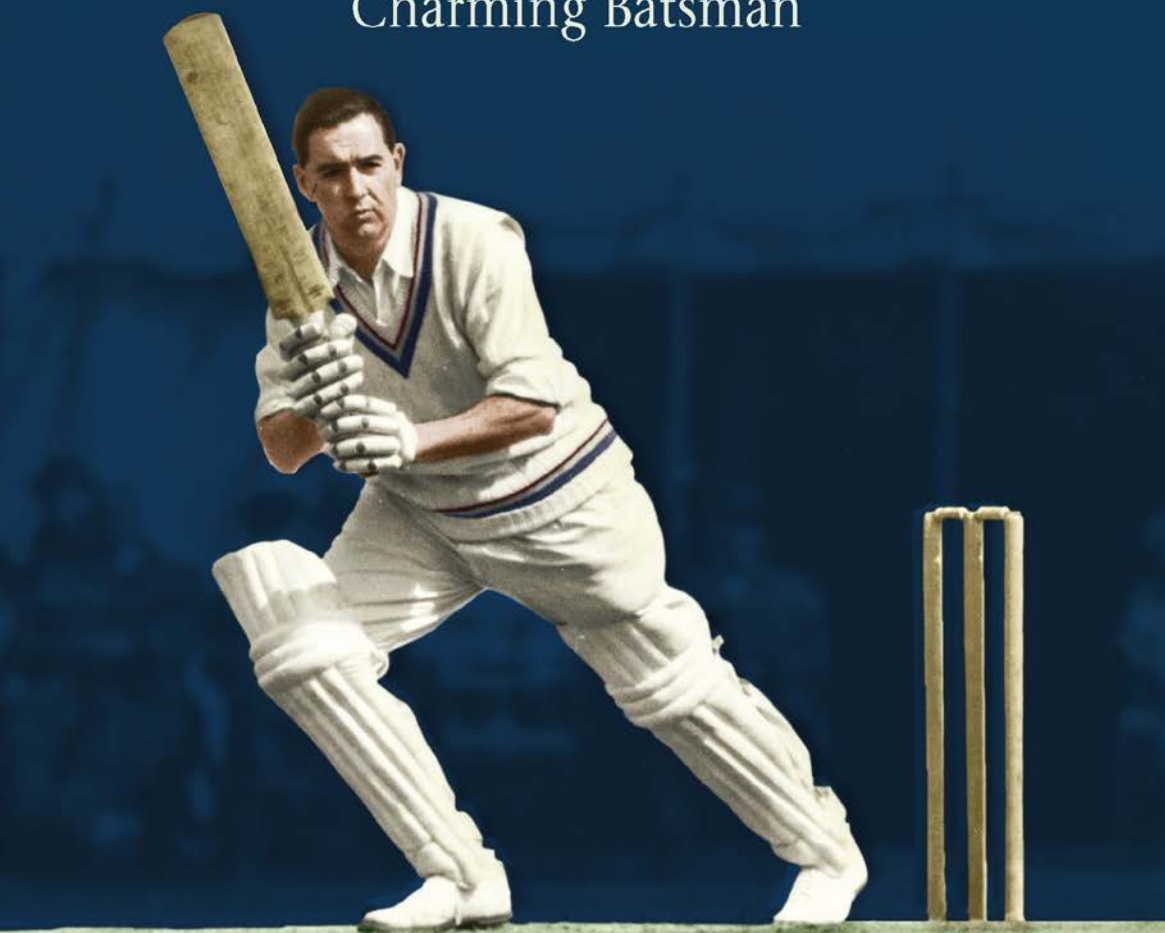
GENTLEMAN AND PLAYER

The Story of Colin Cowdrey, Cricket's Most Elegant and Charming Batsman



ANDREW MURTAGH

Foreword by Sir John Major

GENTLEMAN AND PLAYER

The Story of Colin Cowdrey, Cricket's Most Elegant and Charming Batsman

ANDREW MURTAGH

Foreword by Sir John Major

pitch

Contents

Introduction

MAY'S BOUNTY. Can there ever have been a more enchanting name for a cricket ground? It might just as easily have served as a title of a sonnet by Keats or the subject of a lyrical ballad by Wordsworth. But no, it is a cricket ground located in north Hampshire, donated by Lt Col John May, a member of a famous Basingstoke brewery family, to the local community for the purposes of sporting activity.

Cricket has been played there since the mid-17th century and it is currently home to Basingstoke and North Hants Cricket Club. From 1966 to 2000, Hampshire played a couple of their home games there every year.

A number of counties had similar festival weeks away from headquarters. Scarborough, Harrogate, Tunbridge Wells, Hastings, Eastbourne, Bournemouth, Bath, Cheltenham and Guildford were once as much of the first-class game as Lord's, Old Trafford and Trent Bridge but have now sadly fallen out of favour as being uneconomic.

Basingstoke Week was one such fixed point in the calendar, not greatly loved of the players, largely because of the cramped and spartan changing facilities, with a wooden floor that had more splinters than the gun deck of HMS *Victory* at the battle of Trafalgar. However, the post-match hospitality in the sponsor's tent was as generous as anywhere, it had to be admitted.

So why would I start a biography of Colin Cowdrey at a nondescript, albeit pretty, club ground which isn't even in his home county? The reasons are twofold. First, Cowdrey was no stranger to festival cricket. In fact, he loved playing at these outposts of the

county game as much as he thrilled to the challenge and excitement of Test cricket at the great stadiums around the world. It was no great struggle for him to turn out for his beloved Kent the day after the conclusion of a Test match, no matter how modest and unexceptional the venue; county cricket was his bread and butter and he never turned up his nose at it.

Kent v Hampshire at Basingstoke was yet another fixture in a crowded season and he would have looked forward to playing. There was never an occasion when he did not look forward to buckling on his pads. He loved the game with a passion that never wavered from childhood to the day of his death.

Secondly, something happened at Basingstoke on 15 May 1974, which gave everybody who was there and many who were not cause for thought, throwing up an unusual but pertinent example of the enigma behind the public façade of Colin Cowdrey. By now, even in the earlier stages of the season, the name of Andy Roberts was making people, cricket lovers, journalists, players, selectors, sit up and take notice. Andy Roberts was fast all right, frighteningly so, and county cricketers up and down the land were now well aware of this. Including Cowdrey.

It hardly needs saying, but I shall say it nonetheless, that Cowdrey was as fine a player of fast bowling as there was in the game. His long Test career substantiates this. He faced all the fast bowlers of his era, from Lindwall and Miller, to Adcock, Heine and Pollock, to Meckiff, Rorke and McKenzie, to Watson, Hall and Griffith and to Lillee and Thomson. He knew how to survive and flourish against the very fastest. That is not to say that he relished it. Any batsman who says that he enjoys playing against fast bowling, I mean really fast, when you have only 0.4 of a second to react when the ball is rearing at you at 90-plus mph, is lying. Especially in those pre-helmet days.

So, when he went out to bat for Kent against Hampshire at Basingstoke in the early summer of 1974, Cowdrey would have heard of Andy Roberts and listened to the stories swirling around the county circuit about his fearsome pace but I doubt he would have felt intimidated. Admittedly the score was 21/4 and Roberts was steaming in down the slope but he had been here before, many times. For a few overs, he made it all look so easy, the mark of a good player. I had seen him at close quarters once or twice before and had always

marvelled at the amount of time he seemed to have to play the ball. Many batsmen were hesitant, abrupt and sudden, often making an initial movement forwards or back before the ball was even bowled. Not Cowdrey. He was calm, unflustered, unhurried and economical with his foot movement and the ball seemed to glide off the bat. He was no different this day.

