



# Castleford Tigers

## Heritage Project

## Early Days at the Jungle

Researched and written by Allan Humphries

As most Castleford supporters know, the club played its first game in the Northern Rugby Football League at the start of the 1926/27 season. The team played their home games that season on the Sandy Desert ground on Lock Lane before moving to Wheldon Road for the start of the 1927/28 season. The first league game to be played at the Wheldon Road ground was on 27th August 1927 when visitors Huddersfield won by 3-0.

However, this was not the first time the club had played a match at Wheldon Road. Whilst still playing in the Yorkshire Senior Competition, the club were drawn at home to St Helens Recs in the First round of the 1925/26 Rugby League Challenge Cup. The tie was played on 13th February 1926 and, in anticipation of a larger than average attendance, the club agreed with Castleford Town football club, who owned the ground at the time, to borrow the Wheldon Road ground for the occasion.

This match was to prove very significant in shaping the club's future. This is because the match was played just four days before the annual meeting of the Northern Rugby Football League which would consider Castleford's application to become a member of the league. The club had applied for membership in each of the three previous years but every time their application had been rejected. Everyone at the club recognised the importance of this match as an opportunity to persuade the representatives of the other league clubs that Castleford was now worthy of a place in the senior league. At the time, St Helens Recs were one of rugby league's leading clubs. They had won the Lancashire Cup in 1923/24, and finished 5th in the league in 1925/26. They were to finish the 1926/27 season as league leaders before being beaten by Swinton in the Championship Final. The team that faced Castleford included Dolan, Fildes and Wallace, who were all international players. A good performance against a team like St Helens Recs would go a long way towards persuading the members of the Northern Rugby Football League that they should support the club's bid for membership.

On an unseasonably sunny afternoon, a then club record crowd of over 8,000 turned up to see how Castleford fared against their senior opponents. As the first half progressed a shock result seemed unlikely and the Recs built a comfortable 11-2 half time lead. However, Castleford were not going to give up without a fight and started the second half strongly. Against the odds, they scored two unanswered tries to take a 12-11 lead midway through the second half. Unfortunately, the match didn't have a fairy-tale ending as the St Helens team finished strongly. A late try and a penalty gave the visitors an 18-12 win.

Although defeated, the Castleford team emerged from the game with great credit and everyone involved with the club hoped that the team's performance would be fresh in the minds of the club representatives who would be determining their future. So, attention now moved to the Northern Rugby Football League meeting which was to take place the following Wednesday, 17th February, 1926 at the Belle View Hotel in Bradford. It is impossible to know how much influence the team's performance had on the vote, but suffice to say that the club's application was finally approved.

Castleford's club officials had clearly been planning their promotion to the Northern Rugby League for some time and they moved quickly to put their plans into action. Within a week of their application being approved, the club announced that they had agreed to buy the Wheldon Road ground from the football club. They had already negotiated an £800 loan from the Rugby Football League to help finance the purchase should their membership application prove successful. However, the club was in no rush to move into their new home and spent over a year making improvements to the ground before playing their first league game there in August 1927. The playing area was re-seeded, the perimeter fencing replaced and work was also done to improve facilities for spectators before the club finally made the move into the ground that future generations of Cas players and supporters were to call home.

So, had it not been for the performance of the Castleford team in that cup tie against St Helens Recs in February 1926, over ninety years of top flight rugby league at "The Jungle" might never have happened!

**Footnote:** This wasn't the first time rugby league had been played at Wheldon Road. On 21st December 1919, a Billy Batten XIII played Halifax in a benefit match for Sergeant Ernest Whitehouse, a local man who had been injured in action in the First World War. He had played for the Castleford club in 1912 before moving on to play for York and Halifax during the war years. Whilst serving in France with the West Yorkshire Regiment in 1918 he suffered an injury which resulted in the amputation of his right leg.

Billy Batten was one of the first stars of Rugby League and his involvement in the benefit match would have been a great attraction to rugby fans, particularly as there had been little rugby played during the war years. Batten played 19 times for Yorkshire and 25 times for his country and won championships and Challenge Cups with both Hunslet and Hull. Later in his career he had a two-year spell at Wakefield before ending his career by playing eight matches for Castleford in 1926/27, their first season in the Rugby Football League. He scored his only try for the club in an 18-5 home defeat against Broughton Rangers in the First Round of the Rugby League Challenge Cup on 12th February 1927.

For the record, Halifax won the benefit match 16-6. However, after the match all the proceeds were stolen and the unfortunate Sergeant Whitehouse received nothing.

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