

Kidderminster Harriers – the early years

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Introduction

In this essay we consider the early years of the existence of Kidderminster Harriers, from its foundation as an Athletics club in the 1870s, to its re-foundation after a period of financial trauma in 1892. We mainly use information from newspapers of the time, with all the possibilities of journalistic inaccuracy and inconsistent selection of newsworthy material, supplemented by some material from other sources. To an extent we concentrate on the latter part of the period, and in particular on the association football playing period from 1886 onwards.

Early days - before 1886

When Kidderminster Harriers is first mentioned in the press it is in 1880 as an athletics club, although it was apparently in existence for a few years before that¹. In November 1880 the Worcester Chronicle reported on the 4th run of the season for the Harriers – a road race around the Kidderminster area². These athletics activities continued throughout the period of concern here, mainly centred on Summer and Winter meetings, held initially at the Chester Road cricket ground, and after 1890 at the new Aggborough ground. The 1883 summer meeting included a 120 yards members handicap, a 120 yards open handicap, a 440 yards open handicap, a 440 yards volunteers scratch race (for members of the Worcestershire Regiment), a 1000 yards members handicap, a one mile handicap and a two miles bicycle handicap³. Note that there were races for members and non-members, indicating that primarily Harriers was a members club; that most races were handicapped with runners being given different starting positions according to age and record, very different from today's practice; and that no distinction was made between cycling and running – with presumably both being on grass tracks laid out on the cricket ground. The 1880 Ordnance Survey map indicates that the Cricket Ground occupied its modern location in Chester Road, but with the Pavilion at the south of the ground rather than in its current position to the east⁴. The newspapers also indicate that members of the Harriers club also took part in a variety of other sports days in the locality – at Worcester, Gloucester and Stourport for example.

The Harriers Athletics Club however became the Harriers Athletic and Football Club in around 1880, after amalgamating with a local rugby club. In the main it is clear that “football” here referred to rugby rules, with the first recorded matches being played home and away in November and December 1880 against Dudley Victoria^{5 6}. At the annual dinner of the club in 1885, held at the Corn Exchange Inn, the captains of the two rugby teams reported. The first team captain, Mr J Pritchard, reported that the team had played 16 games with seven wins, seven defeats and two draws against Moseley, Mosely Woodstock, Burton Anglesey, Dudley Victoria, Warwick, Old Edwardians, Coventry, Stourbridge, Dudley Rangers and South Warwickshire Rovers. Mr Moon reported that the second team had played 16 matches, winning 10, drawing 5 and losing just one⁷. Now it is conventional wisdom that in the years up to 1886 the Harriers only played rugby rules. Whilst this may be correct, there are some indications in the press that a few association games were also played. For example,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kidderminster_Harriers – unreferenced article of unverifiable accuracy

² Worcester Chronicle (WC) 6/11/1880

³ Birmingham Daily Post (BDP) 9/7/1883

⁴ Ordnance Survey 1880 - EDINA Digimap

⁵ Birmingham Daily Gazette (BDG) 13/11/1880

⁶ BDG 18/12/1880

⁷ BDP 18/5/1885

the match against Queens College in November 1882⁸ is included in the same fixture list as matches played by teams that were undeniably playing to association rules – Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion, Stourbridge Standard and Walsall Swifts. Similarly the game against Dudley Rovers in October 1883 is in the same fixture list as matches including Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion, Crewe Alexandra, Bolton Wanderers and Notts County⁹. So it may have been that even in the first half of the 1880s, members of the club were engaged in playing both codes, although of course the indications listed above may simply be due to journalistic error.

The above list of rugby teams that Harriers played indicates that they were one of the leading teams in the area, and it seems odd that they should have made the switch to association rules. It may be speculated however that this was due to the state of the two codes at that time. In 1885, rugby union had not settled on a points scoring system for their games, which were usually decided on “goals” (converted tries, penalties and drop goals), with the number of tries scored used as a tie breaker, and there was some dissension about the way forward. Also the Rugby Union was strongly against professionalism, and there was a looming split between the southern and the northern clubs on this issue. By contrast, the association game had unified the different sets of rules a decade earlier, local and regional cup competitions were taking place, and a regulated professionalism was in place. This was leading to a major growth in the game, particularly in the industrialised regions of the Midlands and North. Perhaps the reasons for the Harriers code switch can be found here – that it was to a code that seemed to have the more certain future and to allow competition and the professionalism which, we will see, was clearly attractive to the Kidderminster public.