Then Roberts tested him with a bouncer. He did not attempt a hook; he let it go. But at the same time the old entertainer could not resist playing up to his audience. Theatrically, he made as if he hadn't seen it, ducking far too late and looking around as if to say, 'Good heavens, where did that go?' The crowd loved it, chuckling at the play-acting. But there was a collective intake of breath from the Hampshire players.

Up on the players' balcony, the Kent 12th man, David Nicholls, turned to James Graham-Brown and muttered, no doubt between mouthfuls of doughnut, 'Er, I don't think he should have done that.' Barry Richards, standing at first slip, observed out of the corner of his mouth to Bob Stephenson, Hampshire's wicketkeeper alongside, 'Uh-oh, red rag to a bull.' Richard Gilliat, the Hampshire captain, was fielding at mid-off. He told me, 'When I returned the ball to Andy at the end of his run, his face was expressionless, as it always was. We all knew what was coming.'

Indeed. Everybody in that Hampshire side was ready for it. Surely, it was inconceivable that Colin Cowdrey, who had faced more bouncers than pretty well anybody currently playing, was not expecting it too. The point was that Andy Roberts had two bouncers. We, his team-mates, had seen them both often enough and knew how devastating the second one was. The first was his slower bouncer, quick enough by anybody's standards but once evaded, it tended to induce a false sense of security in the batsman's mind. The second one, that bit quicker, was on the unfortunate batsman before he had time to react. Roberts hit more batsmen than anybody I have ever seen. And Cowdrey was not to be spared.

Richard Lewis, who was fielding at short-leg, said later, 'All I can remember was Colin falling like a sack of potatoes and in so doing he knocked over his stumps. He's out, I immediately thought, hit wicket!'

There is a wonderful series of shots, taken by the master of cricket photography, Patrick Eagar, which renders in almost cinematic form

the moments before, during and after impact of ball on cheek, with Cowdrey's bat clearly rearranging his stumps. It was a horrible few minutes as concerned players gathered around the prone figure. A further picture of Eagar's, with Lewis kneeling down, one hand on Cowdrey's back and the other raised to summon help from the pavilion, is quite poignant. Sometimes, an image needs no words.

To everybody's relief, following a protracted period of medical assistance, Cowdrey pulled himself to his feet. We all expected him to make his way back to the pavilion, a little unsteady on his feet perhaps, with a severely bruised jaw and possibly missing one or two teeth, but thankfully upright and *compos mentis*. However, he had other ideas. He made as if to take guard again and resume his innings. Somewhat embarrassed, the Hampshire fielders pointed out to him that he was in fact out, hit wicket.

He turned to Gilliat to remonstrate. 'He said to me that he wasn't out and that he wanted to continue,' said Gilliat. *What did you say?* 'I just shrugged my shoulders and said, but Colin, you're out. Then David Constant, the umpire, bustled over and said, of course you're out Colin. And he had to go. He didn't want to, you know, and was muttering something about the spirit of the game.' Incidentally, Bob Woolmer, next man in, put it about in the Kent dressing room when he returned shortly afterwards, caught behind for three, that sawdust had to be thrown over the batting crease to soak up the blood. That was an exaggeration. I can confirm that there was no blood and no need for sawdust.

Three questions arise from this incident at Basingstoke, all of which we pondered over, at the time and subsequently. Even now, the answers, such as they are, intrigue me. First, why did Colin want to carry on batting? The answer to that probably lay hidden deep within his psyche. His pride. No batsman likes to admit to being hurt or discommoded by a bowler. A quick, surreptitious rub of the injury, with perhaps a wry little smile at your tormentor, is all you want to allow. Colin would have wanted to pick up his bat immediately, to show who was boss.

Secondly, he was more than likely, if not concussed, then not fully aware of what had happened. The man had just been struck a nasty blow on the jaw. Perhaps he had been unaware he had broken his wicket as he fell. Umpire David Constant was in no doubt. Colin

had to go. He had to be dragged away but doesn't that say something about his bravery and his tenacity? Furthermore, the fact that he was immediately taken to hospital for treatment and took no further part in the match gives rise to the suspicion that he was not wholly in possession of his senses.

And the third is possibly the most perplexing. 'The strange thing was,' said Richard Gilliat when we talked about this many years later, 'Colin and I never really spoke to each other ever again after this incident, apart from casual greeting.' I was shocked. I had no idea. *Why was that?* 'I was never really sure. I think he believed that we had been unsporting, that we shouldn't have appealed and that he should have been allowed to continue.' *But there was no need to appeal, was there? It was out. End of story.* He wrinkled his nose, at a loss to explain it, as I was. 'I don't know. Perhaps he felt we could have withdrawn the appeal, not that we had made one. Connie had given him out, not us. In any case, I wasn't going to call him back. To me, the decision was correct and obvious.'

How very odd. Two of the true gentlemen of the game, two nicer men you could not wish to meet, Cowdrey and Gilliat, Tonbridge and Charterhouse, captains both of their school, their Oxford University side and their respective counties, having a spat that was never resolved. I had heard of historic quarrels between county captains that would fester over seasons, usually because one or other wouldn't declare, but between two scions of the cricket establishment, over a matter of principle, was, to say the least, unusual. Mystifying, even. I wondered what was going on in the Kent dressing room at the time. What was said when Colin returned, sat down and unbuckled his pads?

I asked an old friend and opponent, James Graham-Brown, who was on that balcony when David Nicholls made his remark. 'Colin was deeply upset, that much was clear,' he told me. 'He kept on shaking his head and muttering, "Bad form" or, "Unsportsmanlike behaviour." He felt that a line had been crossed.' But what was that line, I pondered. Surely it was not the fact that Roberts had bowled him a bouncer. He had been facing bouncers throughout his first-class career and none was better at playing them. Never had he suggested that the bouncer was anything other than a legitimate weapon in the fast bowler's armoury. So why had this one caused him so much disquiet, apart from the obvious fact that it had rearranged his jaw?

The answer – if answer it is – I unearthed many, many years later, during research for this book. He believed that Roberts had *thrown* it. This caught me by surprise; indeed, it would not be exaggerating to say that my jaw dropped when I heard the suggestion. I had played with Andy Roberts. I had faced him many times in the nets. Never did I believe there was anything dubious about his action. And neither did I hear the merest hint of a grumble from team-mates or opposing players, at the time or subsequently, that he was a 'chucker'.

However, since the advent of super slo-mo images, you do look at bowlers' action and sometimes wonder. Is it possible to bowl that quickly without a slight, almost indiscernible, straightening of the elbow? I remember seeing slow motion newsreel of Larwood bowling in the infamous Bodyline series and thinking to myself, hello, that was a bit jerky, wasn't it? As often happens, the advance in technology, far from making things clearer, has only served to muddy the waters.

Let us not forget that Cowdrey had been on that acrimonious tour of Australia in 1958/59, bedevilled by accusations of throwing, primarily by the Australians Meckiff, Rorke, Burke and Slater, though the Englishman, Tony Lock, was hardly above suspicion either. He had also faced Geoff Griffin of South Africa, and Charlie Griffith of West Indies, both of whom had suspect actions. So Colin knew all about throwing. If he had a suspicion that someone chucked, it was beholden on everybody to sit up and take note. But he never told anyone, other than his most trusted confidants. Why? We shall never know.

