

JONATHAN RICE



STORIES OF
**CRICKET'S
FINEST PAINTING**

KENT v LANCASHIRE 1906

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Canterbury Cricket Week

THE painting by Albert Chevallier Tayler, entitled *Kent v Lancashire 1906*, shows Colin Blythe, the Kent left-arm spin bowler universally known as 'Charlie', bowling to J.T. 'Johnny' Tyldesley of Lancashire, on a sunny August day at the St Lawrence Ground in Canterbury, the headquarters of Kent County Cricket Club. The painting clearly shows all 11 Kent players who took part in that match, as well as two Lancashire batsmen and one of the two umpires officiating that day. It shows flags flying and marquees crowded with spectators, as well as the bell tower of Canterbury Cathedral in the distance. Most importantly, at least to the man who commissioned it and to the members of the committee of the Kent County Cricket Club that paid for it, it shows that season's champion county in action at the height of their powers. It shows them showing off their skills among the large friendly crowds who flocked to Canterbury for Cricket Week, the oldest and most fashionable cricket festival of them all. As *The Times* leader writer put it a few years later in 1919,

after the long bleak years of the First World War, 'Originally the property of Kent alone, the Week is now the property of all who love the game.'

Canterbury Cricket Week is still, well over a century after the picture was painted, the oldest continuing cricket festival on the planet. It dates back to 1842, only five years after Queen Victoria ascended to the throne and six years before W.G. Grace was born. There was no Kent County Cricket Club in those days, but the most important club in East Kent was the Beverley Club, which played its matches in St Stephen's Field, a little north of the cathedral on the other side of the River Stour, which runs through the city. Although St Stephen's Field is long gone, built over as the city expanded, there is still a Beverley Meadow in the same vicinity, no doubt the meadow which gave the club its name.

On Monday, 15 July 1839, the Beverley Club played a match against the Chilston Club, based near Maidstone. Only one day had been set aside for the game, which somewhat inevitably ended in a draw, but the crowds flocked to see the first appearance in Kent of two major figures of Kent and English cricket, Nicholas Wanostrocht, known as Felix, and Alfred Mynn, later to be renowned as the Lion of Kent. Felix played for the Beverley Club and Mynn for the Chilston XI, and such was their fame that some 4,000 spectators came along to enjoy the day. The committee of the Beverley Club, which had struggled to keep financially afloat since its founding in 1835, must have wondered why they did not charge admission for the game, and it must have occurred to them that if the right players could be assembled in the right place at the right time, there was money to be made. And the right place was obviously the Beverley Club ground.

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A return match was played at Chilston Park later in the season, but that too was inconclusive, so in 1840 the two teams arranged a further pair of fixtures. The first was scheduled for two days in July 1840, at Chilston Park, and resulted in a clear six-wicket win for the Beverley Club. The return match was played over three days later that same month, at a new Beverley Ground, which was near to the Cavalry Barracks in Canterbury. It was here that the club for the first time charged admission, and with crowds of between 1,500 and 2,000 each day, the takings would have been very healthy – certainly enough to pay for the band of the 13th Dragoons based at the barracks to play every day, and still have plenty left over. The Chilston Club won the return match, thanks mainly to Norfolk-born Fuller Pilch, who scored 108 runs for once out, out of a total of 208 runs off the bat. Felix did his best for the Beverley Club, but it was not enough as they collapsed to defeat by 53 runs.

Of course, it was not just the Beverley Club that saw the earning potential of great matches played in festive surroundings. Gamblers loved cricket almost as much as they loved horse racing, and it was just as easy a sport to bet on. In 1841, a ‘Grand Cricket Match For One Thousand Guineas’ took place at Lord’s, presumably with the tacit agreement of MCC, between Kent and England. The Kent team was made up of leading cricketers from all around the county, but the direction clearly came from Canterbury. Kent won the first game by 70 runs, largely thanks to the bowling of Alfred Mynn and William Hillyer. A return match was fixed for Canterbury, beginning on 10 August 1841.

This was the match that created the atmosphere and public fervour which allowed Canterbury Cricket Week to develop. On the first day as many as 4,000 people came to watch the match,

including, as the local journals noted, the leading county families. A 'large booth' was set up for some 300 of these pillars of Kent society to sit down to lunch, and although England won the match easily enough, the success of the day on every level – sporting, financial and social – was enough to encourage the Beverley Club committee to make bigger plans for 1842.

That first Canterbury Cricket Week in 1842 was defined in an official history published in 1865 as 'the first occasion when the two great matches, Kent v England and Gentlemen of England v Gentlemen of Kent, were played in Canterbury'. The point of Canterbury Cricket Week from the very outset was not just to play games of cricket, but also to give the leading county families (and, in passing, the other citizens of Canterbury) a thoroughly entertaining week at the height of summer, a week which would also serve to fill the coffers of the Beverley Club.

