

# Widnes RUFC Centenary Circuit

**A Six Mile Walk around our  
Industrial Town's Sporting Heritage**



Widnes RUFC was founded 100 years ago in 1924 by school teacher and war hero Alf Salt. This easy-to-walk route passes key locations and sports grounds which go some way to telling the true story of the town's sporting development plus links with local industry in that period and earlier.

## Directions from Wids front door

Route video link: [https://youtu.be/wpRzV1\\_-tmE?si=y09rM1BS7JtS4rNg](https://youtu.be/wpRzV1_-tmE?si=y09rM1BS7JtS4rNg)



**Turn left out of club down Heath Road.** You will pass Brentfield, for many years the location of McKechnie Brothers sports club which you can see in the background of the photo above. It later became the home of Widnes St Maries Rugby League

Club. The chemical company opened its Widnes works in 1891 and closed in the late 1980s. The club was also the home to football, bowls and table tennis before concentrating on Rugby League until a fire engulfed the property in August 2012.





***Left at T-junction on to Liverpool Road.*** To the right, you can see the Frank Myler Pavilion on the site of the former ICI Recreation Club. Before closure for financial reasons this was an even bigger venue and the home of Halton RUFC (formerly Widnes ICI). The picture below is the Rugby Union team in 1971. Kneeling on the extreme left is Mark Cross who moved to the Wids later in the decade, going on to become Club President in Widnes RUFC's Golden Jubilee year 2009.



Imperial Chemicals Industries was a combination of four core companies who merged in 1926 to become the largest manufacturer in Britain. Two of them, Brunner Mond and United Alkali, had factories in Widnes. As its massive success slowed down, the business was reorganised and de-merged between 1991 and 2007, finally closing in January 2008. The club lasted another year until 2009. It had been the home to 13 rugby sides, 7 football



teams, chess, table tennis, darts, bowls, hockey and a running club. The building burned down in May 2012.

Further along on the same side is the now deconsecrated St Raphael's Church, scene of many Wids weddings. The

Stewards Avenue estate behind the church harvested many well-known rugby players.

Widnes Golf Club can be seen on the left hand side of Liverpool Road, its entrance round the corner on Highfield Road, opposite the home of the legendary Mike Ryan, former Wids captain and coach. Golf has proved to be



the game of choice for any number of sportsmen, retired or simply with time on their hands, and you can hear many rugby-related anecdotes at the 19th hole. Golf Club members are regulars at Widnes RUFC matches with an annual Wids Golf Day in the close season cementing the relationship.





## ***Right at Cookhouse on to Lowerhouse Lane.***

1 MILE POINT - Corner of Scott Avenue.

Less than a hundred yards down on the left you can't miss the Halton Stadium, a multi-purpose venue and regional centre for table tennis built on the site of Naughton Park, home of Widnes Vikings Rugby League Club who achieved considerable success and acclaim as the Chemics before the advent of Super League. The Wids took part in the lavish opening day of the new ground in November 1997.



The Cricketers Arms on the corner of Milton Rd is an indication of the fact that the Lowerhouse Lane fields were originally shared with Widnes Cricket Club. The Wids had many links with the Chemics. As well as supplying players, founder Alf Salt was a committee man, Colin Hirons was President and Wids Past President Peter Barrow was Chief Executive of the Vikings.

Council-owned Leigh Recreation and King George V playing fields further down on the right are on the site of Gossage's Rec, another works club with



a proprietor prominent in Widnes history. Gossages, considered a model employer and popular with its workforce since 1850, was the largest soap manufacturer in Britain at the end of the 19th century. The business was bought out by Brunner Mond in 1911, ultimately becoming part of Unilever. These pitches and Catalyst at Spike Island are possibly its main memorials in the town. In the early days of Widnes RUFC, the Rec was one of several grounds used to accommodate fixtures for a growing number of teams. Transport was

by double decker bus and, as Past President Dave “Ace” Robertson will testify, anyone sent off had to walk back to the club in their studded boots.

***Turn left before McDonalds on to Moor Lane.*** Widnes Corporation bus depot on the left is a disused listed building. Spectators went by bus to the 1991 and 1992 Lancs Cup Final and several junior finals. Geoff Council ex-county schoolboy and Wids player, now webmaster and Vice President, was one of the drivers. The depot merits a story of its own as it reputedly housed the first closed top double deckers in the country.





