

History of Torbay Ladies Hockey Club

In 1939, at the outbreak of World War 2, so many young ladies left Paignton to join the services that local hockey clubs struggled to make up their teams. Two ladies, Greta Huggins and Barbara Hughes, stepped forward to form Torbay Ladies Hockey Club – an amalgamation of players from Torquay Women's Hockey Club, the South Devon Blues, the Scarlet Runners from Brixham, the Turfs and the Rangers. In addition to Greta and Barbara, founder members included Betty Winsor and Joan O'Donoghue (an England international player).

In June 1940, Plymouth suffered their heaviest night's bombing of the war, as the city was blitzed by the Luftwaffe. The next day, Torbay Ladies had a fixture against the Plymouth side, Mannamead, but having heard of the devastation of Plymouth, and having seen the skies to the south west lit up by the fires burning, they tried to telephone to see if the game could go on. Unable to get through, but not wanting to let the other side down, Torbay Ladies set off in cars for the match. When they neared Plymouth they were stopped by the road blocks of the Civil Defence, who were not letting people into the city without good reason to do so. The intrepid Torbay Ladies hid their sticks and said they were making for the Efford Crematorium for a funeral (the crematorium being near to the Mannamead pitch), and so were let through the barriers.

Arriving at the pitch, Torbay found the Mannamead Ladies waiting for them, and the match went ahead. The score is forgotten, but the gratitude of the Plymouth side for the effort Torbay had made to support their friends in such a troubled hour was long remembered. Goalkeeper Nancy Wilson recalled standing in her goal during that match and hearing the sound of explosions in the City. She looked across to a church which she thought had survived the bombs, but on the journey home, she realised only a shell of the building remained.



Torbay's first pitch was in Victoria Park, Paignton. The land had originally been marshland, flooded by high tides, but the area had been drained and the sea defences built around the 1890's. The pitch was located where the former Lidl's Store stands, and there were also tennis courts marked out. Later, the pitch was moved to the other side of the Park, by the main Torquay Road. A lovely pavilion was built where the teams could sit and have tea after the game. Unfortunately this building began to sink into the reclaimed land and had to be demolished in the 1960's.

During the 1970's, Torbay were a very strong side with some high standard players including Ros Vinten and Sheila Jarvis (England internationals) and Isabel Crocker and Jane Hares (West of England players). They were also strongly supported on the administrative side, with Doreen Carey, herself a Devon County player, acting as Secretary from 1964 to 1986.

One fact few clubs could boast is Torbay's goalkeeper record. Between them, Nancy Wilson and Karen Chapman kept goal for the first 57 years of the club's existence. Nancy played in goal from the Club's beginnings in 1939, and retired in 1970, whilst Karen joined the club in 1967 and kept goal until her retirement in 1996.

Ladies hockey was generally played as 'friendlies' with one or two cup competitions over the season. However in 1989, league hockey was introduced, and Torbay found themselves in the Sun Life West Clubs Women's Hockey League Division 1, along



with Kingsbridge, Mannamead, Plymouth, Penzance, Camborne, Bude, Falmouth, Liskeard and Bodmin. The Victoria Park pitch was not up to league standard, and so the team had to move.

Torbay Ladies HC c1987:

Back: Doreen Carey, Betty Winsor, ?, Sheila Jarvis, Nuala Horne, Val Hammond, Jane Hares

Front: Iris Butler, Sue Allen, Sue Saunders, ?, Jenny Mitchell

Memories of Hockey in the Park – Victoria Park, Paignton

On Saturday 11th October 1969 I played my first game of hockey in Victoria Park for Torbay Women's Hockey Club's 2nd XI as their goalie. I was 15 and they relaxed the rule that you had to be 16 to play women's hockey, as they were short of a goalkeeper. We lost 6 – 3 to Salcombe Ladies.

Torbay had two teams – a 1st XI and a 2nd XI – and whilst the first team played, the second would cheer them along from the pavilion with "ooh – fine shot Sheila – pass! Pass to Valerie!". Ladies' hockey was a very genteel sport then, and all matches were "friendlies" – it wasn't until 1990 that Torbay began to play league hockey and the game was taken more seriously. Teams from as far as Plymouth (Mannamead Ladies), Exeter (the Green Dragons and the Exeter Ladies), Tiverton (the White Eagles) and Sidmouth would travel to Paignton on a Saturday for 'bully-off' at 2.30 pm.

Many of the faces that would turn up on a Saturday afternoon at Victoria Park in the 70's were well known in Paignton – Greta Huggins (who I remember playing with as my right back when she was well over 60 years old), Nancy Wilson (1st XI goalkeeper), Betty Winsor (umpire), Kay Baker (Bakers, the Paignton chemist shop), Doreen Carey (Secretary of the club for many, many years), Ros Vinten (games teacher at Torquay Girls Grammar who also played hockey for England), Sheila Jarvis (also an England player), Jane Easterbrook, Iris Butler, Val Hammond and a young Jane English to name a few. I remember Ros returning from an England coaching session and trying to introduce a 4-2-4 (four forwards, two midfielders, four defenders) system to our play. We had played 5-3-2 (five forwards, three midfielders and two defenders) since we formed in 1939, and all that could be heard was "well who am I supposed to mark?".

The Club played at Victoria Park until the end of the 1989 season – in 1990 the Club began to play league hockey, and the Victoria Park grass pitch was not up to league standard. A part of the problems with the pitch was the need for the club captain to arrive half an hour before the game with a shovel to remove any offending doggie doo from the D (the semicircle around the goal in which the ball had to be for a shot to be taken). From 1990, the Club played their matches at Churston Ferrers Grammar School's pitch, and later at the Clennon Valley all-weather astro pitch.

Hockey at Victoria Park had certain draw-backs. In one match, I remember a lady carrying a large tray of eggs - she was determined that she had right of way across the pitch, even though 22 ladies were charging round yelling, wielding sticks and chasing a very hard ball. She did make it across, but I still say some of the eggs were scrambled by the time she reached the far side.

Another time, I was in goal and we were playing the Green Dragons from Exeter. As their centre forward neared and prepared to launch the ball at goal, a poodle ran in front of me and the goal, closely chased by a stout lady shouting "Mind my Pookie! Mind my Pookie!" – somewhat distracted, I watched the poodle and lady as they raced towards the park exit, only to then see the ball fly past me – it was considered very unsporting of Green Dragons to claim that goal.



Then there was the Saturday of the South Devon College of Arts & Technology (now South Devon College) students' Rag Week. A procession of students on decorated flatbed lorries drove past on the Torbay Road and stopped at the Hyde Road traffic lights. Several of the students let out a whoop and jumped off the lorries to leap over the low wall (there were no railings then) and invade the pitch. They stole our ball, and refused to return it until a ransom had been paid – fortunately Betty, our umpire, had a few coins in her pocket for their collecting tin.

Once the match was over, the team captain would shout "Ladies – three cheers for the Dragons", or whoever else we were playing, and the team would reply "Hoorah, Hoorah, Hoorah". Then came the most important part of the afternoon – tea. There was a big electric water heater in the Pavilion and in fine weather both teams would sit outside with cups of tea, and feast on sandwiches (provided by the defence) and home-baked cake (provided by the attack). As goalkeeper, I was excused tea-making as it was my job to provide the oranges for half time.

Fond memories – I finally hung up my boots in 1996 having played in goal for Torbay for 27 years, and to this day I cannot walk through Victoria Park without remembering the adrenaline rush of excitement as a ball flew past my head, and the feeling of relief that I still had my front teeth intact.

Karen Chapman – November 2024