket to survive or thrive at grassroots.

There is no such thing as a cricket season here in Yorkshire. Not really. An October pause, I'll cede, but by and large, there's practice or matchday action each and every week.

Beneath the pantheon at Headingley, the amateur game is a series of Russian dolls, wrapped in layers of onions. Fragmented and complex, it never fails to surprise.

Approaching this season-long journey, questions exploded around my head like sherbet rockets and, like a Yorkshire terrier gnawing on a cricket boot, I resolved to hop on Yorkshire's railway system and scoff an unconscionable volume of cricket teas to discover more about those that make grassroots cricket tick.

If you think you know how many games of cricket take place every day in Yorkshire between April and September, think again. Double the figure you've already doubled and then start adding zeros like they're going out of fashion.

Each season, the fixtures labyrinth is a veritable rabbit warren and to venture across the land to bring you a snapshot of the soul of the game, millions of captivating tangents had to be refined so that this book

didn't ape the admittedly satisfying thud that comes when thumbing through the Argos catalogue in Shipley.

At least there was choice. The Yorkshire Cricket Board kindly provided the most current playing figures for inclusion in this book. So, at the time of writing, there were 778 clubs I could pick from, 118 leagues and a player pool of 27,880 adult club players to go and watch.

Whether it's kids representing their school in the Drax Cup or in back alleys with wheelie bins as stumps, work colleagues facing off in T20 format Last Man Stands or those in the autumn of their careers playing for Yorkshire over-60s, there are thousands of weekly encounters.

Through its cricket, Yorkshire can be de-constructed and distilled; its people, places, heritage and culture. Given my own ineptitude wielding any willow, this is the only time I can confidently write I will be going into bat for the county.

Across thousands of miles, there are many who are as barmy about cricket as I am and it was time to meet them, whatever the collective noun for a cricket fanatic is.

The skipper who has exhausted the very depths of his mobile phone's address book to source that last player and is now considering siblings, parents, grandparents or anyone with a pulse.

The groundsman who is outside all year round aerating, scarifying, mowing and rolling so that his beloved club can have a cricket square fit to eat their dinner off come the first fixture.

The scorer whose meticulous arithmetic is a record of the day; manifesting itself through coloured dots, lines and digits, allied with waved acknowledgments of the umpire's signals.

The hunt is on for picture-postcard clubhouses sitting resplendent in rolling dales and craggy innings being carved out in a manner that would get Geoffrey Boycott nodding appreciatively into his Yorkshire Tea.

Those blue motorway signs introducing an alien zone called THE NORTH have a lot to answer for but what constitutes Yorkshire cricket fudges across geographical and administrative boundaries.

In cricketing terms, my interpretation of the scope of Yorkshire roughly follows that of the YCB's remit, as a single entity that stretches beyond Sheffield in the south to Middlesbrough in the north.

Out west, Todmorden offers a border with Lancashire, given the boundary is believed to run through their idyllic cricket ground on Burnley Road while the angular nose (Julius Caesar or Mr Burns from *The Simpsons* both sprang to mind) from Hull to Bridlington is Yorkshire's coast meeting the North Sea at its eastern flank.

This will be so much more than just recollections from grizzled men in whites playing hard, relentless league cricket since the day they were hewn from coal, while sucking on pipes and pining for the days of Hedley Verity.

Little about this six-month, sporting soul-searching ended up going impeccably to plan, as if the beating heart of Yorkshire cricket was contained within a tenacious walnut shell that would release its treasures when it was good and ready.

Yet, the rain cancellations, travel chaos and fluidity prised open unexpected doors and matches I'd never anticipated. Imams and disabled cricketers both feature as does the rarity of a brand-new cricket club and a whirlwind afternoon encompassing 13 grounds north of Leeds.

The promised call about a tapeball tournament in the middle of the night at a deserted Keighley gasworks never came, but it exemplified that the stories were out there.

This is a ballad to Yorkshire cricket, as sung proudly by a cacophony of voices within the game.

From the highest league cricket ground in England to the 82-year-old county cricketer, from a fledgling club making strides to vicars socking sixes in their dog collars, let's head off on a tour of Yorkshire cricket in all of its diversity.

Park Avenue, Bradford

WALKING up the cobbled slope at Bradford Forster Square station in early April, the fact that outdoor cricket is back on the agenda marks the end of mournful waiting.

It's quiet, passing the giant arches under which the homeless curl up in sleeping bags as cars rumble down the incline of Cheapside above.