However, to ensure that the Canterbury Week would be socially acceptable, it needed the active support of some of the great names of the county. Men such as the Earl of Thanet and J. Stoddart Douglas, the owner of Chilston Park, were always visible in the crowds from the beginning, as was one of the best and most controversial cricketers of his era, the Rev. Lord Frederick Beauclerk, who had been the president of MCC in 1826. Also a regular visitor was the MP for Dover, Edward Rice, who had in 1829 enjoyed the rare distinction of being blackballed when applying for membership of MCC. We have no idea what his misdemeanours might have been, but given that the foul-mouthed and universally loathed Frederick Beauclerk had achieved membership, it is hard to imagine that anything less than being a member of the wrong political party could have been the cause. His proposer for MCC had been Benjamin Aislabie,

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secretary and a former president of MCC, which makes it all the odder, but at least Rice was not blackballed from the festivities of Canterbury Week. Aislabie himself attended in 1841, the year before he died, further strengthening the link between Kent and London cricket. This link was essential to the continuing success of the festival week, and in the darker years it could be argued that the link was the only reason the Week was able to keep going.

It seems that arranging for the best cricketers to come down to Canterbury for a week was not an insurmountable problem, provided that the city could also offer entertainment in the evening that did not necessarily merely involve the many public houses frequented by the Dragoons, most of which were not known either for their sophistication or for their standards of cleanliness and hospitality. It was felt, therefore, that some kind of evening entertainment should also be arranged for those of higher social standing, and after much consideration, although a Grand Fancy Dress Ball was also planned, the centrepiece of the social week was to be an amateur theatrical performance. As the publications of the day put it, 'The first of a series of Amateur Performances was given, in the old and time-honoured Temple of the Drama in Orange Street'. From that time until very recently, Canterbury Cricket Week has been closely linked with the performances of the troupe that became known as The Old Stagers, and Kent society loved it.

The driving force behind the Beverley Club's efforts in the early years was Mr John Baker, the secretary of the club, but the men who did more than anybody else to establish the Week on the social calendar as more than just a couple of good games of cricket were Frederick Ponsonby and Charles Taylor. Ponsonby, the eldest son of the Earl of Bessborough, whose title he would

inherit in 1880, was the leading man, along with his brother Spencer and John Loraine Baldwin, both behind the formation of The Old Stagers and in front of the footlights. Charles Taylor, a Londoner who had become firm friends with the Ponsonby brothers during their undergraduate days at Cambridge, was a great cricketer and a great eccentric. He was described as 'the finest Gentleman batsman of the time', playing mainly for Sussex and for the Gentlemen against the Players. In the 1843 match, he was recorded as being given out 'hat knocked on wicket, b Hillyer 89'. He also was reputed to have learnt to play the piano in six weeks, but to what level we do not know. He certainly loved to perform and be the centre of attention. He played cricket occasionally during the Week, but was a tower of strength at the Orange Theatre. In 1842, the troupe came down from London by sea to Ramsgate, and from there by coach to Canterbury, and despite the rigours of the journey and the fact that he had badly injured his arm playing cricket a few weeks before, Taylor insisted on playing the part of 'Desdemona (a striking beauty)' with his arm in splints and a sling. The prologue, a 46-line piece of rhyming couplets, which gave new meaning to the word 'doggerel', included the lines:

And though our best man's arm be out of joint
Despite his splints, he'll try and make a point.

It must have been a distressing sight.

The 'amateur band', which gave musical accompaniment to the splintered Mr Taylor's performance, was conducted by Nicholas Wanostrocht, and included two notable cricketers of the day in Herbert Jenner and Charles Baldock. The first rehearsals of the band were reported to have proved that 'mirth and music

did combine'. Whether either mirth or music was felt by the audience is another matter. Nevertheless, the success of The Old Stagers' amateur theatricals and the Grand Fancy Dress Ball, held at the Assembly Rooms on the Wednesday evening, laid down a prototype for the Week which was built on over the next few years.