Tragedy, Kidderminster Olympic and Professionalism - the 1886/87, 1887/8 and 1888/9 seasons

Whatever the situation pre-1886, it is clear that in the 1886/7 season there was a definite move to the Association game. The first game in this season was a home tie against Stourbridge Standard, the early name of the current Stourbridge Town, which resulted in a 2-1 win for the Harriers¹⁰. The first recorded competitive match was a Birmingham Junior Cup match played by the second team, styled as Kidderminster Excelsior, who beat Kings Norton United 1-0¹¹. It seems likely that in the early days matches were played at the cricket ground, and there are some indications of a close liaison between the Harriers and the cricket club (which is sometimes referred to in the press as Kidderminster Excelsior). However there is an early mention in the press of the “Kidderminster Excelsior” ground at Aggborough in 1885, in connection with a theft from the pavilion¹². It may thus be that the second team used the Aggborough venue, whilst the first team used the cricket ground, but this is somewhat speculative.

Early on in this period however, tragedy struck. In a match at Langley Green Victoria in November 1886, a Harriers player – William Colsey, a 22 year old weaver - was killed after being kicked in the stomach whilst trying to head the ball, by an opposition player who mistimed his kick. He died the day after, apparently acknowledging that it was an accident, with no malicious intent¹³. The incident

⁸ BDM 17/11/1882

⁹ Birmingham Daily Mail (BDM) 5/10/1883

¹⁰ BDP 6/10/1886

¹¹ BDP 25/10/1886

¹² WC 17/1/1885

¹³ BDP 22/11/1886

was reported in newspapers across the country. In December of that year, the committees of the Harriers and the Cricket Club proposed that there should be a collection for the player's mother¹⁴.

In this period, the Harriers played predominantly in friendly matches, with competition restricted to a number of knock out cups – the Birmingham Junior Cup, the Kidderminster Weavers Superannuation Fund Challenge Cup and the Kidderminster Association Cup. They suffered a humiliating 14-0 defeat to Aston Unity in the first round of the former in October 1887¹⁵, but had rather more success in the latter competitions – see below. But the major development in these seasons was without doubt the emergence of Kidderminster Olympic as a local rival. The reasons for the founding of a second football club in Kidderminster are not apparent in the newspaper record, but there is some indication that Harriers were in some measure an “establishment” club (the club dinner referred to above was chaired by Councillor Tomkinson, later a deputy mayor, who will appear later in this essay¹⁶), and that Olympic were quite happy to offend that establishment. For example, in 1889 they arranged a football match against Wolverhampton Druids on the afternoon of Good Friday, much to the ire of local churchmen, who warned their congregations not to attend¹⁷. Against this however, it is clear that councillors were also members of the Olympic – in particular Alderman Green, who was also Mayor on one occasion¹⁸. But whatever the reasons behind the formation of Olympic, there were two major results – the development of an intense rivalry between the teams and their supporters, and the encouragement of a competitive professionalism. Olympic, who seemed to have played their matches in Chester Road (although probably at a ground other than the cricket ground), slowly established themselves as a considerable force in the locality, although, as far as it is possible to judge from the surviving match reports, their overall performance was at first somewhat below that of Harriers in this period. In March 1888, the Harriers Excelsior side beat the Olympic 3-2 in the Weavers Superannuation Fund Challenge Cup final¹⁹. Later that year, in the following season, Harriers beat Olympic 2-1 in the first round of the Birmingham Junior Cup²⁰. The January 1889 match, played at Chester Road attracted an attendance of 5000, with Olympic winning 3-0²¹. In February of that year two Olympic players were selected to play for a Birmingham Association team²². In the 1888/89 Weavers Cup Harriers beat Stourport Swifts 7-2 in the final, having beaten Olympic 6-3 in the semi-final²³. Harriers also won the Kidderminster cup in that season, beating Stourbridge 2-0 in the final²⁴. However, clearly part of the success of the Kidderminster teams was due to the payment of players from around the country. In response to a report in the Birmingham Daily Gazette²⁵, clearly penned by an Olympic official, following a Harriers / Olympic match that “Olympic played their own men but Harriers drafted in players from elsewhere”, the Secretary of the Harriers, Mr C H Jones, responded that both teams played their own men, who were from all around the country, and pointed out that the Olympic