The guy who sings an exhaustive back catalogue for a few tossed coins, with a voice flatter than the wicket at Taunton, is belting out Bob Marley. He is irrepressibly cheerful in all weathers and nods good morning before scattering pigeons with a final, gut-busting crescendo.

This pre-season friendly between two Bradford Mutual Sunday School Cricket League sides, Omar and Interlink, is at Bradford Park Avenue, a former county ground being earmarked by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) for root and branch redevelopment over the next few years.

Ascertaining when a season actually starts is not always as straightforward as it sounds.

Yorkshire leagues tend to start anywhere from middle of April to late May though the keener cricketers can

sometimes be found outside in whites on muddy wickets in March.

Pre-match online research on this particular league revealed their old website, floating around Google's repositories like space junk. It didn't show current fixtures but contained some gems from a past umpires' meeting with reprimands for players undressing in public; umpires urged not to continue in thunder and lightning and, perhaps my favourite, 'Can everyone stop using their mobile phones during a game?'

The Bradford Mutual Sunday School Cricket League dates from 1896 when nine clubs like Heaton Baptists and Fagley Mission took part in the inaugural season.

Over the years, as churches closed and social circumstances shifted, church and Sunday school cricket teams became redundant. Club names across Yorkshire like Shipley Providence and Bingley Congregationals still reflect their sporting-religious heritage but the cricket landscape is much altered.

Fewer teams, a reduction in grounds, less insular communities, newer technologies giving us the ability to travel further and infinitely more distraction, particularly electronically, are all factors affecting how cricket in Bradford and across the country has evolved.

If the game in these parts has receded in terms of the number of leagues and teams playing, allied with fewer cricket grounds, that's not to write it off. There is still an awful lot of cricket, as opposed to a lot of awful cricket.

Alongside the semi-professional Bradford League, the Bradford Mutual and Quaid E. Azam Cricket Leagues still fly the flag for the city after the Bradford Central League, which once had 72 teams, limped to an end in 2010.

So, here we are, 119 years later with my 2015 season about to get under way with a friendly game between a local community centre and a restaurant. I am approaching giddy delirium.

Let's face it, we've all waited far too long for cricket to return; first patiently, then grumpily and finally fighting a cabin fever that can only be tempered by unfurling a rusty forward defensive stroke with the office stapler.

Those of us who are hot-wired into the game of cricket don't just appreciate it; we inhale it, neck pints of it, talk, read and dream about it. We check scores on every conceivable device, plan our lives around fixtures and know Joe Root's batting average to four decimal places.

The taxi from Bradford Forster Square railway station rockets up Little Horton Lane, fizzing past the hospital where the volunteers in the cafe do the best toast in the entire world.

Their secret is to grill it and then slather on enough butter that it entirely absorbs in to become a glistening yellow, crunchy health warning.

Ordinarily I walk most places but five minutes with a taxi driver and you can glean all kinds of inside knowledge about cricket in their patch – though not this time as this cabbie admits he didn't know anyone still played at Park Avenue.

Who can blame him given the old county ground is sandwiched between a supermarket and a gym and looks utterly knackered. The blackened walls have a line of barbed wire across the top giving it more of a feel of a prison than a sporting venue to the uninitiated.

A circuit of the perimeter walls reveals Bradford Park Avenue's exterior is boarded-up, hostile and dilapidated.

Jagged metal spikes, an inverted shark's mouth, puts off those tempted to scale the walls.

Metallic gates the colour of mint choc chip, through which thousands of county cricket punters once flowed, haven't been opened in decades and are rusting away next to a phone box.

Walking through the entrance at the side of the stand with its peeling whitewash and a salmon pink freight container don't exactly spark joy but did I mention that THERE IS CRICKET AGAIN, so the not-so-managed decline here is failing to dampen the spirits.

Actually, it's quite the opposite. There's the crackle of potential as this ageing grandfather with creaking knees still has the ability to charm. Yorkshire County Cricket Club first played a three-day game at Park Avenue in 1881 against Kent and I can't help but think of all the masters that have graced this city ground during that time.

In an era long before modern cricketers with their barn door bats would tear up the rulebook on scoring etiquette, the 1881 game was a sedate introduction for Bradfordians.

After Yorkshire had mustered 213, Kent succumbed to 62 all out from 50 overs. Politely asked to follow on, Kent then scored 64 off 64.1 overs (385 balls), doubtless keen to rein in their previous, madcap attacking exploits.