That first Canterbury Week in 1842 produced two excellent matches, in the first of which Kent were thoroughly beaten by England (beginning a tradition that over the years has shown that the Kent county side has frequently performed remarkably poorly during Canterbury Week), and in the second of which the Gentlemen of Kent restored the county's honour by beating the Gentlemen of England by 173 runs. The leading families of Kent continued to support the whole Week, enjoying not only the cricket but also the balls and the theatrical offerings in the evening. It quickly became the major annual event at which all of Kent society could gather and the Week established a reputation for being where the well-heeled young of the county could meet, talk, dance and, frequently, fall in love. The *Kentish Gazette*, albeit an interested party for whom the success of the Week was important, told of 'bouquets of flowers and evergreens, which contrasted with the verdant lawn, and the varied coloured dresses of the ladies produced a very animated and picturesque scene'. The writer, reporting early in the Week, was sure that 'the remainder of the week, if the weather continues favourable, will draw a greater number of visitors to the city than has been known for many years past'. This was a big claim to make, but it shows how rapidly and strongly the Canterbury Week festival had captured the imagination of the local populace, as well as the wider cricket community.

The success of the Grand Week, as it was described, produced a 'cricket fervour' in Canterbury, and after the end of the week several 'Citizens' Matches' were played in and around the city, and financially the risks of staging cricket on such a grand scale seemed to have paid off for the Beverley Club: the balance sheet was reportedly in fine shape.

For the 1843 season, the Beverley Club changed its name to the East Kent Cricket Club, and subsequently to the Beverley Kent Club, perhaps to reflect the wider range of its cricketing authority, and the second Cricket Week was as successful as the first, despite rather poor weather towards the end of the week. The matches were the same as the previous season – Kent v England, and Gentlemen of Kent v Gentlemen of England. These were not just matches of local interest: Kent were acknowledged as one of the strongest teams in the country and the England side was a very strong representation of what the rest of the country had to offer. For those in Kent who loved their cricket, these were matches not to be missed. Kent beat England very easily, by nine wickets, thanks largely to the batting of Fuller Pilch (57 not out), and the all-round strength of the county's bowling attack, consisting of the Mynn brothers, as well as Martingell and Hillyer. The Gentlemen of Kent also had the best of their game, winning by 31 runs despite frequent stops for rain. In this game, Alfred Mynn, the Lion of Kent, took ten wickets.

The 'Private Theatricals' also played their part in the success of the Week. The main production was Sheridan's *The Critic*, in which most of the parts were taken by members of the cricket teams, but some performers were obviously more professional. The part of Miss Dangle, for instance, was played by 'Miss Sidney' (of the theatres York and Cambridge), and Tilburina

by 'Mrs Walter Lucy' (of the theatres Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane). Other productions of *Othello (Travestie)*, *Bombastes Furioso!*, *A Roland For An Oliver* and *High Life Below Stairs* were also performed by the troupe, who must have put at least as much time and effort into their acting as into their cricket. The accent was always on farce, with men playing some of the female roles, to the obvious delight of the audience. A certain Michael Bruce was particularly fond of the female roles, clambering into women's clothing year after year for the amusement of his audience.

In 1844 the connection between the Beverley Kent Club and MCC was further strengthened by the president of the Beverley Club, Sir John Bayley, being elected president of MCC. Bayley was a remarkable man for his era, a baronet with some sense of social awareness. His two passions were cricket and horse racing, and in 1823 he resolved that his newborn son would be named after the winner of that year's Derby. The two favourites were apparently called Emilius and Lollipop. Fortunately for the boy, who was to become a successful cricketer in his own right, Emilius won and the child became Emilius Bayley. As Arthur Duke Coleridge wrote in his book, *Eton In The Forties*, 'Lollipop out of Sweetmeat would have been a very trying name for an Eton boy'.

Despite the leadership that Bayley gave to the Beverley Club, and to MCC, he was far more interested in cricket than the social scene. His time at MCC included overseeing a 12 per cent increase in membership, from 417 to 465, and a greater interest in the welfare of the professional cricketers, who until this time had no real champion at MCC or in the counties. He was instrumental in setting up, in 1847, the Cricketers' Fund, which was to help professional cricketers 'in case of sickness or accident'.

Sir John attended Canterbury Week in 1844, despite his obligations at Lord's, but it was a year in which the weather once again played its part, rather more forcefully and decisively than the year before. As a contemporary report noted, on the first day, 13 August, 'the wind blew the booths down, broke the supports and did sad havoc'. The storms continued all week and the Kent v England match had to be played 'at intervals between the showers'. However, the storms abated for the Friday which gave the ground 'for the first time during the week, an appearance of animation and enjoyment'. Canterbury Week has always needed to be a time of enjoyment, even if on occasions over the years there has been little sign of animation on the cricket pitch.

