

A History of South Woodham Ferrers Rugby Union Football Club

“I was thinking of trying to start a Rugby Club.....”

These were the immortal words uttered by Dave Jones to Derek Lyons during a cricket match at the village hall on a chilly May afternoon in 1981. So the idea was spawned to start a Rugby Club in a developing new town despite the local presence of clubs such as Maldon, Chelmsford, Brentwood, Billericay, Basildon, Burnham on Crouch and, slightly further afield, Southend, Westcliffe and Thurrock.

Some 30 years on, we now have a Club structure and set-up which is the envy of all of our local rivals, and foundations and a playing structure which will stand us in good stead for many years to come.

So how do you turn the idea into reality? We needed to establish first of all if there was any other interest in the town and so we called an open meeting in the village hall. We erected notices of our intentions and spread the news by word of mouth. One of our cricket colleagues, Alan Woolmer, was the chairman of the local Sports Council and we enlisted his help. The first meeting was held in July and turned out to be well attended, so we made a commitment to form the club, and with the assistance of Ron Bushby who was the secretary of the Sports Council, we drew up a constitution. A committee was formed on that fateful night in July, comprising Derek Lyons, Andy Turner, Dave Jones, Colin Eschborn and Paul Spencer.

Dave Jones had been a member at Burnham on Crouch Rugby Club, and we established in advance of the 1981/82 season that Burnham on Crouch were struggling to field a third team, and to help us get off the ground, we initially started supplying players to their third team and playing under the banner of “Woodburns”, that was in September 1981. Over the first few weeks of the season, the number of players from Woodham grew, and it was not long before Woodham was providing the vast majority of players to fulfil these fixtures.

At the same time, we commenced negotiations with Chelmsford Borough Council to try and convince them that we were serious about starting a Rugby Club in the town and needed pitch facilities. Saltcoats Park was given over entirely to football pitches and a hockey pitch. Again with the support of the Sports Council, we secured a commitment from the Borough Council to lay a rugby pitch at the far end of the ground adjacent to the railway line. The original Clubhouse was also being sited at Saltcoats Park under the leadership and direction

of Alan Woolmer and members of the Rugby Club were actively involved in the building of the original pavilion.

There was still much work to be done in terms of continuing to attract players and members, affiliation to the RFU and to the Essex County Rugby Union, and buying kit etc. One of the early things we did was to design the club badge which exists to this day. The badge was intended to represent the fact that South Woodham Ferrers was a developing new town adjacent to the River Crouch. During the 1981/82 season, all our home games were played at Burnham on Crouch and it always paid to be one of the first in the dressing room as the jerseys which were used by the Burnham on Crouch third team had seen better days and you did well to find one there without numerous holes!

We were also working on a very limited budget, and again were fortunate through the Local Sports Council to be able to apply for funding and a grant. The original club colours of all black were agreed upon for two reasons, one is that it was more economical to have jerseys of a single colour and secondly it was felt that our opponents seeing a team in all black might be slightly unnerved and intimidated, although it was quickly obvious once the game began that their fears would be totally unfounded!

1982/83 saw our first season using the new pitch at Saltcoats Park, and before every game we had to "walk" the pitch to ensure that there were no stones/sharp objects as the pitch had been newly laid during the previous summer. The fact that we now had our own pitch and the use of a Clubhouse put us in a position where we were able to push forward and look to expand the club and also to attract the interests of people moving into the town given that there were still a lot of house building and development. Likewise the William De Ferrers School was expanding and we wanted to be in a position to ensure that as students left school they joined a local club rather than move out of the area.

Establishing fixtures as a new club was also difficult in those days, there were no leagues, and the majority of local clubs had established fixtures, so trying to break into their fixture list did prove difficult. However, with much perseverance, and many phone calls, the fixture list gradually took shape as we started to build good relationships with our local rivals. In 1983 we formed the mini section which was formed as a separate club at that stage in view of the availability of funding and grants from the Local Council, and very much as is the case now, that was built upon the foundation of enthusiastic fathers giving up their time on a Sunday!

In 1984/85 we were able to field a second 15 for the first time, and put together a fixture list, the same season as the club entered the Essex Cup for the first time, drawing East London as a home fixture in the first round. East London was a very strong club in those days, and was one of the favourites to win the cup. Woodham put up at magnificent display, losing narrowly in the final stages of the game. There was tremendous local support

that day and that, coupled with subsequent press coverage, meant that we were well and truly on the map and a force to be reckoned with in the future.

Since then, the club has simply gone from strength to strength, and what has been achieved in a relatively short space of time is little short of miraculous, and was crowned in October 2004 with the opening of the magnificent new Clubhouse.

Whilst Burnham on Crouch remains one of our local rivals, we do owe them a huge debt of gratitude for their invaluable help and assistance in the early days of the club. Over the years, countless people have also dedicated their time and energy to building up and maintaining the club, and to all those who have made such a commitment, we again owe a huge debt of thanks.

We must also acknowledge the tremendous support of our sponsors and Lady Getty for her generous donation which started the Clubhouse project, AON Limited and currently LFC Insurance, The Stone Company, Effective Exercise, Clive Beardall, Tulip International and Perception Media - and without their support over the years; the Clubhouse project would not now be complete. So, as we celebrate our achievements, we also look forward to the next 30 years in the sure knowledge that we have laid firm foundations.

