

Chairman's Report to the AGM 2020

A warm welcome to all our members to this, our first virtual Annual General Meeting. What a strange year this has been, both on the rugby field and elsewhere, as we still do not know whether we will be able to play any rugby this season or, if we do start, how long it will last! In these uncertain times, we are particularly grateful for the continuing support of our membership, our Cavalry Club and our sponsors who underpin our financial stability and collectively are the envy of many other clubs.

Our 2019/20 season ended with a close 19-15 victory at home against Stourbridge on 14 March which left us in 9th position with 5 matches still to play, not that far clear of a very congested relegation zone – but all was taken out of our hands with the cessation of rugby activity as a result of the Covid-19 virus and the RFU's decision to determine final league standings on an extrapolation of points per game achieved in the completed games. With Caldy already out of reach at the top of the table and both Scunthorpe and Preston Grasshoppers adrift at the bottom, the impact of the "points per game" method was to relegate Otley in 14th place – although, as two of their remaining 5 games were against Scunthorpe and Preston, they would have had reasonable expectation of climbing out of the bottom three had the season been completed. Sadly, the early end to the season denied us a home semi-final against Harrogate in the Yorkshire Cup and the opportunity to host the Roses county match in Yorkshire's 150th anniversary year, both of which would have been great rugby occasions.

Looking back at 2019/20, many supporters rightly highlight the outstanding back to back victories on the road at Sheffield Tigers and Tynedale in which the team played some superb rugby. From a personal perspective, the victory at Huddersfield earlier in the season probably had more resonance. In part this was because a side missing several regulars and with the unlikely pairing of Foresters' flanker Sam Smith and 18 year-old no 8 Will Smith performing miracles in the second row racked up 40 points away from home against a traditionally robust side. It was also the game in which Henry Macnab scored arguably the try of the season, finishing off a move which began with inspired vision by Jack Blakeney-Edwards in our 22, followed up by strong carries from Oli Cicognini and Joe Altham, great team support and a brilliant individual finish from Henry – just one of the 2018/19 Colts team to make such an impact over the season. More importantly, the match showed how far the squad had come since the dark day on the same ground almost exactly two years earlier when we conceded 5 tries in twenty minutes in a dismal run which saw us lose 11 of the first 12 matches in the 2017/18 season. And – perhaps just as indicative of the strength of the club, it was a day on which we also produced a "greenwash" with the Foresters winning at York and the 3rd and 4th XVs recording wins over Selby.

At a time when participation in men's rugby is in decline nationally, we continue to run 4 teams although this seems to get harder each year and we owe a great debt to the team managers across all the lower teams and the guys who turn out each week. The Foresters continued to dominate 2nd XV rugby in the north east, comfortably winning the Northern Pilot League and the Yorkshire 2nd XV Premiership and, applying the same points per game method as the 1st XV, the incomplete post-Christmas Yorkshire Conference A. Our 3rd XV finished in a solid mid-table position in the Yorkshire Championship North whilst the 4th XV struggled to complete enough fixtures to make an impact in the North/West Merit Table. We need to work harder on attracting social rugby players and encouraging more players to play for longer – which will be a particular concern as we recover from Covid-19 with a number of older players perhaps getting used to free Saturdays.

2019/20 was a frustrating year for our Mini/Junior section with bad weather and Covid-19 combining to significantly shorten the season. Whilst no team was likely to match the achievements of the 2019 Colts, numbers remained solid and we continue to run teams at all age groups as well as expanding our girls' section with an U15 team. Maintaining participation levels as we emerge from Covid-19 is also a key challenge for our Mini/Junior section who continue to do a great job in attracting players from a wide area. The work that Hedley Verity and our M/J leaders and coaches do in the club and the

schools is critical, not only in maintaining a flow of players for our senior teams but in promoting the enjoyment of sport among young people of the Dale.

Off the field, this was a year of consolidation after the upheavals of 2018. The coaching team of Jon Feeley and Jon Skurr, supported by Matt Shuttleworth and Chris Black, were into their second season, with discernible development in the skills of the senior player group. Lisa Roddis settled in well in the clubhouse with improved bar offering and turnover; meanwhile, Rachel Younger, who had run the kitchen on a franchise basis for several years, left to run Relish in Grassington so we brought Julie Horton in to bring the downstairs catering back “in-house”, which worked very well. Rachel still provided sponsors’ meals on an outside caterer basis and remains a key part of the team. Sadly, as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, Julie has taken alternative employment when we were unable to offer any prospect of a return to rugby so we will again be looking for kitchen staff when rugby resumes.

The committee has lost one of its most energetic members with the news that Claire Gains and her husband Nick, having sold their business interests, have decided to make a fresh start closer to grandchildren and have now left the area, although they will remain members of the Cavalry Club; Steve Rhodes has also stood down from the committee but will continue as our statistician, and Stephen Brake, who has done an outstanding job as membership secretary for twelve years, has also moved away from the area, to be succeeded by Stuart Willis, who came to the club recently when his daughter joined the U13 girls’ team. We have also lost our two Mini/Junior reps, Sam Allen and Phil Hargreaves, who have stood down to be replaced by Anthony Donald and Gerard Simpson. Sam leaves a vital legacy in the apprenticeship scheme which he instigated and which we now need to build on as part of our plans for the future. This is just one of many areas where we have openings for enthusiastic volunteers to make a real difference.

On a more celebratory note, we congratulated committee member and former player Neil Heseltine on his election to Chair of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority. Given our shared commitment to supporting young people in the Dale, we look forward to working closely with Neil in his new role. Even more noteworthy is one committee member who has not gone anywhere or done anything out of the ordinary – except serve the club unstintingly for over 70 years. Chris Baker announced at the start of last season that it was 70 years since his 1st XV debut in September 1949 and that he would be stepping down from the committee at the end of the season. Thankfully, he changed his mind and retains his hallowed position as Father of the House. We are all indebted to Chris for his extraordinary dedication to Wharfedale.