We can speculate. Perhaps he wasn't sure. Perhaps he did not want to cause a fuss, a furore even. He would have known that had he opened his mouth publicly, there would have been a storm of press interest. Roberts was just setting out on a long and distinguished career. Perhaps Colin felt he would not be believed, or, at the very most, accused of sophistry, inconsistency. He still had his pride. He could still play. He had not lost the urge to perform on the big stage. He would not have wanted to be accused of 'losing it' and blaming an illegal delivery for his misfortune. 'He set great store by sportsmanship, you know,' his son, Christopher, told me. I knew. He did.

It has been well documented that Colin Cowdrey believed that you should always carry yourself like a gentleman, both on and off the

pitch, and that you should treat your opponent with respect. Benign, genial, chivalrous and kindly, he exuded a sort of generous, cheerful, even boyish delight in playing the game and he disapproved of the more abrasive, confrontational posturing that was beginning to take root towards the end of his career.

He wrote in his autobiography, 'I revere the manners and the customs of this country which are rather scornfully written off these days as old-fashioned and typically English.' He believed the virtues of the game of cricket were immutable and as good a frame of reference as any for a worthy life. He abhorred the coarse, the boorish and the ungentlemanly. It is entirely appropriate that the annual MCC Spirit of Cricket Lecture should be named in his honour, a past president of MCC himself. Together with Ted Dexter, he had been instrumental in incorporating a preamble to the laws of the game, *The Spirit of Cricket*. To him, cricket had to be played in the right spirit; otherwise, what is the point? It is a game, after all.

Ah, but there's the rub. Do we play cricket for fun or to win? Every games player worth his salt will tell you that it's much more fun when you win. And if you play it seriously, you must win, or else you lose your place in the draw or the competition or the rankings or the team, and ultimately your job, your livelihood. So more is at stake than pure personal enjoyment.

This is the dilemma facing all professional sportsmen and women. How far are you prepared to go to win? Where do you identify the point beyond which you will not set foot in your quest for the upper hand, because over there lies the murky territory of gamesmanship, sharp practice and cheating? As ever, it remains a matter of personal judgement. Opinions vary as much as human nature. One man's quick thinking is another man's chicanery. As often happens with these contentious disagreements, time lends distance and perspective. Looking back, it doesn't seem to matter very much now. It certainly didn't affect the result of the match. Hampshire won by an innings and 71 runs.

Andy Roberts took the county scene by storm in 1974, taking 119 first-class wickets at an average of 13.62, and went on to become one of the great West Indies fast bowlers of that generation. Colin Cowdrey quickly recovered from his mishap. Within a few weeks, he was playing as well as ever, so much so that his name was touted for the

tour of Australia that winter. In the event, he was not selected. He was, as it happened, recalled to the national colours during that devastating series, to make his sixth tour of the country, but that dramatic story awaits us in a later chapter.

Colin Cowdrey came to represent this ethos of gentleman amateur but I am convinced he never set himself up as its ambassador. It was his nature to abhor shabby behaviour, on or off the field, and, as we shall see, it was a code of conduct buttressed by his upbringing and strong Christian faith. However, he was no apostle for courtliness at play; he never saw himself as an heir to Chaucer's *veray parfit gentil knight*.

It is true that he later did become a knight – of the realm – but others put him there. He did not seek the epithet nor the honour. He led his life according to his own lights. Others chose to behave differently. He did not, publicly at any rate, turn on those who had different values. He was no moral crusader. As he says in his biography, 'I am not the extrovert showman who happily wallows in the public eye. Indeed, I have always admired the unobtrusive touch.'

So, I think it would be true to say that he liked to do good, with a bat or a pen or a gin and tonic in his hand, by stealth, with no fuss, no fanfare. Anybody who saw his cover drive would understand what I mean. It was so well timed that it had just enough velocity to reach the boundary (I should know; I chased a few, convinced that I would catch them. But I never did). He was not one to crack the advertising boards. I believe he was a gentle man as well as a gentleman.

Yet it did surprise me how Cowdrey seemed to divide opinion. I was fully aware of the criticism occasionally levelled at him that he would sometimes go into his shell and allow bowlers to dictate to him.

I remember talking to Tom Graveney about Colin not long before Tom died. He was a huge admirer of Colin, as a player, as a person and as a captain. Colin's travails with the England captaincy, both when he had it and when he lost it, will concern us in a later chapter but Tom reckoned that his quiet authority brought the best out in his team, not least himself. So fond of Colin was he and so convinced of his moral probity and inherent decency, that he asked his friend to become godfather to his son, Tim. Tom was no fool; he recognised a good'un when he saw one. As for Colin's batting, he had this to say, 'He had the technique, the shots, the timing, everything. Sometimes he batted

like a dream.' And then he gave a little sigh. 'If only he had had the ruthlessness of Peter May. There would have been none better.'

I wish I had had more time with him to explore exactly what he meant but alas, Tom's innings was shortly to be curtailed. Was he intimating that Colin lacked ruthlessness? As a captain, he was occasionally criticised for indecisiveness but according to Tom, in the Caribbean during the 1967/68 series, when he felt he had the full backing of the selectors and the team, 'Colin was a changed man – he cracked the whip, you know.' Or did he mean that sometimes an innings full of authority and thrilling strokeplay could be followed by one of scratchiness and diffidence?

Anyone who has played cricket for a living knows all about the vagaries of form; like a will o' the wisp, one day it is there and the next it has evaporated. Colin had a stockpile of talent and all the weapons to combat any attack yet his contemporaries wondered why he felt he had to retreat into his shell from time to time. Paradoxes abound about the man. It is what makes him an intriguing subject.

Listen to this observation of a young player just starting out on his county career for Kent as Colin's was coming to a close. 'I was playing in a second XI match against Surrey at Norbury in 1971,' James Graham-Brown told me, 'and I had scored 60, my first half-century for Kent. Colin phoned me – I had not even met him – to congratulate me. What a lovely thing to do. From that moment I was a Cowdrey man through and through.'

Here's another example. Bobby Parks was a young team-mate of mine at Hampshire, making his way in the game just as my time was drawing to a close. His father, Jim, had played many times with and against Colin over the years and they had been on several MCC tours together. 'Several days after my debut for Hampshire,' Bobby told me, 'Colin (I had never met him) sent me a note congratulating me on my first match. Apparently, he used to do this all the time. Later on, as I got to know him, he turned out to be probably the nicest man I've ever met.' This solicitude for others has been stressed time and time again by those whom I have interviewed for this book. Colin was undoubtedly a kind man.

He scored over 7,000 Test runs at an average of 44.06, so he can't have been quite so kind to opposing bowlers. You don't play 114 Test matches without having a steel rod for a backbone. I am reminded

of the retort from David Gower, another one who has been unfairly castigated in some quarters for squandering his talents at the highest level, 'Well, I scored over 8,000 Test runs so I can't have been such a bad player, can I?' Indeed not. Incidentally, Gower's Test average of 44.25 compares very closely to Cowdrey's. And Peter May, generally regarded by many, Tom Graveney included, as one of the finest of post-war English batsmen? His Test average was 46.77. So, there was not much of a difference in record between the 'ruthless' May, the 'dilettante' Gower and the 'unassertive' Cowdrey. Public perception can be a capricious mistress. More anomalies to explore.

