

Jack Birch who was capped for England and Great Britain

In the photograph below is the Barwick-in-Elmet Football team, and some followers, from some time in the 1930's (see the footnote for a list of those we can identify). Among the people in the photograph is Jack Birch who lived in Barwick and was awarded a cap for playing for his country.



The Jack Birch in question is the older person in the back row on the left with a flat cap. He won two caps playing rugby league.

Jack (John Wilkinson Birch) was born in Garforth in 1878, the son of George Birch of Parlington and Alice Smith of Garforth. He started working life as a butcher's boy. He married Annie Simpson of Kippax in 1898, became a coal miner, and lived in Garforth.

Early playing career

While living in Garforth, Jack started to play rugby for Leeds Parish Church. It is somewhat of a surprise that Leeds Parish Church had a rugby team. It was in the days when there was no split between what became two forms of rugby, Rugby Union (the game played solely by amateurs) and Rugby League (which did pay its players). At half an inch below 6 ft. he was well above average height for that age. Weighing 13 stone, he would have been quite a formidable opponent. He played as a prop (no 8 or 10).

Photograph above:

Back Row (l-r)Walter Lovett, Jack Birch Senior - with cap, George Pullan(?),Not known,Man in hat partially hidden - not known,Arthur Curtiss(?), Fred Robshaw(?), Bill Birch, boy to rear not Known,Not known,boy - Ronnie Hurst(?), boy not known.

Front Row (l-r)Young Jack Birch, Ellis Birch, Pim Poulter, ? Inman (?).

In 1901 the Leeds Parish Church club was disbanded when its lease on its Clarence Road ground expired. The Church club committee placed the whole of their playing staff at the disposal of the Leeds Club who took on Jack and seven of his colleagues.

Jack made his début against Wakefield Trinity at Headingley on 7 September 1901. In his first season with the club, Leeds won the Yorkshire Senior Competition in 1901/02. Leeds became champions with victory over The Rest, a team made up of the best players from rival clubs the result been 7-5 on 19 April 1902 at Headingley.

On 26 October 1907 at Headingley the Leeds team played New Zealand, known as the All Golds because of their professional status. The game was a win for the tourists 8-2.

Jack played for Leeds for 8 years.

International playing career

At the age of 30, John Wilkinson Birch won a cap for England while at playing for Leeds in 1908 against Wales, scoring a try. In that year he won a further cap, this time for Great Britain against New Zealand (known as the All Golds). The match was played at the Athletic Ground, Cheltenham. The game was won by New Zealand 8-5.

Post retirement

Jack stayed a miner for the rest of his working life. He was a miner and came to live in Barwick. The photograph at the beginning of this article, bears testament that, in spite of Barwick-in-Elmet never having a rugby team, Jack retained an interest in sport and supported for the village football team. He ended his days living at 36 Chapel Lane, opposite the village hall and the football and cricket ground. He died at the age of 75 and was buried in Barwick on October 14th of that year.



John Wilkinson Birch in his playing days

H J Smith

I am very grateful to Jack Wilkinson's grandson, David, for making me aware of his grandfather and his achievements and for the information which he has provided to make this article possible.