¹⁴ Worcester Journal (WJ) 4/12/1886

¹⁵ BDP 3/10/1887

¹⁶ BDP 18/5/1885

¹⁷ Gloucester Citizen 22/4/1889

¹⁸ WJ 5/10/1889

¹⁹ WC 31/3/1888

²⁰ WC 6/10/1888

²¹ BDP 21/1/1889

²² BDP 7/2/1889

²³ BDG 22/4/1889

²⁴ BDP 6/5/1889

²⁵ BDG 2/4/1889

team only had one Kidderminster man (who travelled from Taunton), with others from Wolverhampton, Darwen, West Bromwich and Worcester. He continued that they should take “a good drubbing” with better grace. There was clearly considerable ill feeling over the matter.

Perhaps inevitably, the use of itinerant professionals by both teams was censured by the Birmingham FA for paying excessive travel expenses, making unregistered and unrecorded payments and, in the case of the Olympic, for paying other clubs for the use of their players²⁶. Both teams only escaped suspension as they were judged to be “young clubs” and that offences of this type were committed by more established teams in any case (!). At the hearing the Olympic indicated that they intended to have a fully registered professional time for the following season.

Triumph - the Birmingham League – the 1889/90 season

Both clubs did indeed become more overtly professional in the following season, although it is difficult to say whether all players were in this category, and both joined the newly formed Birmingham League and enjoyed considerable success. Indeed one player, A Wade, seems to have been registered as a professional for both clubs and was duly suspended by the FA in September 1889 until May 1890²⁷. By now Aggborough was undeniably the Harriers ground²⁸, whilst Olympic continued to play at Chester Road. The league results clearly indicate that Olympic were the stronger side, although the two teams claimed the first two places in the league table at the end of the season – see figure 1 below²⁹. However as not all the matches were completed, there was no formal declaration of champions. There seem to have been three non-cup matches played between Harriers and Olympic that season. The match at Aggborough was certainly a league match and resulted in a 0-0 draw³⁰ with 5000 to 6000 people watching. The other matches were a 4-1 win for Olympic at Chester Road ground³¹ watched by 4000, and a 2-0 win for the Harriers at an unspecified ground late in the season³². Only one of these would have been a league match and the other would have been a “friendly”, although that is probably an inappropriate term in view of the rivalry between the clubs. The teams also played in a number of cup competitions. In the Birmingham Senior cup, neither side enjoyed long runs, with Olympic losing to Walsall Swifts in the 2nd round³³, and Harriers apparently defaulting on their match to Burton Swifts in the first round, because a league match took priority³⁴. In the qualifying competition there were notable thrashings of Great Bridge Unity by Harriers by 8-2³⁵, and of Hereford and Ludlow by the Olympic, by 25-0 and 9-0 respectively^{36 37}. In the Weavers Cup final at Chester Road. Olympic beat Harriers 5-1³⁸.

²⁶ BDP 21/3/1889

²⁷ Sheffield Daily Telegraph 7/9/1889

²⁸ BDP 4/11/1887

²⁹ Non-League Football Tables 1889-2005, Soccer Books Ltd, Cromwell Press 2005

³⁰ BDP 20/1/1890

³¹ BDP 7/10/1889

³² BDP 21/4/1890

³³ BDP 10/2/1890

³⁴ BDP 13/1/1890

³⁵ Nottingham Evening Post 23/11/1889

³⁶ BDP 14/10/1889

³⁷ BDP 28/10/1889

³⁸ BDP 5/5/1890

The season was also notable for a rather odd legal case at Worcester Crown Court brought by Olympic against the Ancient Order of Shepherds³⁹. At the Shepherd's fete on August Bank Holiday in 1889, Olympic were playing Worcester Rovers in the final in what, based upon earlier years, was probably a six a side match. Worcester apparently scored the only goal of the game with five minutes to go, but this was disallowed by the referee. The Worcester players then refused to play further and spectators invaded the pitch. The referee abandoned the match and the Shepherd's Fete Jubilee trophy was not awarded to either side. Olympic claimed that by right it should have been theirs – an argument that was dismissed out of hand by the judge, as it was purely a matter for the referee, and costs were awarded against them. This again perhaps reflects the uncompromising competitiveness of the Olympic club.