What intrigues me more than anything about the man is how he married his generous temperament with the inherently selfish business of scoring runs. 'It's nonsense to suggest that Colin had no ego,' Graham-Brown told me. 'Of course he had an ego. All the great performers possess an ego. Colin was no different. He knew how good he was, how blessed with God-given talent. But that ego was a fragile one. It occasionally fractured and, like Humpty Dumpty, it had to be put back together again. And do you know what – that made him an attractive man in my view. Somehow, his insecurity made him more endearing.'

Not everybody who played with him would agree, I expect. Sport at the highest level does not admit of weakness and certainly one or two found his vacillation infuriating. But the vast majority, I feel confident of saying, admired him for what he did achieve, in spite of these perceived weaknesses. Who doesn't warm to a person overcoming obstacles, particularly those placed there by his own nature, to reach the sunlit uplands of success?

Colin Cowdrey was born on a tea plantation in India and ended up in the House of Lords, being granted on his death a memorial service in Westminster Abbey. Only three sportsmen to have been so honoured, the others being Sir Frank Worrell and Bobby Moore. This is a life worth examining and, as Socrates once said, the unexamined life is not worth living.

I

A Solitary Childhood

India, 1932–1939

'Dear Master Cowdrey, I shall be watching your career with great interest.'

Letter from Jack Hobbs

OOTY sounds like a cheeky little bar in downtown New Orleans resonating to the foot-tapping, syncopated beat of traditional jazz during long, hot, summer nights. However, Ooty is to be found on another continent altogether, a different world, you might say.

To give it its full name, Ootacamund is situated in the Nilgiri Hills, the summer capital of the Madras presidency in India during British rule. It was one of 65 hill stations set up across India by the British to escape the searing summer heat. Ooty was considered to be one of the most beautiful, hidden among luxuriant forests and at over 7,000ft above sea level, its climate is pleasantly mild throughout the year.

The rolling hills are covered with trees, such as conifer, pine and wattle, with the scent of eucalyptus predominant. The green downs and lofty hills abound with exotic and colourful species of plant and flower; not for nothing was Ooty known as the 'queen of hill stations'. No wonder it was popular with the British. It reminded them a little of home.

Whatever else you might say about the British, who are notoriously lazy linguistically, they are remarkably accommodating with new words encountered on their travels. No language is more susceptible to borrowing words from another country than English and the British in India during the days of the East India Company and the Raj found a rich source of extending their vocabulary.

But being British, they made little attempt to spell or pronounce these words correctly, so they anglicised them. 'Blighty' comes from an Urdu word, meaning 'foreign'. 'Bungalow' loosely means 'belonging to Bengal'. And how about this? Deolati was a British camp near Bombay, where there was a sanatorium for soldiers affected by heat and stress. It soon came to be known as Doolally.

Ootacamund was no different; the popular contraction to Ooty was inevitable and typical. It was first set up as a place for soldiers to recuperate, but it soon became a home away from home for the colonial masters. Bungalows sprung up, with neat, tended gardens, a golf club, gymkhanas (another Indian word), churches and, as surely as night follows day, a club, the Ootacamund Club, founded in 1841. I suppose the recent TV series, *Indian Summers*, gives a reasonably accurate picture of what it was like back in the dying days of the Raj in the 1930s.

It was here that Colin Cowdrey was born, on Christmas Eve in 1932. In some official sources, his birthplace is given as Bangalore, some 200 miles away, but as he was cheerfully fond of pointing out, the distances in India are so vast that no one would quibble about a mere 200 miles or so.

It is an odd fact that, since the Second World War, about one third of England captains were born abroad. Apart from the obvious South African influence (Greig, Lamb, Strauss, Pietersen) and the pub quiz teasers such as Denness and Lewis (Scotland and Wales respectively), the list throws up some unusual countries of origin. Freddie Brown was born in Peru, Donald Carr in Germany, Ted Dexter in Italy and Colin Cowdrey in India.

One of the stories that swirl around Colin's early childhood was that his father immediately wrote to a friend in England requesting that the new arrival's name be put down for membership of MCC. Just over half a century later, that infant was to become MCC president.

Another legend that grew up with the boy was that his father had deliberately chosen the names Michael Colin Cowdrey, to give him the impressive and prescient initials MCC. Mind you, there are a number of Colin's army of fans in India who are convinced that MCC stands for Madras Cricket Club. And his father did play there.

For Ernest Arthur Cowdrey was a sports fanatic and cricket was his game of choice. He had ended up in India almost by accident. He was born in Sanderstead, a leafy enclave of Surrey, and after school, he worked in a bank. Good at games, he soon showed promise as a cricketer and for a time, as he moved up the age groups, he harboured dreams of playing professionally.

In such research into the early life of Ernest Cowdrey as has been possible, I was intrigued to discover that he first played for Beddington Cricket Club, where I too learned how to play the game as a schoolboy. He met Kathleen Mary Taylor there and later married her. From club cricket, Ernest graduated to Surrey Second XI and on to Minor Counties cricket with Berkshire but that was as far as his cricket career went – for the time being.

From the bank, he progressed to stockbroking in the City, buying and selling tea stocks. Quite what happened to provoke a sudden decision to sail off to India has been lost in the mists of time. He set himself up on a tea plantation high up in the Nilgiri Hills. Whether his wife approved of the move, we are none the wiser. According to Colin, she never betrayed any resentment but wives were expected to be loyal and dutiful and she played the part faultlessly. How much she enjoyed the gilded cage of life in a remote part of a far-distant land, he had little concept; he was too young and, in any case, parents were not wont to discuss their feelings with their offspring in those buttoned-up times.

For a gilded cage is what it must have been. The bungalow in which they lived, although hardly palatial, would have been nothing like a typical suburban bungalow in England; accommodation would have been spacious and comfortable. There was a tennis court in the garden and a golf course at the back, admittedly comprising only the single green, and half a dozen servants to cater for the needs of only three of them. And the views of tea plantations dotting the rolling green hills all around were indeed spectacular.

The climate was kind and one can be forgiven for thinking Colin's childhood was blessed and privileged. But it was an isolated

existence. The nearest town was 66 miles away, Ernest was away all day supervising the 2,000-acre estate and whenever he could, he played cricket – never on his doorstep and sometimes in Madras, a good ten-hour drive away. There must have been times when Mrs Cowdrey felt very much alone.

Colin was an only child and in the way that an only child does, was very much thrown upon his own devices. He had no brothers or friends so he had to shift for himself. He immersed himself in his sport, no doubt making up the rules, terms of engagement and imaginary matches as he went along.

He was fortunate in two respects. It was an outdoor existence and few and far between were the times when he would have been driven indoors. He remembered the occasional violent thunderstorms that you get in a mountainous setting, the torrential rain adding to the green lushness of the terrain. But most of the time, he was either kicking or hitting a ball. And secondly, his father was quick to recognise the precocious talent of his young offspring.

Ernest was clearly no mean sportsman himself and his enthusiasm for ball games had in no way been diminished by his move to the subcontinent. This passion rubbed off on his son; you might say, percolated through his very pores. Before breakfast, it was golf on the pitch and putt hole (for the diminutive Colin, it was more of a par five).