Two further appointments of note saw club president John Spencer elected as President of The Barbarians – another great accolade for Wharfedale’s most famous son – and, amongst the upheavals within the RFU, former skipper John Lawn appointed as “Head of Game Development” under the RFU’s new structure announced in September. In this role, John has overall responsibility for player welfare and development pathways, match official performance and development (Shed take note!) and the development of coaches across the country – all vital areas for the growth of the community game. We congratulate both Johns on their respective appointments which demonstrate how Wharfedale RUFC continues to make a huge contribution to the game as a whole.

Back home, we have continued to invest in our facilities with the installation of the new electronic scoreboard, generously funded by Annette Hirst of Brigantes Holidays, while the extended summer break has allowed us to undertake the work on the replacement of our ageing boilers. Although delayed by Covid-19, the installation is now complete in a new dedicated housing behind the clubhouse, leaving minor finishing off works to be completed. When fully commissioned, the new fully automated, zone programmable system will deliver operational savings and reductions in carbon footprint across the whole of the clubhouse. It will also free up additional storage space in the changing rooms where the old hot water cisterns have been removed. The total cost of the project is

around £90,000. Half of this has been funded from three key sources – the Wharfedale Half Marathon, the 200 Club and the Mini/Junior section have all made significant contributions and we are particularly grateful to Jill Heseltine and the Half Marathon Committee, Howard and Jennie Whiteley (and before them Michael and Christine Harrison) who run the 200 Club and, of course, all the Mini/Junior leadership and members. In addition, we have received grants from the Cracoe and Rylstone Community Fund and the Linton Community Fund – but we have also borrowed £45,000 which will need to be repaid. Additional thanks are due particularly to Roger Tiffany and John Sykes who have supervised the construction of the new boiler housing and have project managed the whole effort together with our external advisers at Craven Energies.

Looking to the future, as we move towards our centenary in 2023, Philip Eddleston and David Baker are leading a project to look at how the Club can be developed, fit for purpose for the next generation or two. This includes:

1. Focusing on how we develop the Club as a hub and training centre for young people in the Dale.
2. Driving the participation in female sport at the Avenue alongside the continued focus on male sport.
3. A raft of potential clubhouse improvements including changing rooms, showers, toilets, disabled access, catering, dining/function capacity, spectator balconies and parking.
4. The potential for an additional pitch will also be assessed and in time, the playing surface themselves will be evaluated.

Outline ideas have been discussed with the National Park and the General Committee has given approval for the plans to be developed further, including consultation with local residents to ensure that they understand our objectives and are involved in the process.

As always, there are sad moments when we mourn the passing of those who have contributed so much to the club over the years. In the last year, we have lost three stalwarts: Peter Rymer, who proudly played in the Yorkshire Shield winning side of 1957 and then captained the side for two seasons, Jim Holmfield, a life member, who was team secretary for some 30 years amongst many other roles, and most recently Martin Scriven, treasurer for 14 seasons, great travelling supporter and a popular ambassador for the club. All are deeply missed and their memory is an inspiration to those of the current era who serve the club unselfishly.

The last few months have inevitably been dominated by the impact of Covid-19. John Sykes, our Health & Safety lead, has done a terrific job working with Lisa Roddis and our medical staff (Sam Lyles, Jill Alexander-Riley and Rachel Galley) to ensure that we have the right protocols in place to minimise risk of infection as we began the tentative process of reopening the clubhouse and resuming training. We have sought to balance our obligations to our neighbours with our obligations as a sports club to continue to provide opportunity for our players to keep fit and active.

Since the closure of our facilities in March and with the loss of key summer fund-raising events, treasurer Alex Howarth has been keeping a close eye on the finances and we are extremely grateful to Alex, not only for his dedication at a time when his own business is placing increased demands on his time, but also for his careful stewardship over many years which meant that we were as well placed as could be to withstand the financial pressures of lockdown. Without rugby, there is no matchday sponsorship, gate or bar/catering money, so our income is significantly reduced. Although rugby costs are also reduced particularly with no away matches and no travel, our coaches continue to work and our medical costs have increased due to the additional Covid-19 precautions at training. Ongoing costs which have to be funded irrespective of rugby amount to around £10,000 per month, albeit partly offset by furlough support for wage costs. However, thanks to the loyalty of our sponsors, Cavalry Club and other members, our membership income remains strong and, even without those matchday

revenues, current forecasts suggest that we are likely to end the season with a modest surplus which we plan to reinvest in our facilities.

At the time of writing, as we enter into the second national lockdown and RFU have announced the abandonment of the 2020/21 league season, we await news of whether and when what is left of the season will start, what format it will take and how long it will last. Various options are on the table as the RFU continues negotiations with the government for the resumption of competitive rugby. Whenever we get back on the pitch, Wharfedale will be ready for the fray and, thanks to all our members, we will be in as strong a position as possible. Sadly, we have lost one of our main sponsors, Oldfields, who have supported the club in so many ways over the past ten years and will remain great friends of the club, although their business priorities have led them to refocus their marketing spend – but our other main sponsors (Brook Taverner, Delivernet, In-Site Property and Primeur) remain in place, as do Midgley Motor Cars who provide the two club pick-ups. We are hugely indebted to these sponsors, the Cavalry Club and all our members and of course to the army of volunteers who put in so much effort to make Wharfedale RUFC the special place that it is. Thank you all for your continuing support.

Vis ex montibus venit!

Robert Fort
Chairman
November 2020