A scandal hit the 1844 production of *Esmeralda*, a burlesque written for Canterbury Week and performed by The Old Stagers, which was accused of political bias by a local journal. The production, it was claimed, criticised 'domestic policy of the existing government, of which some slashing hits at Peel and others ... were loudly applauded by the audience in all parts of the theatre'. So despite its popularity, *Esmeralda* was cut from the programme for the rest of the week. William Bolland, another of the original Old Stagers who played a fair amount of cricket, explained to the audience that it had been suggested to the management of the theatre that 'a few words had, by a distortion of their meaning, given offence to some of the firmest supporters of the Cricket Week', and so the management immediately withdrew the play 'to the regret of many'. Then Sir John Tylden, a strong supporter of the Week and all that went with it, responded by thanking the cast and disassociating himself from the 'foolish and wicked attack which had been made, expressing a hope that they would be spared another year'. From this distance it is hard

to understand what the fuss might have been about, and certainly the criticism of the domestic policy of Peel's government would be seen as lightweight in comparison with some of the political comment today. But it was severe enough to create concern that they might not be spared another year.

Whether the *Esmeralda* scandal had anything to do with it or not, by the end of 1844 the Beverley Club's finances were not in good shape. They had an overdraft of £250, equivalent to at least £30,000 today, which they managed to keep under control by public and private subscriptions. But it was not a situation that could last. In July 1845, the wandering cricket club I Zingari was formed by the Ponsonby brothers and John Baldwin, with other Canterbury stalwarts such as William Bolland, Charles Taylor and many others being elected members of the new club, so their attention was to an extent diverted from Canterbury Week. They did not desert completely – the Gentlemen of England team that played against the Gentlemen of Kent that summer included six IZ players in their side – but they did not do as much work behind the scenes as before. This did not help the Beverley Club's finances.

Over the winter of 1846–47, the club moved to a new and final home at St Lawrence at the eastern edge of Canterbury. The great batsman Fuller Pilch was appointed as groundsman, and he managed to create a playable surface by mid-May 1847, when the first match at the St Lawrence Ground took place. The Cricket Week began on 2 August, but once again the fates were against the organising committee, who had to report at the end of the Week that although the weather was beautiful, 'the general election which was taking place at the time prevented so large an assemblage of the leading families

and visitors as on other occasions'. The election was a fiercely argued and closely fought one, being the first since the repeal of the Corn Laws the year before, so it was not surprising that the leading families of the county should have been more occupied by politics than cricket. It was won by the Whig Party led by Lord John Russell, who captured a majority of the popular vote but a minority of the seats. The repeal of the Corn Laws had brought into sharp focus the deep split in the Conservative Party between the trade protectionists, led by Lord Stanley, and the free traders, led by Robert Peel. The party was so disunited that the Whigs were able to remain in power for another five years. The lessons of 1847 were obviously not studied by the modern Conservative Party before the 2016 referendum on EU membership. Politics and sport always seem to find a way to trip each other up.

By 1849, despite the establishment of Canterbury Cricket Week as a mainstay of Kent's summer social season, the Cricket Club was in dire financial straits. A meeting on 17 March that year was called to decide whether to carry on or wind up the club. The meeting was poorly attended and the 'apathy evinced for the future welfare of the Club by its members was so truly disheartening' that the committee resigned en bloc, and effectively turned off the club's life support machine. However, reports of its death proved to be premature, as when word of this meeting got out, other citizens of Canterbury resolved to make sure that the Cricket Week, at least, would carry on. With backing from the Earl of Winchilsea, who was the son of one of the founders of the Marylebone Cricket Club as well as being a major landowner at Eastwell, near Ashford, the club secured enough money to carry on, and the eighth Canterbury Week was saved.

Canterbury Cricket Week

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, while Canterbury Week was establishing itself ever more securely in the social calendar, the club that organised and hosted the cricket matches was limping from crisis to crisis. There was always a reason why the crowds were never large enough to cover the bills – the 1851 Great Exhibition ‘took away many who would otherwise have assembled at the favourite August trysting place for Kentish lasses and lads’, for example – but in 1859 a greater threat to the financial well-being of the club appeared. A meeting was held in Maidstone, chaired by the Earl of Darnley, proposing the formation of a Kent County Cricket Club, not in opposition to the organisers of Canterbury Week, as they were at pains to point out, but simply to have the opportunity of taking the increasingly popular game of cricket to other parts of the county. The meeting enthusiastically approved the new venture. The new Kent County Cricket Club based itself in West Kent, a long and arduous ride from Canterbury, and started slowly, playing only ten matches in its first two seasons. Throughout the 1860s it played county matches at places as far afield as Chatham and Tonbridge, as well as at Canterbury. By the early 1860s, matches between ‘Kent’ and other counties such as Sussex, Surrey, Nottinghamshire and Middlesex were being played under the auspices of the Kent County Club, at Margate, Faversham, Maidstone, Crystal Palace and Gravesend, but the climax of the season was still Canterbury Week, when Kent played England and MCC.