## **Scenes from the 1991 cup win against Orrell at Waterloo**



***Cross Kingsway and turn left at library. Straight past Victoria***

***Square on to Widnes Road.*** On the right is the former Town Hall which once was a meeting place for away fixtures, most notably Barrow in Furness at the start of each season. It later became a night club which was visited by at least one guest speaker after a club dinner.

2 MILE POINT - Asda

***Cross Asda car park and carry on past Simms Cross pub on right to pedestrianised street which becomes Albert Rd.*** Wids Lancashire cup winner Alan “Abby” Forshaw was landlord of the pub from 1979 and a highly successful amateur Rugby League side spread its name, most notably playing Wigan Warriors at the DW Stadium in the Challenge Cup. Several Wids players turned out at various stages in their careers. Clive Bancroft and Keith “Beefy” Newton have been enthusiastic Mad Wasps tourists down the years. It’s over two decades since any rugby was played on tour but the spirit lives on. Gary “Spike” Clare, now past-President, is the leading light and has encouraged a new breed of Angry Bees to take up the mantle. He is pictured at the centre of these Yellowcoats with Clive on the right.



Further up the street on the left is John Geddes Cycles. John opened the shop in 1978, having been a national cycling champion and 1956 Olympic bronze medallist.



Pictured here, he has been a long-term club sponsor who has supplied and serviced bikes used by groups of Wids casual riders sometimes referred to as The Wild Hogs.

The cycling craze came to Heath Road long before lycra. 2003 was the real starting point as the Trans Pennine Trail presented a substitute for the lack of rugby games on the aforementioned Mad Wasp tours. The Cheshire Cycleway was the next to follow with many variations and destinations added since.





The terrace of shops on Albert Rd includes the original home of John Brunner in the town. A Victorian entrepreneur and social reformer, he met chemist Ludwig Mond while working at John Hutchinson & Co. Their partnership promoted improved working practices and benefits for employees. Crucially, these included sports and recreation clubs.



**Turn left up Deacon Road at traffic lights by Bradley pub.** The shop on the corner used to house Kirkham's Bakery and, according to club records, hosted the first-ever annual club dinner in the form of a smoking evening.

**Turn right at next lights on to Appleton Village** Car park on the left was site of Appleton Lodge, John Hutchinson's home. Effectively, the father of the town's chemical industry, his grave is in the top right corner, a matter of inches from the church walls.

St Bedes had been built in 1847 as a ministry to the rapidly growing Roman Catholic population (particularly Irish and Eastern European) who came to work in local factories. Hutchinson was not a Roman Catholic.

***Follow road bend around St Bede's Church***

The southern gates of Victoria Park are opposite. The park itself is home to a variety of sporting activities and hosts a weekly Parkrun.



Appleton House, the home of the Deacon family was just inside this entrance until 1906. Formal gardens mark its location. This photo was possibly taken in 1904/5 when the Angel and Elephant pub (centre-left, later Appleton



Arms, now a nursery) was constructed. As Chairman of Widnes Education Committee, Henry Wade Deacon went on to play a crucial role in our story with the club's alma mater Grammar School being renamed in his honour.

***At T-junction, turn right on to Birchfield Rd***



After the main park gates, we come to the Horse and Jockey pub which once hosted a fiendish weekly quiz set by retired St Patrick's head teacher John McMullen (bottom right) who played full back in the first game at Heath Rd.





John's long term successor in that position was Les Whitfield pictured next to his son Mark on the left. The other five are the Rileys whose home is a few doors along from the pub. Matt, Gareth, Andy and Paul stand either side of their father Graham ("Crack") before his retirement game at the Wids, aged 70. His mate Les was only 69 at the time. They are both Past Presidents.

3 MILE POINT: Wade Deacon School on the left. The Crown pub on the right. School and Pub were used as the original grounds and clubhouse before the move to Heath Road in 1959.

The railway station is another spot where Wids teams gathered before travelling to away games, particularly in Liverpool and Wirral.



The so-called "dead centre of Widnes" has quite a few Wids connections, quite apart from the number of ex-players buried in the cemetery.