For those that feast on statistics, at the other end of the spectrum is South African AB de Villiers who, at a one-day international in January 2015, sizzled his way to 149 off 44 balls against the West Indies in Johannesburg.

Kent would have their revenge at Bradford Park Avenue but they'd have to wait a while. Until 6 May 1967 to be exact, when Yorkshire were bowled out for 40 in 45.4 overs.

Standing in the gravel car park with the sun on my face, being at Park Avenue is to be transported back to a time when Bradford hosted momentous matches and imagine what it must have been like, jammed with thousands of cricket fans.

Clinging to the lifebuoy of history will not resurrect Bradford but it has certainly seen stellar encounters from Yorkshire taking on an England XI in 1918 to welcoming Don Bradman's Australians in 1930.

If you're of a certain age, you might recall wicketkeeper David Bairstow making his county debut at Park Avenue in 1970 against Gloucestershire as an 18-year-old having taken his A Level English Literature exam at 7am.

I wonder if David, while hurling himself about in the field, had cause to revisit his answers. I imagine the thrill of representing his county at a young age trumped any nagging worries over J.B. Priestley.

When I emerged from the gloom of the sports hall having taken my A Level English Literature exam, it soon became apparent that all was not entirely well. Everyone kept talking about the wicked *Macbeth* question on the back page. As I hadn't seen a wicked *Macbeth* question on the back page, this was not going to be my finest hour.

When the end of county cricket came for Bradford Park Avenue, a ground that still remains intoxicatingly nostalgic for Yorkshire fans, it was with a crushing defeat and a record score of 681/7 declared by Leicestershire in 1996.

The love affair with the city had been on the wane as the stadium fell into disrepair, the crowds thinned and the cost of maintaining the outground stacked up, so Yorkshire County Cricket Club moved on.

Today, Park Avenue may stand as a forlorn, crumbling relic but this deserted stadium is still where a clutch of Bradford teams call home – and where new cricketing roots are already taking hold.

I've come along unannounced so there's mild curiosity as introductions are made and the rucksack with spare camera lenses is squirrelled away for safekeeping.

The scorer's table is adorned with phones, sunglasses, stationery and the changing room key attached to a block of wood with 'home' written in capital letters in biro.

The scoreboard is a wooden, hinged, freestanding structure, popped up as a sandwich shop advertising today's specials.

There is a slight air of incredulity that anyone would bother to come and watch a friendly game upon which nothing is riding but that doesn't prevent the conversations flowing.

Interlink are batting and it's all happening out in the middle. The pitch is offering plenty of encouragement in the contest between bat and ball. Cue indignant LBW shouts that turn to pleading, gigantic wafts at the ball and good-humoured smiles between two sides that look as if they know each other well.

Even though Park Avenue's infrastructure is more of the shabby than the chic with tired, mildew-coated plastic red seating and grimy remnants of a white paint job on the walls that likely date back to the 1970s, you can see why the few remaining teams relish playing here.

The ground is convenient to get to and Park Avenue has never completely lost its prestige. After all, this is the hallowed turf where international greats of the game

from Bradman to Gavaskar have walked out to bat and for certain Interlink players, they re-tell, with a sense of awe, a Boycott hundred as if it were yesterday.

As word gets out that a journalist has come to watch their game, the Interlink squad line up for a photo with the striking outline of the Al-Jamia Suffa-Tul-Islam Grand Mosque in the background.

They all have matching kit with logos advertising a bakery, accountant and deli splashed across their fronts. Someone at Interlink is making the most of local sponsorship with their website also featuring a £15 MOT deal and protein shakes with a picture of a muscled, tattooed warrior whose sculpted six-pack has not quite yet been replicated at Interlink (no offence, lads).

The scorer, Sara, is in her first season with Interlink CC and is getting to know players' names and gently reminding players not to stand in front of her. She keeps an immaculate book with black, red and blue notations.

It's the funny thing about cricket scorers that they rarely get the credit they deserve for being such an integral part of the game. Leave the job to the players and the scorebook can look like a pre-school playgroup has been at it with crayons.

Cricketers will throw up their arms and proclaim that they 'dunno how to score' when asked to do their stint and yet the role of the scorer in the hierarchy of a cricket club often unfairly sits below that of the players.

That won't stop some batsmen, once dismissed, making an immediate beeline to the scorer to check they didn't miss that glanced single in the 14th over that had been originally given as a leg bye.