There is a touching photograph of the boy Cowdrey – he must have been four or five at the time – teeing off on this single hole of theirs. Immediately, the trained eye in sporting talent would see that Colin was a perfect little player, even in the relaxed and balanced way he is addressing the ball. And standing behind him is the well-disposed but sternly critical figure of his father, no doubt about to make the odd tiny adjustment to grip and stance, looking so much as Colin would in later years, slightly portly, not tall, with the same kind, rounded features and a look of benevolent encouragement.

In the evening, when Ernest returned from work, it was cricket, cricket, cricket. He had his firm ideas about how to coach the budding batsman. Eschewing the slog to leg, the natural stroke of any untutored youngster, he placed Colin alongside the wire netting of the tennis court. If he hit to leg, his back would receive nasty abrasions. Thus the only strokes available to the young boy were on the off side, which endless hours of practice perfected.

It was a wonder in later years that he was ever able to play on the leg side at all. 'That's because everybody bowled an off stump line in those days,' laughed Christopher, his son, many years later. 'He didn't need to play much on the leg side, apart from the elegant whip off his legs over square leg.'

I'm not entirely sure about that; those who played against him can testify with total assurance that he was pretty adept on either side of the wicket. Colin always remembered the meticulous attention to detail of his father's coaching, frequently adjusting this, suggesting that, theorising about something else.

One wonders whether the seeds of Colin's obsession in later years with technique and execution – in some critical eyes, to his detriment – were sown in these early sessions. James Graham-Brown tells a surprising story when he once found himself, as a young pro, bowling to the experienced Test player and Kent captain, in the nets. Cannon fodder, we net bowlers used to call ourselves. But not a bit of it. After ten minutes or so, Colin stopped the bowler, advanced down the net and enquired of the tyro whether he felt that his, Colin's, top wrist was too far round on the handle. Graham-Brown was dumbfounded. He hadn't a clue, hadn't even noticed and in any case would have been hard-pressed to form a suitable respectful answer.

Great players are not easily pigeon-holed. Some just go out there and rely on their instincts and their eye. Others are forever tinkering with grip, stance, foot movement, head positioning, even weight and make of bat. Colin Cowdrey was a technician, who painstakingly analysed his own style and craft, as well as those of others, team-mates and opponents alike. Each to his own. It obviously worked for him, as his 7,624 Test runs amply attest.

Would it be too fanciful to speculate that Ernest Cowdrey, a competent club cricketer not quite good enough to make the grade professionally, lived his dream vicariously through his precociously talented son? What is beyond doubt is that he invested heavily in time and emotional support to make sure that the sapling was painstakingly cultivated. And once the eternal verities of batting technique had been firmly installed, he made sure that where Colin went to school took into account his cricket education. Some might say it was the sole driving force.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that Ernest was rather more than a competent club cricketer. His own father reckoned he wasn't

good enough to make the grade in the first-class game but on a level just below that, in Indian club or social or representative cricket or whatever you like to call it, he was more than a useful player. With the distances involved, the lack of formal structure, the absence of adequate practice facilities, the irregular nature of any fixture list, the long periods between matches, the matting pitches, the variable surfaces – all must have tested any batsman's technique, to say nothing of his enthusiasm.

Ernest must have been very keen to travel 300 miles to Madras for a game. Fancy getting a duck and facing a ten-hour drive back home, having spent most of your afternoon shuffling between third man and long leg. The first motorways, it is true, had been built by the time Colin was born but they were in Italy. India didn't catch on to the idea of expressways until 1990. The roads in and out of the Nilgiri Hills were single track, largely unpaved and frequently subject to landslides. Southampton to Scarborough was the longest and most arduous journey I ever made to play a game of cricket but I was paid to do it. Ernest made these gruelling trips because he loved the game with a passion; a passion, needless to say, inherited by his son.

It is a wonder that Ernest had time to play cricket at all. Despite the seductive image that life in colonial India might present to us in our mind's eye, all sun-dappled garden parties, tennis on the lawn, servants dispensing drinks, endless rounds of golf, tiger shoots and elephant rides, the reality on a large tea plantation between the wars must have been very different. He was responsible for a labour force numbering at various times between 500 and 600 men. There were no trade unions or organisation of labour; a strict class structure was still in place and the social divide between workers and managers, the whites and the Indians who served them, unbridgeable.

Running a plantation was a bit like running a mini city; the manager responsible for all his workers and their families, their welfare, their births, their deaths. The manager was very much the father figure, with all the responsibility that that entailed. Furthermore, the economic pressures must have been immense. The Great Depression of the 1930s hit the tea industry heavily, with wholesale prices dropping by 53 per cent in four years. During the war, conscription into the army deprived the owners of the younger English middle managers who supervised the tea planting. Beneath

the apparent calm and stability of the British Raj was the seething undercurrent of political uncertainty and social unrest.

Nationalism was on the rise, the Indian independence movement was gathering force and the ethnic and religious tensions in the country were already at breaking point. Trouble was afoot. That much was evident even to the most purblind colonial master. And one assumes that Ernest was not blind.

The young Colin, perfecting his off drive, would have been blissfully oblivious of all this, of course. His days were spent with a teenage retainer of the household, by the name of Krishnan, whose sole occupation, it seems, was to play sport, hour after hour, with the little boy. If he found his role tedious, he never showed it, according to Colin; in fact he gave every sign that a day's activity of a combination of cricket, football and golf was all an energetic teenager could conceivably want. A bond was formed between the two of them, which survived well into their middle age.

It is interesting to speculate what ramifications such an unusual existence had on the young child. I have heard it argued that an only child, starved of the company of siblings or friends of the same age, necessarily becomes introspective, withdrawn, self-contained, egocentric even, slow to make friends, unsure of commitment and uneasy in relationships. Nonsense, cries my wife (an only child); you have the undivided love and attention of your parents, you have to fend for yourself and you make of life what you will. Besides, you have a bedroom all to yourself. And you don't have to share Christmas presents with anyone. So, I am not at all sure that we can confidently ascribe any trait of Colin's personality at this early stage of his life to his solitary Indian childhood.

More clues might emerge from his schooling back in England later but, for the time being, we have no reason to doubt his assertion that it was an 'idyllic' early boyhood. Endless games of cricket and football in the sunshine with a willing ball-boy certainly fits the bill, in my view.

I think we can take it as given that Ernest, on his return to the house every evening and following business/cricket trips away from home, would have engaged his son with tales of derring-do on the pitch. Whatever his wife thought of these frequent absences, history does not record but we know from her son's testimony that if she complained, it was quietly or in private.

Of Ernest's deeds with the bat, we know very little but there is record of him scoring a century for the Planters v Madras CC in their annual encounter. On the back of this, he was selected to play in a one-day match for the Madras Europeans against MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club, not Madras Cricket Club!) who were touring India during the winter of 1926/27, the first touring team to travel to the subcontinent to play first-class matches.

It was only a one-day game, but two odd facts emerge. First, the match was drawn. No such thing as a limitation on overs for a one-day fixture back then; the side batting first had to be bowled out or declare. And secondly, doesn't the very name of the local team, Madras Europeans, sound outdated, inappropriate and, frankly, a little racist to our more sensitive ears? So, all 22 players at the Chepauk Stadium that day would have been white. However, one's faith in human nature and the social glue that is cricket can be partially restored by a glance at the fixture list for that tour. MCC played against Muslims and Parsees XI, Hindus and Parsees XI, Hindus and Muslims XI, as well as the full Indian side (though it did not yet have Test status; that came a few years later, in 1932).

