



## A Message from OUR FOUNDER

“It was one of those things that you never know why, and you have long forgotten how, it happened.

In the best traditions of *1066 And All That*, it was a good thing that Preston Grasshoppers Strollers came into being sometime around 1978. It is an extremely good thing that its origins are shrouded in the mists of time.

I say “its” because the Strollers rapidly became a club within PGRFC. But “it” might equally be “they” because it, or they, were made up of a suitably motley (and in some cases mottled) collection of highly individual, awkward, idiosyncratic

and charismatic sportsmen. Well, at least, men. As far as we know they were all men and, as far as I know, remain so.

It all started with the multi-talented Bert Shepherd. I first met him when he was in charge of the bar at the old Lea Gate ground. Arriving behind the pumps for my first night on duty at a monthly dance I found a note with a fiver pinned to it. “*Nip up to the off licence and get a bottle of Dry Martini in case any women turn up,*” it read.

But I digress. Some years later in the spanking new clubhouse at Lightfoot Green, Bert was to come up with another attractive incentive, not to women but to me, to come out of an extraordinarily early enforced retirement, brought on by injury, a demanding job, and lack of talent. The precise nature of the bribe to turn out again in a shirt of blue and white hoops and navy blue knickers (as the fixture card always used to describe the club colours) is long since forgotten but I think the knickers may have swung it.

Bert had extended the Hoppers’ repertoire to a sixth team. Two thirds of them had played together in the first team back in 1960. Their particular style of Saturday afternoon exertion was now dedicated to a leisurely run out followed by lashings of bonhomie. They also tended to win rather a lot.

It was impossible to resist, but time was against Bert. When his boots fell apart he decided to hang them up for good. Someone had to carry on the team. Six was too big a number for some of us, so a plan was hatched to invent the Strollers. Well it must have been a plan, because it worked.

The title matched the way we played and we had at least two ready made songs. One came from the memories of more senior members who could recall Flanagan and Allen as young men. The other merely reflected our romantic natures.

Within weeks the pattern was drawn for future years. A solid core of regulars was supplemented by rising stars, falling idols, players with talents or fitness levels best suited to bar duties or those with chronic aversion to Saturday afternoon retail therapy. Some who would never have been seen dead in a sixth team logged in firmly as “Strollers only” on availability lists. A legend was born and, despite one or two fierce battles in selection committee, it began to take life.

There were those who could not be there week-in, week-out. Their excuses became increasingly colourful. They were always accepted but rarely believed. Some, however, were genuine. There was the doctor who was on duty every third weekend, and there were those who insisted on taking the same Saturdays off. They did not want to risk being injured and taken to hospital when the said doctor was doing his stint in casualty. Thus the NHS was responsible for the Strollers having to maintain a larger squad than most teams. It was a system later adopted by Sir Alex Ferguson and Sir Clive Woodward.

Later, bespoke team sweatshirts displaying the now famous grasshopper with bandages on crutches were created. They became coveted “caps” for those who made three appearances. Occasional superstar guests were awarded jumpers immediately. The only rule was that such performers had to slot into holes in the squad whether it was a position they had previously experienced or not.

One of these was the legendary J R H Greenwood who appeared as stand-off in one of our regular clashes with at Fylde. That, as it happened, turned out to be my last outing on a rugby field, having been damaged by a 50-year-old-plus prop forward playing with one arm still in plaster from a previous encounter.

On the field we won with monotonous regularity (or so the memory suggests) as a result of massive superiority in experience, if nothing else. It was frequently necessary to remind the team that three points was sufficient. Any more could be tiring, and ungentlemanly.

Despite that a system of fines had to be implemented, along the lines of those for dropped catches in cricket. The main variation was that anyone who scored, or didn't drop a pass, or did something equally effective, had to buy a jug. This was not because we encouraged alcohol abuse, far from it. It was solely for the purpose of maintaining club funds. The journalist's traditional financial dyslexia meant that there never seemed to be any match fees to hand over. That row with the higher echelons of PGRFC administration was eventually solved by the explanation that (a) no-one ever claimed travelling expenses because we were invariably transported to away fixtures by those with company cars or expense accounts; and (b) that at home, match fees were used to encourage the buying of jugs and eventually so many were purchased that the club benefited significantly more from bar takings than the missing match fees.

Despite considerable efforts to maintain decorum and discourage drinking there were moments when standards slipped. On one occasion a scrum-half who spoke with a peculiar accent announced that his wife had warned him that she would no longer collect him "if you have ten pints". Dutifully he did not. He left the tenth on the bar for her to see and went on to the eleventh. She seemed convinced because he was transported home, but, after all, he was an accountant. Mysteriously he was not available the following week but after one Saturday of shopping duties he was allowed out again.

Other beneficiaries of the Strollers' munificence (or is it magnificence?) were pharmacists. At a time when "Something for the weekend, sir?" had special meaning for hairdressers, for many a Stroller Saturday morning meant a trip to the local chemist rather than the barber. They went to stock up on much needed bandages and balms to protect against knocks or to soothe bumps. We eventually negotiated a bulk contract.

Memories of events on the field are naturally less sharp. But we did have a goal kicker whose achievements were only exceeded in last year's world cup. He was called up at every excuse to perform feats from all parts of the field, sometimes in our own half. His tally did not necessarily match Mr Wilkinson's on the scoreboard but his laboured preparations provided welcome respite from our toils – one of the Strollers' mottos being "it's less tiring to stand still than to walk".

That was the birth of the Strollers. It was not without its pangs. Progression through life was rapid and, in truth, halted at adolescence. But it was a spectacular youth.

Just as we were to venture into an international dimension, I was whisked away to the Street of Adventure (or is it shame?) to work at the Strollers' official newspaper, the *News of the World*. From there I watched enviously as the team won renown for its foreign tours that became regular, much-sort-after annual pilgrimages. I understand they were so popular that they had to be carried out in secret. Not even the North Sea ferry companies could be told of them in advance lest their ships became swamped with admiring groupies.

Pop star status was finally confirmed by the release of their own compendium of artistic renderings on tape. That became a firm favourite for me on long car journeys. Such was the quality of the production that it became jammed into my car tape player. It is pleasing that who so ever now drives that particular vehicle must still be listening, with awe and amazement.

As the tale of the Strollers comes to its inevitable conclusion it remains one of the regrets of my life that I never experienced such a tour. I almost did, once. Warned by the police that the Strollers' bus was traversing Cambridgeshire en route for Harwich, I intercepted the squad just over the Suffolk county boundary. Refreshments were forced down me and I was eventually kidnapped on to the coach. I escaped only by lying that my wife was in labour and that I had to get back to Cambridge to give a youthful Rob Andrew some advice on kicking as he prepared for the Varsity Match.

I have always taken pride in the fact that Strollers will always believe anything that you tell them, so long as it is sufficiently far fetched. Unsullied by cynicism, untouched by the seamier side of professionalism, a finer bunch of gentlemen posing as hooligans you could never wish to meet."

*Bob Satchwell. April 2004*