But here in the south-west of the city, fenced in by the ring road of the A6177, cricket is being treasured as

the afternoon traffic drones by, oblivious to the tussle behind the shabby walls.

These two squads are not holding anything back as they relish the chance to be outdoors playing again and the Yorkshire weather is being unusually accommodating.

There are gargantuan straight sixes plonked on to the stretch of grass beyond the path where a local archery club are practising by thudding arrows into targets. Batsmen whisk themselves off their feet with their attempts to hit the ball into the middle of next week and stumps are splayed like crooked teeth.

The Park Avenue pitch still plays true; no brutal lifting deliveries or balls that land and scuttle. There's now a groundsman employed to look after the place as one of the many baby steps involved in an ambitious regeneration plan to bring the ground back to full health.

By the time you read this, the artificial pitches will be in as facilities begin to get a desperately needed overhaul that will see outdoor nets, a pavilion and top to toe refurbishment with significant investment.

Plans revealed in November 2015 included those dreamy artist's impressions that mesh utopian splendour with cartoon colour. The new community pavilion wins design points as a wooden-clad, stretched boomerang with floor to ceiling glass for a cosy, indoor, first-floor panorama.

If I was to mischievously pick holes in the rendering of the technical drawings, the walls do have the look of a medieval castle that should comfortably withstand siege warfare. Or even pies dispatched with relish by batsmen like human trebuchets.

As with any stadium masterplan of this scope and endeavour, there will be phases, five in total if you

believe the builders, that kick off with eight practice wickets and nets plumbed in on the site of what used to be the Bradford Park Avenue football pitch.

A gigantic barn is earmarked to be set back from but in line with the community nets to offer batsmen a tantalising target after they have got their eye in.

Once concrete is laid and springy, the C-shaped support structure separating net lanes will be locked into place like super-sized staples and artificial carpets will be rolled out.

The renovation to the Park Avenue wicket and outfield itself for the purpose of first-class cricket (i.e. the professional game) is early in the order of things for all the literature emphasising that this is community first and county a distant second.

However, a building can spring up in next to no time but professional pitches can take years to properly bed in and get right so there's an element of future-proofing going on.

There's a beady eye on Bradford for 2019 when Yorkshire CCC will be juggling fixtures across the County Championship, T20 Blast, Royal London Cup, a Test match against Australia, a one-day international against Pakistan and four ICC World Cup matches.

I'd like to think teams like Interlink CC, who have stuck with this cricket ground when many others deserted it, get the fruits of this evolution by having first dibs on a surface that should be the pride of the county – but they are worried they'll be turfed off.

The lion's share of this project, estimated at £5.5m, is the Community Pavilion that will boast luxurious changing rooms the teams of yesteryear never dreamt of and a restaurant with a capacity for hundreds of diners.

Repairs to walls, thousands of new seats, a bit of Polyfilla and a lick of paint are all on the horizon too, along with floodlights that would make Bradford Park Avenue capable of hosting day-night international games.

At a time of austerity, the rationale for this mega-investment in a single ground comes from a shortage of cricket pitches that flies in the face of an overwhelming demand in Bradford and surrounding areas to play.

The ECB sees engagement with south Asian communities as a key plank in reversing falling numbers who play recreational cricket across the country, backed by a survey that told them 30 per cent of those playing cricket are from a south Asian background.

Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, Leicester and London are five cities where initiatives are under way and the Bradford Park Avenue redevelopment partly taps into that strategy to better cater for a population who could potentially be encouraged to play more cricket.

In a few years, the goal is to have many more Bradfordian teams playing midweek and weekends as well as practising in the nets, with the venue catering for business and community requirements beyond cricket.

Sure, there are disbelievers who point to the way the site has been blighted by vandalism in the past and a visitor's incredulity when it comes to something as mundane but practical as parking.

State-of-the-art, bells-and-whistles security will need to be integrated to protect this multi-million-pound investment, that's for sure. Those that used to play at Park Avenue tell of being chased off by gangs and not feeling particularly safe.

Just closing the gates and turning out the lights will be asking for trouble in a deprived area of the city because, sadly, it will be seen as a challenge to idiots looking to trash and steal stuff – but through feasibility studies and planning behind the scenes, we have to trust Park Avenue’s guardianship is in safe hands.

