

The Second World War Years

The 1930s had seen the first period of success for the club. Two Yorkshire League titles were won, along with the Rugby League Challenge Cup in 1935. The decade ended with an appearance in the 1939 Championship Final against Salford at Maine Road, Manchester, where a crowd of 69,504 – then a record for a rugby league match in England – saw Castleford suffer a narrow 8-6 defeat. However, just four months later this period of success for the club was brought to an abrupt end by the outbreak of the Second World War.

When Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared war on Germany on 3rd September 1939 the new rugby league season was only two games old. Just one day before the outbreak of war Castleford had played Hunslet, but the match was abandoned just before half-time due to torrential rain – perhaps an omen of what was to come. The match was played under unusual circumstances as the country was already preparing for war. Train services were already being disrupted as evacuation plans were being introduced, resulting in the referee plus one player from each side failing to reach the ground in time for kick off. One of the appointed touch judges took up the whistle and the rain began just as the teams kicked off. As the torrential rain continued, pools of water began to form on the pitch making open rugby impossible. The only try came after half an hour when Arthur Atkinson scored for Castleford. Jim Croston did his best to get the conversion attempt off the ground but couldn't manage to clear the crossbar. A few minutes later the referee called the players together and made the decision to abandon the match. Just before the players left the field – wading through knee-high water to get back to the dressing rooms – the crowd gave the loudest cheer of the day as a spitfire flew over the ground. Although the storm abated for a while, a second storm struck later that evening causing flooding on Bridge Street and in the Wheldale area of the town. The forked lightning was even more spectacular as air raid precautions, including the black out, were officially imposed for the first time that evening.

The war had an immediate impact on people's lives. Within 24 hours of war being declared, air raid sirens sounded in Castleford for the first time, although it turned out to be a false alarm. Within the first week, the landlord of the George and Dragon public house on Bridge Street was fined £5 for breaching blackout regulations and, sadly, the first two local fatalities of the war occurred when two cars collided in the blackout.

In the uncertainty of those first few weeks of war the Government, fearful of air raids, imposed a ban on all sports where large crowds might gather, and the rugby league season was abandoned. The recently arrived New Zealand touring team had played only one match of their tour before it was cut short. A match against Dewsbury was quickly arranged to help to finance their trip back home and they left shortly after the game on 9th September. However, within a few weeks the Government realised an immediate attack was unlikely and lifted their ban, and the first matches of a regional War Emergency League were played on Saturday, 30th September 1939. Castleford played in the Yorkshire Section, losing their first match 24-19 at Batley, before going on to have a fairly successful season, finishing 5th in the 15 team league.

Although clubs tried to carry on as normal, playing rugby during wartime created a number of problems. As more players joined up for military service clubs began to struggle to field a team each

week. So the Rugby Football League gave clubs permission to field “guest” players from other clubs to make up the numbers, which often meant that team line-ups were not finalised until minutes before kick-off. Kitting out teams was also a problem as no playing kit could be bought without clothing ration coupons issued by the Board of Trade. Several grounds were requisitioned for various purposes to help with the war effort, whilst others had capacities reduced for fear of air raids. Difficulties in scheduling matches meant that cup ties that were level after 80 minutes were settled by extra time rather than replays. And in recognition of the war, the league decided that Challenge Cup finalists would be presented with War Savings Certificates rather than medals.

In the late summer of 1940 German plans to invade the British Isles had to be put on hold when they failed to defeat the RAF and their allies in the Battle of Britain. However, with France now under German occupation, the British Isles were within easy range of German bombers and the country suffered attacks on a daily basis between September 1940 and May 1941 during what became known as The Blitz. Although attacks were aimed mainly at larger cities including Sheffield and Leeds, Castleford’s location in the industrial area of the West Riding meant that there was always a risk of air raids. On the evening of 14th/15th March 1941 Castleford suffered its most significant attack of the war. That night 50 high explosive bombs and over 400 incendiary bombs fell on the town, mainly around the Ambler Street and Churchfields Lane areas. Two people were killed and 17 others injured, with five houses destroyed and another 250 damaged.