In 1862, the great hero of the Week, as far as the spectators were concerned, was E.M. Grace, who played for MCC against the Gentlemen of Kent, and scored 192 not out, of his side’s total of 344. In this 12-a-side match, the 20-year-old Grace also took five wickets in the first innings and ten wickets for 69 in the second,

which were all the wickets to fall, as the last man was recorded as absent. The match was, however, played under protest, and might have caused lasting damage to Canterbury Week, had tempers not cooled in time. Two matches were scheduled for the week, the first being a comparatively friendly fixture between England and Fourteen of Kent. Hon. Spencer Ponsonby, who was running the fixtures on behalf of MCC, was having great difficulty in raising an England team, and just when he thought he had 11 men, Tom Hayward had to drop out through illness. E.M. Grace was immediately contacted, and he said that he would come and play, on condition that he was also allowed to play in the second match of the Week, MCC v Gentlemen of Kent. The manager of the Week, William de Chair Baker, agreed to this request, and so E.M. came to play both games. In the first game he scored a duck in the first innings, but did rather better in the second, making 56. When it came to the second match, the captain of the Kent side, William South Norton, knowing nothing of Baker's promise to Ponsonby and Grace, objected to Grace playing for MCC when he was not a member of the club. This is described as 'a little friction' in the club history, but the truth of the matter seems to have been that Norton was adamant that neither Grace nor E.W. Burnett, a bowler who was listed in the MCC XI despite also not being a member of the club, should play for MCC. While all this discussion was going on, Spencer Ponsonby was in rehearsals for The Old Stagers' programme that evening.

As there were several other MCC members at the ground, it was suggested that E.M. be elected by them there and then, but this proved to be not possible under MCC rules. Luckily this was 1862 when the waiting list for MCC membership was rather less than the 20+ years it takes these days, but it still proved impossible

to elect him or Mr Burnett to the club. Norton then declared that the Kent team would refuse to play, but when it was pointed out to him that if they did not play, all the gate money would have to be returned to the thousands who had turned up to watch, but also it was quite possible that MCC would not wish to take part in future Canterbury Weeks, he relented. Baker also added that he had given his word to Ponsonby that Grace would be allowed to play, so if the game were to be cancelled, he would have to resign his position. The match went ahead, but as one Kent Gentleman later said, 'we, unwillingly, I must say, and under protest, played the match. We all thought that, as there were competent cricketer members of MCC on the ground, it was somewhat out of place to play two men, neither of whom was a member of the club.'

By 1866, W.G. Grace had joined his elder brother at Canterbury, playing for 'South Of The Thames' against 'North Of The Thames', W.G.'s birthplace of Downend near Bristol being 0.016 degrees of latitude (just over one mile) south of Tower Bridge. W.G. also played for 'Gentlemen Of The South' against I Zingari in that Canterbury Week, both of which games, along with the third match of that week, Gentlemen of Kent v MCC, are listed under 'MCC matches' in the 1867 *Wisden*. This was a sign that control over Canterbury Week was slipping away from the ever-weakening Beverley Club. Matters did not improve in the next two years, although the profile of cricket all around the country was being raised by the astonishing exploits of the young W.G. Grace, and this had a positive effect on Canterbury Week spectator numbers.

By the last decades of the 19th century, Canterbury Week was one of the highlights of the county's holiday season. The first railway line in Kent, the Canterbury and Whitstable Railway, locally known as the 'Crab and Winkle', had opened in 1830,

with the world's first season tickets sold for that line a year later. By the 1850s railways were criss-crossing the county, allowing people from London, both from high society and from the East End, to enjoy summer sunshine in Kent. People came down from London for the hop-picking, to build sandcastles and sunbathe on the sands at Margate and Folkestone, and to watch the cricket at Canterbury. St Lawrence during Canterbury Week would be a sea of tents stretching halfway around the ground (but never obscuring the lime tree), tents hosted by wandering cricket clubs such as I Zingari and the Band of Brothers, by the President of Kent CCC, by the Mayor of Canterbury, by military units like the Buffs and the East Kent Yeomanry, by The Old Stagers and by several smaller private tents for rich members of the crowd who had not been invited into any other tent. Each tent flew a flag which added to the colour and pomp of the occasion. One day of each Week was set aside as 'Ladies' Day', when the fashions of the ladies were displayed even more prominently, it seemed, than the cricket. What might seem somewhat condescending and sexist to modern eyes was a joyous highlight of every Week for over a century, and in the latter part of the 19th century and the early 1900s the fashion highlights were as eagerly reported on as any cover drive or smart stumping.

The St Lawrence ground during Canterbury Week showed Britain at play, all classes in what was still a very stratified society enjoying the experience in their own ways. In many seasons, the only first-class games played in Canterbury were the two in Canterbury Week, so it was not surprising that the cricket lovers of the city should be so enthusiastic during their Festival Week.