Enough of sociological musings and back to the match. MCC had brought out a strong side, led by Arthur Gilligan and including Maurice Tate, Maurice Leyland, Andy Sandham, Bob Wyatt, George Geary, George Brown and Ewart Astill. Their opponents may not have been of Test status but they were taking the Indians – or, in this case, the Europeans – seriously enough.

The Euros (if I can call them that) won the toss and batted first. They declared, nine down, for 201, after 66 overs. E.A. Cowdrey, opening the batting, top-scored with 48, 'batting with a vengeance' according to a contemporary report 'and taking a toll of the bowling', which comprised, let us remind ourselves, Tate, Geary, Mercer and Astill. In reply, MCC were 155/8, with only Maurice Tate with 53 bettering Cowdrey's score of 48. A moral victory for the home side, you could say, but a look at the scorecard reveals that MCC had only 36.2 overs to bat, before, one assumes, the light failed.

Later, Ernest did fulfil his lifetime's ambition to play first-class cricket. Only one match, it has to be said, but there it is in the record books, a three-day fixture between the Europeans and the Indians at the same Chepauk Stadium in Madras. He scored nine in the first

innings and 27 not out in the second. He also bowled 11 overs for 48 runs but was wicketless. The match was drawn.

He continued to play regularly for Weynaad against Calicut in the annual Malibar series as well as touring teams from south India. He also played for Madras when he was in town and available. We are indebted to a local historian, W.K.M. Langley, for these words when writing an account of Planters cricket in 1953, 'It is needless to record Cowdrey's influence on Indian cricket, and indeed on most other games, as this is well known to everyone.'

By the end of the 1927/28 season, Cowdrey was described by Langley as a 'new star in the firmament' when he took the field for Wynaad against Calicut, 'so we knew what to expect and it is significant that thereafter I have not recorded which side won these matches!' Oh, that you had, Mr Langley, and furnished us with more than just an infuriatingly brief glimpse into the cricket career of one who must have been a considerable player in his own right.

But he did have this to add about Ernest, 'But his greatest achievement was yet to come in his early training of his now famous son. I believe this started on the level site of the old Chundale tea factory. We are all waiting with high hopes the full development of one of the three most promising cricketers in England.'

As this was written in 1953, it is interesting to speculate who were the other two 'most promising cricketers in England'. Peter May? Tom Graveney? David Sheppard? Fred Trueman?

And that, frustratingly, is pretty much all we know about the Cowdreys' time in India. Perhaps that doesn't really matter all that much. Colin was only six when he left for good – that is, putting aside the times when he later toured there with MCC – and how many of us remember much about our lives in those first half-dozen years?

All we have is a hazy recollection of one or two incidents and a general sense of whether we were happy or unhappy. Colin never wavered from his assertion that his childhood was blessed with love and affection and if he was on his own a lot, well, he wouldn't have known any different. He was content as long as he had endless hours of hitting, catching or kicking a ball, with the willing assistance of the faithful Krishnan, day after day, week after week, month after month, until the years merged into one another.

That is all that he could recall of his time in India, interspersed by the odd spectacular thunderstorm in the mountains and a village hunt for a leopard that had been worrying livestock and had killed a man. The leopard was cornered and ritually slaughtered. The head is probably still on display at the Ooty Club, where incidentally, the game of snooker was invented. It's true. There is prime source evidence, in the form of a framed letter from the game's inventor, Sir Neville Chamberlain (no, not that one, but a baronet of the same name), claiming that fact. It is not too fanciful to imagine Ernest Cowdrey excelling at that game too, whenever he visited the club.

Details of life on the Cowdrey plantation are sparse but one assumes that Ernest must have made a reasonably successful fist of the business. For when it was time to consider the schooling of the young Colin, in common with most expats in that part of the world, there was only one option – boarding at a public school back home in Blighty. And private education was no less expensive, comparatively speaking, than it is today. There was never any hint that Ernest would struggle to pay the fees. So Colin prepared himself for the journey back home. Quite where 'back home' was or what the very concept meant exactly, he was probably a bit vague. But it was an adventure.

On the long sea journey back to England, something happened that he remembered for the rest of his life. Having just emerged from the Suez Canal, their ship was steaming westwards across the Mediterranean Sea when Ernest sent for his son, safely tucked up in bed in his cabin, to join him on deck.

I leave the description of the scene to Colin himself, 'At the rails, he held me up in his arms for a better view of the SS *Strathmore* sliding into the gathering darkness. She was about three miles away but I can remember the scene vividly, with her lights pin-pricking her shape against the Mediterranean. What I can also recall most clearly is the change in my father's voice, for its tone, all at once, could hardly have been more reverent if he had been showing me the precise spot where Moses had delivered the tablets. He said, "Don Bradman is on board that ship. He's bringing the Australian team to try to beat England."'

Several interesting points emerge from this piece of description. First, what a turn of phrase the writer displays, a gift that remained with him all his days. It is often said that Colin Cowdrey neglected his studies, preferring the pursuit of cricketing to academic excellence.

On his own admission, this was probably true but let nobody assume that he wasn't bright, knowledgeable and articulate, as later evidence underlines. Note too the Biblical imagery; religion was to be an integral part of his life. As was Bradman.

The year was 1938. This was to be the last Ashes encounter between the old foes before war engulfed Europe and what a memorable series it was. Bradman's Test average for the season was 108.50, normal service, you might say. In the fifth Test at The Oval, where England squared the series with a mammoth win, Len Hutton broke Bradman's individual Test score of 334 by making 364. Bradman and Colin became firm friends. They died within two months of each other. There was another synchronicity in this passing of ships in the night to which I shall return later.

The destination of the travellers was England but the reason was schooling. Homefield School in Surrey, established in 1870 as 'a preparatory school for the sons of gentlemen', was not far from the family home in Sanderstead and seemed an eminently suitable choice, given that its headmaster, Charles Walford, was a keen games player, who had won a Blue at Cambridge for rugby. He was a cricket nut, so the fit would seem to have been a perfect one. And in some ways it was because by the time Colin moved on to Tonbridge, he was good enough to play for their first XI at the age of 13. The foundations of his cricket education, as Colin was the first to point out, were laid at Homefield, specifically at the feet of its headmaster.

However, what was good for his cricket might not have necessarily been best for him as a new boy at school. Colin joined Homefield in the summer term and all my schoolmastering instincts are troubled by this. Would it not have been better for him to start school at the same time – September – as the rest of his contemporaries, when they were all new boys together? By the time he arrived, at the start of the summer term, friendships would have been formed and he would have been the odd one out. Perhaps that matters less and less as you get older but at such a young age, all you want to do is fit in and be part of the gang. Most little boys hate to be 'different', set apart from their peers.

No doubt with his eagerness to please, he would have settled in quickly enough, especially when it became evident early on that he was good, outstanding even, at games. It does seem a strange decision,

however. Unless of course, you take into consideration Ernest's burning ambition to further his son's cricket career. Because as we all know, the summer term is, in reality, the cricket term.

It is a fact of life, to some an uncomfortable one, to others a relief, that sporting prowess seems to smooth the path for a new boy at school. Perhaps it is because sport usually embraces the team ethos – you belong to a group – and as I have pointed out there is no one who yearns more ardently to belong to a group than a young boy. Perhaps being good at games hints at strength, vigour, manliness, in the same way that say, an expert bowman or horseman in the Middle Ages would have 1garnered respect.