Such distractions aside, it is clear that there was considerable ambition in the town for a football club playing at a higher level, and discussions were held with a view to the amalgamation of Harriers and Olympic so that they could field a viable side at a higher level. Meetings were held of the members of both clubs and resolutions for the amalgamation passed by large majorities⁴⁰. The new team was apparently to be named Kidderminster Town, although the records show that only the name Kidderminster seems to have been used, and they applied for, and were granted, membership of the Midland Counties Football League, a professional league below the Football League itself (created in 1888) and the Alliance League (created in 1889) that was within a few seasons, to become the second division of the Football League. The reserve team was to continue to play in the Birmingham League under the name of Kidderminster Rovers. Ominously the report of the Olympic meeting indicates that a number of members were unhappy with the proposal and "intended to withdraw their subscriptions".

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pt
Kidderminster Olympic	21	19	2	0	84	9	40
Kidderminster Harriers	21	13	2	16	75	38	28
Oldbury Town	21	11	4	6	43	33	26
Smethwick Carriage Works	21	11	3	7	72	46	25
Langley Green Victoria	21	9	7	5	52	40	25
Hednesford Town	19	7	3	9	50	72	17
Wellington St George's	20	6	5	9	39	57	17
Aston Victoria	20	7	1	12	53	64	15
Unity Gas Department	21	5	5	11	34	66	15
Willenhall Pickwick	21	5	4	12	44	78	14
Ironbridge	22	5	3	14	46	65	13
Great Bridge Unity	20	6	1	13	41	65	13

Figure 1 Birmingham and district League 1889/1890

³⁹ WC 28/9/1889

⁴⁰ WC 10/5/1890

The trauma of the Midlands Counties League - the 1890/91 season

The 1890 season thus started with considerable optimism with a strong professional side made up of former Harriers and Olympic players that was felt by the press to hold some promise⁴¹. The new Athletics ground at Aggborough was described as being “splendidly arranged with two grandstands, the largest of which is within the enclosure, and able to hold up to 15,000 spectators”⁴². The rather later 1900 OS map shows the ground to consist of a cycling track (not quite the smooth oval of later years), with small stands on either side of the straights⁴³. The new team also entered the FA Cup for the first time. The first few competitive games went quite well with draws against Port Vale and Burton Wanderers and a win against Rotherham, and by the end of October 1890 they had won one, lost one and drawn two games, with seven goals for and nine against. Similarly in the FA cup qualifying rounds the Kidderminster team won their first game against Bath by a 4-1 margin and the second against Oldbury 4-0. But after that things started to go badly on the field with a string of league defeats, and, by implication, in terms of the gates that the team attracted. Crowds at this time are recorded as very small, and there was of course no longer the intense local rivalry between Harriers and Olympic that drew crowds of many thousands. The nadir was in the first round of the FA cup in January 1892. Kidderminster were drawn away to Darwen in Lancashire and lost the match 3-1. Kidderminster appealed against the result because of the state of the pitch, and a replay was ordered. That game was played on the 24th January, and Kidderminster were 4-0 behind at half time, and eventually lost 13-0. The news was transmitted to Aggborough via a series of telegrams, to a small crowd who were watching a Rovers match against Redditch, and the Worcester Chronicle reported that they became more and more dispirited as the news reached them⁴⁴. This led the reporter to voice doubts about the future of the club. The results continued to be poor and by the end of February Kidderminster were bottom of the table having won two, drawn three and lost nine matches – see figure 2⁴⁵. The press speculations proved only too correct and a meeting of the club members was convened shortly afterward^{46 47}. The meeting was presided over by Mr J Pritchard (the former captain of the rugby club referred to earlier) who gave apologies from both the presidents, Mr Smith and Mr Tomkinson (the former Presidents of Olympic and Harriers). The chairman reported that the debts were heavy and increasing, with uncovered debts of £220, including about £45 in players wages, and that the club had been obliged to withdraw from the Midland League. Very roughly, based on the ratio of average wages between 1880 and the present, this corresponds to around £80,000 in today’s terms. After discussion a resolution was passed that dissolved the club, and in effect also removed the Rovers side from the Birmingham league. In the discussion, it was explicitly stated that there had been a loss of support from the “working classes” due to the poor results. Others spoke of how the responsibilities for the club had been borne largely by members of the old Harriers club, with little support from the old Olympic members. One speaker remarked that the people of Kidderminster would rather see a boys team win a match, rather than a good team lose one, a remark that would not be out of place on modern Fans fora. But the deed was done, and the Kidderminster club ceased to exist.