A certain Lt Col Newnham-Davis, writing in 1907, describes Canterbury Week as 'the Goodwood of cricket, and the first

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sight of the great half hoop of tents, the flags, the carriages, and the moving crowd does suggest a racecourse'. He lists many of the tents that reappear every year, and many of the names still ring with a Kent connection over a century later. 'There is no merrier tent at teatime,' he writes, 'than Mrs Neame's pavilion, set back from the main line of tents and screened by little trees and flowering shrubs.' Shepherd Neame, the Faversham brewers, are still the main sponsors of the county club, and the ground is now named the 'Spitfire Ground' after their most famous brand of beer. Several Mrs Neames throughout the generations have entertained merrily down the years.

In 1876, *Wisden* described Canterbury Cricket Week as 'the most famous yet played', partly because W.G. Grace scored 344 playing for Gentlemen of MCC against Kent, the first triple century ever made in first-class cricket and still the highest score ever made on the St Lawrence Ground, but also because of the 'large and brilliant assemblages on the cricket ground', including the 'maids, matrons and magnates of the county'. The first day, Monday, was the August Bank Holiday and the sun shone. The game was an odd one – Kent and Gloucestershire against the Rest of England – but that did not stop a huge crowd of people coming to the ground. 'Kent and Gloucestershire' was little more than a ruse to fit two of the Grace brothers, W.G. and G.F., and their cousin William Gilbert into the home side, and the match petered out into a draw. Even the next match, in which W.G. made his record score, was drawn and the third match of the Week, against I Zingari, was not even begun. However, the character of Canterbury Cricket Week is not affected by the results of the games played: it is a celebration of cricket, of summer and of the county of Kent. As a journalist wrote in 1908,

'How very poor cricket would be without these Kentish festivals. All the glories of a great game are crowded in them. Kent cricket belongs exclusively to Kent. It is always a rich sporting carnival. Such cricket is not possible outside of Kent and I am glad that the people of the county are so jealous of it all.'

* * * *

There had always been one potential problem which could have spelt the end of this particular Kentish festival at any time. This was the fact that the county club, now firmly established, did not own the St Lawrence ground. In the first half-century of Canterbury Week, the ground was owned by George Milles, Lord Sondes, whose family home was at Lees Court near Faversham, very close to the Harris estate at Belmont House. Milles, a politician, began life as the heir to a barony, but in 1880 was promoted to the rank of earl, but whichever way you look at it, he was still a lord. The club rented the ground at £40 a year from Lord Sondes's tenant, at Winter's Farm in Nackington, but in 1890 the rent was raised to £50 a year. There was always the theoretical possibility that Lord Sondes, who was a cricket lover and had been Kent's club president in both 1873 and 1887, might nevertheless wish to sell the land or use it for some other purpose, which would have forced Canterbury Week to come to an end. In 1894, the first Earl Sondes died and his son, who as Viscount Throwley had been president in 1891, decided he wished to sell the St Lawrence Ground. Throwley had played half a dozen games for the county in 1882 and 1884, although oddly enough none of them had been at his own ground in Canterbury. Fortunately, he was willing to give the club first refusal when it came to selling. Lord Harris knew that for the club to buy the

ground was the only sensible course if the Canterbury Week, and with it the club, were to be safe, and so negotiations began. Sondes wanted £5,500 for the 13-acre site, a little over £500,000 in today's money, but Harris's valuers put it at only £4,000. In the end, Sondes proved his commitment to the club by agreeing to a figure of £4,500 for the unencumbered freehold, a price that today we would consider a wonderful bargain, even allowing for inflation. The parcels of land sold off by the club for housing in the early 2000s fetched several millions of pounds. In the 1890s the club struggled to meet the price, but achieved their target through a mix of donations by subscribers, the sale of government Consols and a transfer from the club savings. Now the club owned its headquarters and Canterbury Week was safe indefinitely. However, the two main instigators of the purchase, Lord Harris and George Marsham, a long-serving committee member and cousin of Slug Marsham, were clear that this would not mean that Kent would be playing more first team matches at Canterbury. As *Wisden* reported, 'there does not seem any idea of the county committee arranging matches at Canterbury, outside the time-honoured week at the beginning of August'. The Kent eleven would remain peripatetic despite now having a permanent home.

By the turn of the century, cricket was entering what is now seen as a golden age, and Canterbury Cricket Week was its seasonal high point. It was this, as much as Kent's cricketing success, that Lord Harris wanted to celebrate in 1906.

