

Edgbaston



Edgbaston County Cricket Ground is Birmingham's oldest international sports venue. During its first Test Match, in May 1902, Australia were bowled out for 36 runs – their lowest ever total – before rain forced a draw. The Thwaite Scoreboard, shown here during England's more recent, scintillating victory over Australia during the epic Ashes series of 2005, is a 1989 replica of the 1938 original.

In sporting circles, even amongst those with no direct knowledge of Birmingham, the name of Edgbaston is renowned.

Edgbaston cricket ground has been staging Test matches since 1902. The first ever games of lawn tennis were played in the garden of an Edgbaston house in or shortly after 1859. The Edgbaston Archery and Lawn Tennis Society claims to be the world's oldest tennis club to be playing on its original grounds. (For the reason, tennis forms its own chapter.)

Other sports played in the area – both at well-appointed private clubs and at facilities belonging to the City Council, Birmingham University, West Midlands Police, plus no fewer than eight public schools – include rugby, football, hockey, athletics, bowls, golf, croquet, fives and swimming.

That so much sporting activity should be concentrated in the area is, in itself, worthy of note.

Rather more remarkable, however, is the fact that, as the aerial view opposite illustrates, Edgbaston's open, recreational spaces are exceptionally close

to the city centre, yet have survived the otherwise rampant urbanisation of the 20th century.

They have done so, by and large, because great swathes of Edgbaston have been, or still are, in the ownership of a single landlord, the Calthorpe Estate.

It is therefore on this estate's borders, hardly more than a mile from the Town Hall, that we begin our survey of Birmingham's sporting heritage, among the elite.

Calthorpe Estate's origins go back to 1717, when a well-travelled merchant, Sir Richard Gough, purchased 1,700 acres of mainly farmland for £20,400. This included Edgbaston Hall, rebuilt by Gough and now the clubhouse of Edgbaston Golf Club.

The first lease to build on the estate followed in 1786, during the lifetime of Gough's grandson, Sir Henry Gough-Calthorpe (who became the first Lord Calthorpe ten years later). But it was only after George, the 3rd Lord Calthorpe (1787–1851) inherited the estate in 1807 that the character of Edgbaston as we know it today started to emerge.

No doubt mindful of how the once exclusive Colmore and Gooch Estates in the town centre were being rented out to businesses and workshops, Lord Calthorpe resolved to create an estate populated only by people of an 'appropriate social class'. Thus agricultural tenants were gradually but deliberately ousted by 'gentlemen and tradesmen'.

With its fast draining soil, fine views across the surrounding countryside and its relative immunity from the noxious fumes of nearby industry (thanks to prevailing winds), Edgbaston was to become a haven for Birmingham's rapidly growing monied classes. No commercial or industrial concerns, nor any housing for the lower orders, were to be permitted within its borders.

Initially development was gradual, until a period of almost continual local prosperity saw Edgbaston's population rise from 6,609 in 1841 to 22,760 in 1881. Steady acquisition of land, meanwhile, expanded estate control to 2,500 acres, or 85 per cent of Edgbaston parish. »

The Calthorpe Estate has long acted as a green buffer to the not-so-distant city centre. To identify the area's sporting locations, compare this view – taken from the southern, Selly Oak side of Birmingham University – with the map on page 21. In the upper centre of the image is Edgbaston Golf Club, closer to the city centre than any other in Britain.