⁴¹ BDP 25/8/1890

⁴² BDP 21/7/1890

⁴³ 1900 OS map

⁴⁴ WC 24/1/1891

⁴⁵ Derby Daily Telegraph (DDT) 11/3/ 1891

⁴⁶ WJ 21/3/1891

⁴⁷ WC 21/3/1891

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Gainsborough Trinity	18	11	3	4	68	18	25
Long Eaton Rangers	18	12	1	6	56	28	25
Derby Midland	17	10	3	4	36	25	23
Sheffield United	16	9	2	5	29	17	20
Lincoln City	14	6	4	4	30	18	16
Burton Wanderers	16	6	4	6	24	29	16
Burslem Port Vale	16	6	2	8	31	40	14
Rotherham Town	18	5	3	8	17	31	13
Derby Junction	18	4	4	10	20	39	12
Staveley	18	4	4	10	23	52	12
Warwick County	11	4	1	6	26	30	9
Kidderminster	14	2	3	9	15	33	7

Figure 2 Midland Counties League Saturday March 14th 1891⁴⁸

Rebirth 1891/1892

Clearly however, there were many in the town who could not simply let the matter rest there, and another meeting was called in the middle of May⁴⁹. Mr Tomkinson, the former president, was present this time, but refused to take the chair until he had assurances that the debt associated with the old club would be paid off. After some negotiations, and a donation of £25 from Mr Tomkinson himself, sufficient guarantees were received from others for him to take the chair. From there he proceeded to denounce the baleful effects of professionalism and proposed that Harriers should be resurrected as an amateur club. Alderman Grosvenor and Mr Humphries proposed and seconded a motion that once again Mr Tomkinson should take over the presidency, agreeing with him concerning the effects of professionalism and, in a side swipe at Olympic, noting that it was not Harriers who had introduced it to the town. The motion was carried by acclamation, and after a gap of one year, Kidderminster Harriers was reborn, with Mr Pritchard, who chaired the dissolution meeting, reappointed as club captain. The summer sports seem to have been held as usual that year⁵⁰. The club then applied for renewed membership of the Birmingham League, which seems to have been easily granted and normality was restored. There is some indication that Olympic also reformed at the same time, and indeed applied for membership of the Birmingham League, but folded again before they could play any matches⁵¹. The last that is heard of Olympic is a rather sad mention of photographs of past Olympic players being on show at an exhibition in Worcester in 1894⁵².

The first two matches for the reformed Harriers were against Oldbury away (winning 2-1) and Langley Green Victoria at home (a 3-3 draw). With those games began a much more settled period of Harrier's existence, if not a particularly successful one – they finished mid-table that year, and the year after they were bottom. But nonetheless they continued in the Birmingham League and its successor the West Midlands Regional League, until 1972 (with a break of a few years in the 40s and

⁴⁸ DET 14/3/1891

⁴⁹ WC 16/5/1891

⁵⁰ BDP 13/7/1891

⁵¹ Non-League Football Tables 1889-2005, Soccer Books Ltd, Cromwell Press 2005

⁵² WC 20/1/1894

50s in the Southern League), before they rose to become one of the leading non-league clubs in the country, and for a few brief years, Worcestershire's only representative in the Football league itself.