Despite the close proximity of the Hickson’s chemical factory – a potential target – the rugby ground escaped unscathed and Castleford continued to play in the Yorkshire Section of the War Emergency League, finishing 9th out of 14 clubs in 1940/41. Their campaigns in both the Yorkshire Cup and the Challenge Cup involved matches decided by extra time rather than the peacetime method of replays. On 22nd March 1941 Castleford visited Huddersfield in a Yorkshire Cup Second Round tie. After 80 minutes the sides were level at 3 points each. The referee signalled for the start of extra time but four of the Castleford players said they were unable to continue. If they played extra time they would have missed their trains and been unable to report for military and munitions duties, which they decided were more important than playing rugby. They left the field and the rest of the Castleford team went with them. The referee decided that play should continue, so Huddersfield kicked off, scored a try and were awarded the match. Three weeks later, on 12th April, Castleford were involved in more extra time drama. In a First Round Challenge Cup tie they eventually beat Featherstone Rovers 8-5 when Jim Croston finally scored the decisive try after 117 minutes play!

The league format changed slightly in 1941/42, with teams from both sides of the Pennines competing in the same league. Despite increasingly difficult circumstances, the club completed the season, finishing 14th out of 17 clubs. It was during this season that Arthur Atkinson played what was to be his 431st and last match for the club. On 14th March 1942, whilst home on leave from his duties as a PT instructor in the RAF, he played in a 13-0 defeat at Keighley. Not the ideal way for one of the club’s greatest players to bow out. The season ended with a two-leg 2nd Round Challenge Cup defeat to Oldham. The second leg, played at Wheldon Road on 2nd May 1942 marked the last Castleford match for a second member of the 1935 Challenge Cup winning team, Leslie “Juicy” Adams. A try scorer in the 1935 final, he had been the first player to win the cup with three different teams, having played for Leeds in 1932 and Huddersfield in 1933. Tragically, he was killed in January 1945 whilst on active service with the RAF in Burma.

In July 1942 the club announced that it would not compete in the 1942/43 War Emergency League. The club had struggled to field a team towards the end of the previous season due to players' wartime commitments. Also, wartime fuel shortages made travelling to away games difficult. Buses were no longer available and it was not feasible to travel to many away games by train without players taking time off important war work. The club gave their players permission to guest with other teams and during the season numerous Castleford players appeared for Huddersfield, Bradford Northern, Wakefield Trinity, Featherstone Rovers and Leeds. And two Castleford players, Reg Lloyd and Jimmy Robinson, became Challenge Cup winners as guest players in the Dewsbury team that beat Leeds 16-15 over two legs in the 1943 Final.

From August 1942 the ground was put to good use to support the war effort. Parts of the ground were used to grow vegetables and others for animals to graze, and the ground was used as a venue for Holidays At Home events. This was a series of events organised by the local council during the summer months to entertain local people who were unable to take holidays away from home due to wartime travel restrictions. The programme included sporting events, music concerts, dances and a number of horticultural and agricultural shows. In August 1942 a boxing event was held on the ground. Top of the bill was Freddie Cotton from London ("probably Britain's next Featherweight Champion") versus Tommy Tune from Barnsley ("recently went 15 rounds with World's Champion Freddie Miller"). Agricultural shows were very popular at this time as people raised animals and grew their own vegetables to supplement wartime food rations. In 1943 and 1944 the ground hosted the Red Cross Agricultural Show which attracted large numbers of exhibitors, with the 1944 show attracting 478 entries for the best rabbit competition. There were various categories of competition for horses, including horseback musical chairs, although the cattle and goat sections had to be withdrawn due to a local outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

With the war entering its final stages and the Allied forces liberating Europe from German occupation, Castleford re-entered the War Emergency League for the 1944/45 season. The first match was played on 2nd September 1944, and resulted in a 20-5 home victory over Dewsbury. The Dewsbury goal was kicked by Gus Risman, guesting for the club from Salford, who went on to captain the 1946 England touring team to Australia and New Zealand, and is now a member of the Rugby League Hall of Fame. The club went on to finish 6th out of 17 clubs in the league that season, supplementing their playing strength by using a number of guest players. One of them was Billy Stott of Wakefield Trinity. He became the first winner of the Lance Todd Trophy for his performance for Wakefield in their Challenge Cup Final win over Wigan the following season, and after retiring as a player he was landlord at the Bath Inn on Wheldon Road for several years in the 1950s and 1960s.

The club's last match during wartime was a 10-2 home defeat to Wakefield Trinity on 21st April 1945. Despite a fairly successful season the club didn't feature in the finals that mark the climax of the season, and which coincided with the climax of the war. Huddersfield won the Challenge Cup beating Bradford Northern 13-9 over two legs. The second leg was played on 5th May, just three days before VE Day, which marked the German surrender and the end of the war in Europe. Two weeks later Bradford beat Halifax in a two-legged Championship Final 26-20 to finally bring an end to wartime rugby league. After six years of war, Castleford and the rest of the rugby league community could finally look forward to the normality of a peacetime competition.