Or maybe it was a sign of the times, where more value was put on external attitudes than internal character. Undoubtedly, his schooling had a lasting influence on the young Colin. In the latter years of his cricket career, his espousal of the tenets of good sportsmanship and comradeship became almost an article of faith.

If ever a man embodied the Latin adage, *'mens sana in corpore sano'*, it was Charles Walford. He believed, as did many others of his ilk and persuasion, in the importance of strong discipline and physical exercise, specifically the traditional team games, for the development of young boys and their spiritual and mental well-being.

It is a fact that John Rae, later a renowned headmaster of Westminster School in the 1970s, was a contemporary of Colin's at Homefield. There is no record of any later communication between them, nor indeed any evidence that they ever spoke to each other at school, but it would have been interesting to gain another insight into the character and personality of Walford. Sadly Rae is no longer with us but during his time at Westminster and in his frequent appearances and contributions in the national media, he was a strong advocate of tolerance and a sense of humour in the disciplining of his pupils.

One imagines therefore that his principles of education would have been at odds with his first headmaster's. Whether Rae was a bit of a rebel, even at that early age, we have no evidence but knowing his courting of controversy in his later career as an educator, I wouldn't have been half-surprised. Colin was no rebel. His avowed intent was to toe the line and not to cause trouble.

Charles Walford, for good or bad, was a martinet. Probably he would not have disapproved of the epithet, for a martinet was a drill

officer in Louis XIV's army, and Walford was nothing if not a man of routine. The term has taken on a derogative meaning in modern times, which someone as fair-minded as Colin would not have really meant, because there were undoubtedly worthy aspects of Walford's influence on his pupils. But he was a hard taskmaster.

Privately, he led a spartan existence, following a rigid daily routine, which he expected his charges to emulate. He scorned frippery and worldly excess and attempted to instil a more spiritual disposition in his pupils. He was a fierce disciplinarian and beatings were frequent, though Colin avoided most, an instinct not to kick over the traces already firmly established in his personality. It is no surprise to learn that Walford taught mathematics, classics and scripture. Maths would have suited his predilection for order and method, classics would have supplied countless tales of morality and the virtuous life and scripture would have provided ample endorsement of the Christian faith.

None of this would have been lost on the impressionable boy. In Colin's own words, Walford demanded 'obedience, punctiliousness, truth, effort and conscientiousness'. Aristotle's famous saying, 'Give me the child until he is seven and I will show you the man' would have been familiar to anyone with Walford's classical education and is as good a way as any of understanding the essence of Colin's early schooling.

The headmaster encouraged academic endeavour – of course he did, he was a schoolmaster – but it was on the games field that his influence was mostly felt. He was as firm and unyielding in his cricket coaching as he was in the classroom. Nets were run with military precision; they commenced at 4pm on the dot. And woe betide any boy who was late.

He would stand, rigid and silent, behind the net and then come round every so often to correct a fault of technique. Colin called it a type of 'tyrannical tuition' but from it he really learned how to play. It was a tough environment; you either sank or swam. Colin was good enough to cope and believed the training had equipped him well for the battles he faced in Test cricket. Others, presumably, were not so fortunate. On reflection, from the perspective of adult life, Colin believed that Walford was 'too tough' and that sort of inculcation was not one that he would wish for his own children.

Colin can remember not a word of praise from his mentor but there was one episode that revealed a kinder aspect of Walford's

temperament, one that Colin treasured for the rest of his life. It was the occasion of his first hundred. Nobody ever forgets his first hundred. Colin made 100 first-class centuries and even he could not remember all the others that were not recorded. But he remembered his first all right. Except that it wasn't. Not quite.

As a seven-year-old, he was playing in an under-11 match and he knew he was nearing triple figures. Excited commentary from his chums on the boundary kept him abreast of his score. Eventually, he made it and enthusiastic celebration among the young spectators ensued as Colin shyly raised his bat in acknowledgement. Soon afterwards, he got out. Then a recount of the score in the book revealed the awful truth. Cowdrey had been dismissed for 93, not 100. The poor scorer was not lynched but for a time his name was mud.

Colin was too generous to make much of the mistake but, unbeknownst to him, his headmaster wrote to Jack Hobbs about the incident. Several days later, Colin received a hand-written note from The Master, as Hobbs was universally known. 'Dear Master Cowdrey,' it said. 'I take great pleasure in sending you this little bat, which I have autographed. I shall be watching your career with great interest.'

Jack Hobbs died in 1963. Up to that point, he would have had a lot to keep him interested in Colin's career, for by then, it would have encompassed 67 Tests. And, following Hobbs's example, Colin became one of the great writers of letters and *billets-doux* in the cricket firmament.

In the autumn term of 1939 – Colin's second at Homefield – he was surprised that it was his grandmother, not his parents, who met him at the school gate. He was airily told that 'they had gone to work' and that was as far as the explanations went. In fact they had returned to India, which was always going to happen, with the boy left in England to continue his schooling. There had been no emotional preparation, no clarification, no farewell. One day they were there, the next day they were gone.

Perhaps, they felt it was for the best – no protracted goodbyes, no tears, no fuss. Besides, in those days, that was the way it was done. Colin's experience would not have been unusual in this regard. No doubt he missed his parents but prep school is a busy life, he had little time to ponder and, like most six-year-olds, he would have accepted the reality as the norm.

What nobody could have predicted, except perhaps Winston Churchill, was that the gathering storm clouds were about to burst over Europe and nothing was to be the same ever again. Colin did not see his parents for another seven years. Once war broke out, travel became next to impossible and the family was sundered. The emotional effect of the enforced separation can only be guessed at but it is as well to remember that dislocation of households, communities, societies, even races, became commonplace during the Second World War. And let us not forget that the war's duration – and thus the length of separation – was unknown, even to Churchill.

Colin's predicament would have been mirrored in tens of thousands of homes throughout the land. My sister was born at the same time as Colin, and she explained she had little recollection of our father before he went to war. Then suddenly, six years later, she discovered a strange man at home who immediately assumed the alpha male role in the family and started to lay down the law. It was a tense time of adaptation and familiarisation and she never, truly, established a close relationship with him.

It is no less easy to put ourselves in the shoes of the parents forced to abandon their children. When Ernest and Molly Cowdrey resumed their life in India, presumably they expected to see their son the following summer, when he would have travelled out from England during the long summer break. But war broke out and that was that. We do have a small window into the family's anxiety for their distant son. Among Colin's papers, I unearthed a solitary letter from Molly. It is addressed to Mrs Pickard, one of many acquaintances who were charged, together with grandmother, aunts and uncles, to look after the boy in their absence. It is dated 24 October 1940, when the situation in Europe was possibly at its grimmest. In the most beautiful handwriting, she profusely thanks Mrs Pickard for her many kindnesses shown to her 'little scamp' and assures her that it is a great relief that he is being cared for by such good friends.

She goes on to say that Colin is 'school mad' and that his life seems to be exclusively about having a good time. She is thankful that he is too young to comprehend fully the 'horrors of this ghastly war' and that he is in safe hands. Mind you, she continues, it helps that he is 'cricket mad, which pleases my husband very much for he is a cricket lunatic too'. The poignant bit comes at the end. 'Are not our RAF truly

marvellous? Where should we be without them? To say nothing of our Silent Navy and the Dunkirk Heroes? All of them heroes, to whom we shall owe our lives and freedom, before long, we pray. God bless them. May 1941 bring us that much longed for Peace, Peace and still more Peace!' Little did she know that peace, in October 1940, was a long, long way off.