Kent County Cricket Club

In the 1860s, relations between the two big Kent cricket clubs were cordial, but it soon became clear that there was not room for two

major clubs, both claiming in some way to be in charge of cricket in the county. In 1865, the secretary of the Kent County Club, William South Norton, wrote to his counterpart at the Beverley Club, William de Chair Baker, stating his committee's view that 'the cricket of the county might be much improved in the future if an amalgamation ... could be obtained without interference in the maintenance of the Canterbury Week in its integrity'. Baker wrote back, rejecting the Kent County Club's overtures and suggesting that any amalgamation would be harmful to the Beverley Club, who had the one jewel in the county's cricketing crown, Canterbury Week.

Both clubs struggled on, short of money and short of any major success on the cricket field, until by 1870 matters had reached a crisis. The Beverley Kent Club was still officially hosting an outwardly thriving Canterbury Cricket Week every August, so famous and socially important that it was able to attract the biggest names in cricket, but behind the painted smile was a weeping accountant or two.

The figures quoted by Lord Harris in his 1907 publication *The History of Kent County Cricket* show that in 1864, the club made a loss of £68 on an income of £162 from the Week; in 1865, when Baker turned down the first overtures from the Kent County Club, the loss was £44; and in 1866 and 1867, the loss each year was over £100. In 1868 there was another year of loss, and despite small profits in 1869 and 1870, the total losses over the most recent seven years before the amalgamation meeting in 1870 totalled £362 on gate receipts of £1,211. Running a Week that cost 30 per cent more than it earned could not continue for long. It seemed inevitable that the Beverley Kent Club should look to amalgamate with the Kent Cricket Club at last.

Canterbury Cricket Week

It was not only in Kent that changes were in the air. From 1864, an informal system of declaring a champion county had been in place, which was widely if not universally recognised as conferring the laurels fairly. In the absence of any organised international cricket, this was the ultimate prize that any county cricket club could aim for. Surrey, Nottinghamshire, Middlesex and Yorkshire dominated those early seasons, and Kentish pride was dented. Kent was a cradle of cricket as old as any other county, and it hosted the biggest and most fashionable cricket festival in England, so why could it not organise itself to win the County Championship? Yorkshire, Lancashire, Surrey, Sussex, Worcestershire and Middlesex had already formed county-wide cricket clubs, and Derbyshire and Gloucestershire both established themselves in 1870. Because there was no club that had a clear mandate to organise county cricket in Kent, and because the Canterbury Week had become such a fashionable cricketing success, many of the best amateur players had little interest in playing for their county, but preferred to play country house cricket, of which there was plenty in Kent, with only occasional forays into county cricket. This left the county side rather weak, which in turn further discouraged the better amateurs from playing. Which was the chicken and which was the egg in this problem is hard to determine, but if Kent had a well organised county side to take on the bigger counties, especially the northern powerhouses of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire, then the best players could be persuaded to play for the county more often.

On 13 October 1870, the committee of the Kent County Club met and passed a motion that 'this meeting is of the same opinion with regard to an amalgamation with the Beverley Club as that

expressed in a report issued in 1865'. It was suggested that rather than risk writing to Mr Baker again, a personal approach might work better. The task of persuading the Beverley Club to consider amalgamation was given to Herbert Knatchbull-Hugessen, a member of a grand cricket-loving Kent family who were based at Mersham, near Ashford. It was always likely to be a difficult task, requiring a great deal of tact and diplomacy. As Knatchbull-Hugessen himself wrote a few years later, the Kent County Club 'was regarded as a West Kent club by many East Kent people and, perhaps not unnaturally, there was a kind of antagonistic feeling between the two divisions, and a little jealousy. I am bound, in passing, to state that this feeling was stronger in East Kent, because it was suspected by some that there was a desire on the part of West Kent to interfere with the Canterbury Week, and have the matches at Maidstone'.

Despite the overdose of suspicion from the Beverley Club, Knatchbull-Hugessen's approach was successful, and thus it was that on 6 December 1870, a meeting was held of members of both the Kent County Club and the Beverley Kent Club, at the Bull Hotel in Rochester. The Bull, an old staging inn, had been carefully chosen as the venue for the meeting which was to unite the two clubs, one based in Tonbridge in the deepest western recesses of Kent, and the other in Canterbury, a long way to the east. Rochester is on the River Medway, which traditionally marks the dividing line between East and West Kent, but the Bull is just on the east side of the river, an inn fit for a Man (or Maid) of Kent. On the other side of the river are the Kentish Men and Kentish Maids, and although the distinction these days is now more a matter of idle banter than anything else, in past times the distinction was clear. Kent is a big county, and it is still difficult to

travel smoothly from, say, Tunbridge Wells to Canterbury despite the presence of motorways and railways. For railway travellers, the loudspeaker message 'Change at Tonbridge for Tunbridge Wells and High Brooms' strikes like an icicle through the heart, and road travellers who have to make the choice between using the M2, M20 and M25, or the country lanes through Biddenden, Tenterden and Goudhurst, will know better than to expect to arrive at the appointed time. Kent is still really two counties. Uniting the two halves into one cricket club might not have been an easy project. So it was a clever piece of political flattery that caused the County Club to suggest a meeting place just within East Kent, the home turf of the Beverley Club.