There is also talk of Yorkshire’s disability and ladies teams using Bradford Park Avenue as a future base, no doubt a key tick when it comes to attracting the sort of grants that will be needed, as Yorkshire County Cricket Club and Bradford Council are not going to be stumping up all the cash.

But whether or not the kind of money needed to breathe a new lease of life into Park Avenue is forthcoming, long-term sustainability and having the right people to drive that will be absolutely key.

It’s not difficult to plough money into capital projects but it’s quite another thing to meet the costs and foot the bill on an ongoing basis. Who manages Park Avenue – and who pays for it in years to come – is an altogether tougher conversation, you’d imagine.

It feels churlish to strike a note of caution when the proposed sums of money being earmarked for Bradford should lead to a striking, modern facility that the city can be proud of.

But long after the diggers have rolled out and the window cleaners have squeegeed the final pane of glass, the annual running costs for the pavilion alone have been pencilled in at over £320,000 on the corporate calculator.

So, is sinking staggering amounts of money into one particular venue the way forward? One line of thinking is to distribute the wealth and cut the funding pie in other ways instead – ensuring there is parity among all

Yorkshire clubs tackling issues like effective drainage to help avoid cancellations.

When it comes to the money, we often gauge by return on investment so if this Bradford project caters for the cricket demographic through sheer weight of numbers netting, training and on matchdays, that's a positive, right?

However there are consequences, some of which are not necessarily ones to brag about, as seen with other cricket facilities which hoovered up major grants. Once erected, these hubs are immediately under pressure to justify their cost and so the clarion call is for everyone to be sucked in from miles around to use them.

This redistribution within communities from A to B (rather than always bringing in new users) can mean those with existing facilities might desert them for the tempting upgrade. There's also the inevitable economics that could have an impact on a squad like Interlink CC who are probably steeling themselves for a price hike.

Though Bradford does have a shortage of cricket grounds, there are some not yet being used to their capacity either. Karmand Cricket Club is a steep walk up Barkerend Road and can be found behind the Karmand Community Centre in the attic of the city.

Up there, the elevated views are breathtaking although if the wind is blowing the wrong way, the tang from the nearby abattoir can be pretty unpleasant. After years battling for planning permission and funding, Karmand have smart twin outdoor nets, a tasteful pavilion and a ground to be proud of with its gigantic steep bank on one side.

There is room for both Karmand and Park Avenue, of course, but it's always tempting to play devil's

advocate to tease out how a decision actually resonates across an area. There is no singular solution but the allocation of spondoolies in cricket is a topic that drives many a conversation for a lock-in at the pub with an open tab.

Everyone will have their own take on how cricket clubs can be best assisted though I'm partial to the idea of the ECB recruiting staff, a bit like personal advisers, to tour the country and help implement an individual development plan for each club that delivers exactly what they most urgently need.

There are cricket development managers, coaches and administrators within the Yorkshire Cricket Board, as an example, that each has an area the size of a European country and hundreds of clubs and schools to manage.

For Interlink, who moved back to Bradford from the playing fields on Hirst Lane in Shipley, where the welcome waft of warm bread from the bakery greets you en route to the canal, digits are crossed that the people of Bradford – for whom this project was principally designed – are the ones that truly benefit.

For all the incredulity and cynicism that some have with the reinvigoration of the mothballed county ground, let's hope the next few years see ambition matched with fruition. The end-game has to be to replicate the teeming crowds of yesteryear when Park Avenue once hosted county cricket and to that end, Bradford would be an ideal host city for a World Cup team like Pakistan for the ICC World Cup in 2019.

For the moment, there's still much to be thankful for, not least Sara putting in a word when the Interlink and Omar players break for tea which leads to a plate of spicy chicken and pizza being deposited in front of me.

It's a leisurely introduction into the cricket season and during the afternoon both squads joke and pose when they see the camera trained on them.

When cricket resumes after tea, so does the torrent of action; it's hard to remember a single defensive stroke and there are unfortunate run-outs, with the bails repeatedly sent airborne as the desire to hit the ball into Centenary Square in the city centre takes hold.

They don't realise it at the time but perhaps this April friendly is the catalyst for future heroics with a crucial bit of fine-tuning as the Interlink CC squad end up winning the 2015 Bradford Mutual Sunday School Cricket League title.

They played their cricket with a smile on their faces; were inclusive when this pasty-faced beanpole turned up to find out about their club; and appear to have taken a liking to Bradford Park Avenue, which they'll be back to in 2016 and hopefully for many more years to come.