The tone of her letter is grateful, wistful, anxious but never self-pitying. We can only guess at how much she missed home once she was whisked off to India by her husband. We can sympathise with her at the desperately unfortunate circumstances that separated her from her son and we can admire her fortitude and constancy throughout these long years.

She must have been one hell of a woman? It was Jeremy who answered. 'Funnily enough, Dad never really spoke about his parents. But I remember Molly being a strong and feisty woman. She died in her 90s, you know. For 26 years, she worked as a volunteer at Bromley Hospital, pushing a trolley and looking after patients' needs. She saw that as her duty, giving back to the community. That was probably the same spirit that helped her survive in India.'

Molly Cowdrey was awarded the British Empire Medal, which is for 'meritorious civil or military service worthy of recognition by the Crown'. The certificate, but not, alas, the medal, was unearthed among Colin's effects. The familiar crest of the Greater London Council heads the citation, which was to be read by Mr R.F. Ashmole, chairman of the Bromley Health Authority, and in it lengthy and glowing tribute is made to her 26 years of dedicated service to the Red Cross. Furthermore, mention is made of her constant presence as a volunteer organiser and operator of the hospital trolley shop. She was an exceptional fundraiser for the hospital and this too is noted as well as her selfless devotion to the disabled. The citation concludes thus, 'It is fitting that Mrs Cowdrey's commitment, devotion and kindness are now recognised by the award to her of the British Empire Medal.' One would imagine that the applause was thunderous. Would it be unreasonable to speculate that it is obvious from what source Colin inherited his magnanimity and public spirit?

How did Colin cope as a lonely child? As he had been brought up to do, with stoicism and forbearance. He just got on with it. What else could he do? The psychological repercussions he would have to deal

with later, when he was older and when he could understand what had happened to him. In the meantime, Charles Walford became his surrogate father, in all but name.

The question is whether this was a fortuitous or damaging twist of fate. Colin was measured and temperate in his own assessment. For a start, his extended separation from his parents was an inescapable turn of events. It was nobody's fault. Walford didn't ask for the job of nurturing the young boy, though he was quick to recognise the nascent talent and develop it. He was a headmaster and he had many other youngsters to take under his wing. Even though he could see, as plain as a pikestaff, that he had a potential genius on his hands, he showed Colin little favouritism. To spoil a child was just not in his nature.

At no stage could the young boy have got above himself. Modesty became a pillar of his personality. We have already seen that Walford instilled in his charges a strict moral code; wrongdoing brought its immediate and uncompromising consequences. Did this stifle any propensity for devilment, impetuosity, spontaneity? Probably.

I doubt that taking a gamble was greatly regarded at Homefield. Good manners were expected, demanded even, and Colin remained to his dying day the very acme of genteel behaviour. Courtesy, respect and civility underpinned all that he did. He disapproved of slackness, disorder and imprudence, all of which can be traced back to his early schooling. Shoddiness was not in his vocabulary; he could easily have quoted Evelyn Waugh's maxim, 'If a thing is worth doing at all, it's worth doing well.' And it is not at all fanciful to imagine Colin Cowdrey quoting Evelyn Waugh. Walford instilled in him, if not a love of learning per se, then definitely a desire to absorb.

However, even Colin accepted that a tough, at times harsh, regime left him, how shall we put this, a little short of self-confidence. This is a conundrum that stalked him throughout his life, something that left experienced onlookers scratching their heads in bewilderment. How can one so gifted and talented sometimes doubt his own ability? Sometimes the explanation is obvious. It was because nobody praised him when he was young. Certainly he got no praise from Charles Walford.

Colin's peripatetic early life meant that he became – and remained – the perfect guest. He was never in his own home, where he could

let down his hair and behave with the boisterousness of youth. He was kindly fostered by a series of dutiful relatives but he was always conscious that he had to behave. In 1942, his grandmother died and the role of guardianship was taken on by various aunts and uncles. During term time, he boarded. During the holidays, he was thrown largely on to his own devices. He wasn't lonely, he always said, but he was alone. Mind you, if he had had the distractions of a full and raucous family life, he might not have spent those thousands of hours throwing a ball against a brick wall and practising his technique.

It reminds me of the story of Bradman's boyhood that the Don never tired of telling. He would throw a golf ball at the curved brick wall, which housed a water tank, in his back yard and attempt to hit the ball, which rebounded at speed and at different angles, with a cricket stump. He maintained that endless hours playing this form of solo cricket sharpened his reflexes.

In 1946, after the cessation of hostilities, Colin's parents managed to secure berths on a troopship home from India, which can have been no easy thing with an estimated five million men and women needing to be repatriated from all corners of the Empire. Eventually, the three of them were reunited.

It must have been a strange and strained meeting. Colin was now 13, on the cusp of adolescence. When he had last seen his parents, he was a little boy. Where on earth do you start? What do you say? How do you greet each other? How best to break the ice? Colin admitted that he found it all disconcerting and difficult.

In my experience, 13-year-old boys are not the most communicative of individuals at the best of times and we know that Colin was reserved and self-contained. It was a protracted and awkward period of readjustment. It says much for both mother and father that, slowly, a rapprochement and then a relationship of genuine affection was established between them and their son. Of course, especially with his father, there was the shared passion for sport that bound them.

The two of them, father and son, frequently speculated how fate might have dealt them a different hand altogether. What if Colin had been one year younger and the journey to England to go to school had been scheduled for May 1939, not 12 months earlier?

By then, war was imminent and Ernest might well have had second thoughts. Quite possibly, Colin would have stayed in India, attended

one of the top schools in Bangalore or Madras, had the benefit of the best coaching in games (with the exception perhaps of rugby) and no doubt his precocious talent would have surfaced as readily under the Indian sun as it did under the cloudier skies of England. He would have played first-class cricket for Kanartaka and numbered as his team-mates, rather than opponents, Bhagwat Chandrasekhar, Erapalli Prasanna and Gundappa Viswanath. And who knows, Colin modestly deliberated, he might have played Test cricket for India.

Ernest Cowdrey had one final, significant decision to make in the cricketing apprenticeship of his son – where to send him to senior school. The choice rested upon another unconventional decision, much the same as had been made to send him to Homefield School. The original, favoured destination was Marlborough College in Wiltshire. But Ernest wanted Colin to start immediately, this being the cricket term and Marlborough had no spare places. Tonbridge School did, and so it was for Tonbridge that he packed his bags in April 1946.

Several points present themselves at this juncture. Did the registrar, or whoever was responsible for the enrolment of pupils at Marlborough, ever kick himself for missing out on a future England cricketer? And, once again, Ernest had sent his son to a new school at the wrong time, when he would be entering an environment as a stranger where friendships and alliances had already been made.

A senior school is not like a prep school either; it is bigger, harsher and more unforgiving, more like noisy kennels than a cosy spot on the hearth in a domestic home. Colin was no strapping, mature, sophisticated 13-year-old. That first term was going to be an unsparing test for him. Furthermore, he was leaving Homefield before his final cricket season, much to Charles Walford's chagrin. Whether Walford ever forgave Mr Cowdrey Snr is not recorded.

So Tonbridge it was. It turned out all right in the end. In fact, Colin developed a lasting affection for the place, recognising the enduring influence the school had on his upbringing, both on and off the field. The fact that he chose the name Lord Cowdrey of Tonbridge when he entered the House of Lords in 1997 says it all.