For one thing it's currently Jon Hetherington's workplace.

A former player, coach and Lancashire Trophy winner, Jon has achieved some YouTube





fame with his “Trot The Egg In” podcast which has seen him interview a range of rugby players from internationals to third teamers with the same level of attention to detail. It’s well worth a listen.

***Opposite cemetery gates, turn right down Derby Road.*** The nursery in front of deconsecrated St Pius Church was the home of 1930s Wids player and Second World War hero Air Marshal Sir Edward Gordon Tap Jones, the only man in his family not to become a doctor. His father was the town medical officer and won the Military Cross in the First World War.



The Methodist church on the right was Alf Salt’s place of worship and one of the Wids original players, Bill Ankers was the organist. They are pictured in this classic shot of that pioneer 1924 team.

Further up Derby Road and off our route, the Hollies was the home of Ludwig Mond, business partner of John Brunner whose story we have touched on. It was later the home of the avuncular Glynn Andrews, a squash-



playing, jazz loving car dealer who died in the year he was President Elect. Of all his contributions, supplying and maintaining the Wids minibus is the one that sticks in most players' minds to this day. Virgin Radio DJ Chris Evans made one appearance for the Wids Colts, famously saying on his BBC Radio Two drive time show that he realised he wasn't cut out for Rugby because he was convinced he wouldn't survive the bus ride to the game.

***After Methodist church, turn left up Beaconsfield Road.*** On the right is Widnes Cricket Club, a close-season diversion for many players, a watering-hole for locals. Wids Past President and Captain Charlie Morris offered up this selection: A. Atkin, M. Hignett, M.King, G.Davies, T.Ledson, C. McElroy, C.Atkin, C.Morris, I.Harry, T. Young, Rupert Faulkner, D.Morris, Robin Faulkner, R.Critchley, C.Rigby

***At T-junction, turn right on to Pit Lane then left up Coroners Lane opposite St Luke's church.***





In the photo above, two Farnworth-born Past Presidents Dave “Ace” Robinson and John Barrow reminisce about the sporting heritage of the village, church and Ring O’Bells pub. There’s a lot of information on the notice board and inside both buildings.



4 MILE POINT - Glebe Lane, half way along Coroners Lane. The homes of seven Wids Past Presidents are in close proximity. Graeme McGregor and Ray Heapey, members of this 1996 walking party, were the nearest and prominent in Widnes society as doctor and teacher respectively. Just a few blocks away, you'll find the homes of Les Whitfield, Dave Herriman, Mark Cross, Dave “Ace” Robertson and Ivor Lewis, all pictured elsewhere. Graeme McGregor- Appleton Surgery GP and honorary club doctor. A Squash player who only stepped on to rugby pitch for medical matters. Ray Heapey - Bankfield Maths master who played first team scrum half for the first ever 1st XV Widnes RUFC game in September 1959. Les Whitfield. The club's only double Lancashire Cup winner (1976 and 1991). Played until he was 69.

Dave Herriman. Club's first coach. Past President of Lancashire RFU.  
Mark Cross. First ex-Halton player to become Wids President. Notable fundraiser whose efforts helped finance the lounge extension in 1979.  
Dave "Ace" Robertson. Clubman of the Year for work on development of pitches from old farmland. His recollections of working life on Fiddler's Ferry's eight towers feature in the Halton Heritage Working Lives project.  
Ivor Lewis. Played until his 65th birthday and still active as Trustee and Sponsorship Secretary

***At T-junction, turn right on to Birchfield Road*** Glance to the left coming out of Coroners Lane for a distant glimpse of the ex-Birchfield RUFC/ Albright & Wilson Recreation club which became the third victim in a series of unfortunate fires that beset former works recreation clubs in the town.





To the right, through the trees of Birchfield Gardens, you can see Thatchways, the former home of one of the McKechnie Brothers.

**Turn left down Upton Lane** The Upton Tavern has been and continues to be a popular venue for rugby players and supporters. It dropped the Upton and became simply The Tavern in 1985 on the arrival of landlord John Wood whose playing career encompassed the Wids, Chemics and Great Britain. A group of his Wids contemporaries, now mainly retirees, comprise the Wids DIY club who have a couple of get-togethers each year at the pub.



**Beyond Tavern and line of houses, turn left up Upton Bridle Path and right down Rock Lane footpath.**

Rock Lane used to mark the northern border of the farmers' fields leased from the council for pitches.

5 MILE POINT - first small brick footbridge over stream.

**At the end of the path, turn left on Queensbury Way and pass three roundabouts before reaching island next to Four Topped Oak** While the facade of that pub remains the same as it was, the interior has changed beyond all recognition since its time as a magnet for rugby players of both

codes and many clubs. It was by no means unknown to see international RL players having a pint with one of their RU counterparts in the 70s and 80s.

**Turn left up Prescot Rd** The playing fields on the right include two pitches owned by the Wids with the remainder used by Rugby League and Association Football teams.



Over the railway bridge on the left provides the best known view of Widnes RUFC. An area of unwanted farmland was transformed in the 50s by volunteers and developed into the clubhouse and grounds you can see today - owned and maintained by volunteer members.



***Turn left into Heath Road***



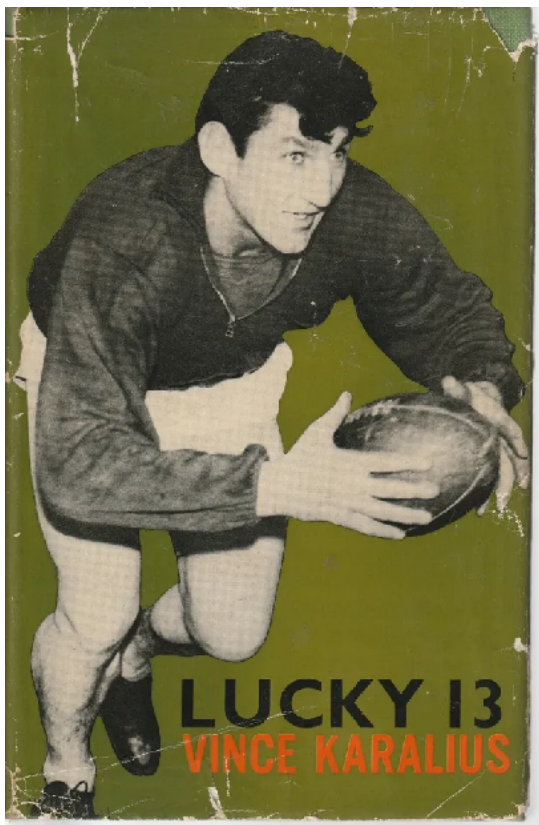
6 MILE POINT - Club front door. If club is open, come in and buy a pint. You deserve it. There can be quite a crowd in on a Saturday in particular. If not too busy, there are indoor games to entertain you as well as TV sport.



Table tennis, popular in the 60s and 70s at Heath Rd made a welcome return in 2009 (top right).

The game was revived by Frank Lawless and refined by Bill Wheeler.

The club now boasts facilities that the early players could never have even imagined.



Should you harbour any doubts about coming into the Wids, here's an unsolicited recommendation from the autobiography of the town's most famous Rugby League player and coach, known in Australia as "The Wild Bull of the Pampas" - Vincent Karalius

Now please don't get me wrong. And don't think I'm anti-Rugby Union. Far from it. I have some grand friends in the amateur game. My wife Barbara and I always enjoy ourselves at Saturday-night dances at one

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Rugby Union club's headquarters. They go down big with me.

His brother Tony was quite fond of the place as well:





Tony was a club regular for many years, renowned for picking up four pints at a time and, in his own words, playing dominoes very competitively. He's pictured with Andy O'Neill, club captain in Widnes RUFC's Golden Jubilee season 2009-10.



Andy gathered this squad of his predecessors and successors as Captain to launch the Wids Centenary. Some will be doing the walk. Look out for them on the way. Thanks to everyone for your support.

A YouTube guide, showing landmarks, road signs and turning points, can be accessed on **Widnes RUFC Wids 6 Mile Centenary Circuit** or use this link: [https://youtu.be/wpRzV1\\_-tmE?si=y09rM1BS7JtS4rNg](https://youtu.be/wpRzV1_-tmE?si=y09rM1BS7JtS4rNg)