The evening chosen for the first meeting was cursed with weather that was described as 'inclement' even for December, which meant that many supporters of the amalgamation could not get to the meeting. However, there was still a good number of keen Kent cricket supporters who braved that December night in horse-drawn coaches and railway carriages, and even on foot, to debate the resolution 'that the Kent County Club and the Beverley Kent Cricket Club be amalgamated in one club, to be called the Kent County Cricket Club, and that the St Lawrence Cricket Ground, Canterbury, be the County Cricket Ground'. This may have been another sop to the Beverley Club, but in truth St Lawrence, which by now had hosted many major matches, was by far the best ground in the county and it would have made no sense to have tried to base the club anywhere else. Nevertheless, the new club always intended to play on as many grounds around the county as it could, and in this it certainly succeeded. First-class cricket continued to be played all around the county as much after 1870 as before, which only served to emphasise the

excitement when Kent played at Canterbury during Canterbury Week. A final resolution was included as a counterbalance for the western element: 'That a President be chosen alternately from East and West Kent, and a Committee consisting of ten gentlemen from East Kent, and ten from West Kent, be formed to conduct the business of the club.' Given the time it had taken to get to this point, it was surprising but nevertheless gratifying that the resolutions were carried with enthusiasm. The second resolution did much to put the East Kent contingent's minds at rest: 'That the entire management of Canterbury Cricket Week be retained by Mr W de Chair Baker, the amalgamation being effected upon the basis that no change whatever take place in this Annual Meeting at Canterbury.'

The man chairing this meeting was George Francis Robert Harris, 3rd Lord Harris, a man of frail health who had nevertheless been Governor of Trinidad from 1846 to 1854, and Governor of Madras from 1854 to 1859. His grandfather, the 1st Lord Harris, was the soldier son of the rector of Brasted, a village just west of Sevenoaks in Kent. He had fought successfully in America and India and had been rewarded with the title of Baron Harris of Seringapatam and Mysore, and of Belmont in the County of Kent, in 1815. The Harris family were long-established in the county, but comparative newcomers among its nobility.

The 3rd Lord Harris's son, also George, had been born in Trinidad while his father was governor there. He soon grew to love cricket and eagerly accompanied his father to the founding meeting of the Kent County Cricket Club. Lord Harris was duly nominated as president in the club's founding year, and the 18-year-old George Harris, fresh out of Eton and beginning his time at Oxford University, was invited to join the committee.

Young George, a slim youth, slightly on the tall side and with the beginnings of a moustache which was to grow more luxurious with the years, had played for Eton for three seasons from 1868 to 1870, and would win his cricket Blue at Oxford in 1871, 1872 and 1874. One of the most famous photographs of him shows him posing at the wicket with bat, pads and gloves and a high starched collar and bow tie, as well as his ubiquitous panama hat. That image may seem a caricature of a country house cricketer to us today, but there is no doubt that young George Harris was a very good cricketer, a fine batsman, a bowler who strove to bowl as fast as he could, with varying degrees of success, and a fielder of the highest calibre. He merited the place that he would go on to win in both the Kent and England sides through pure cricketing skills, and not because of his social connections. But the social connections certainly helped in his Kent committee work.

Despite the geographical imbalance, and the fact that the wealthier citizens of the county were generally Kentishmen rather than Men of Kent, the new club based in Canterbury seemed to work. There was good will on all sides. Much of the organisational skill came from the West Kent contingent, but the administration of Canterbury Cricket Week remained in the hands of the man who had been running it for several years, William de Chair Baker. William South Norton, who had captained and acted as honorary secretary of the old Kent County Club since its formation in 1859, was appointed honorary secretary of the new club, but within a year stood down in favour of Mr Baker, who combined the job of running Canterbury Week with that of running the county club. At first there was no officially appointed chairman, and yet a committee of 20 people, drawn from all over the county, managed to keep the

club running, and indeed growing, in a way that would confuse any organisational management expert today.

In 1872, the 3rd Lord Harris died, and young George, still studying at Christ Church Oxford while playing countless cricket matches and even going on a cricket tour to Canada, found himself the inheritor of the title and the family seat at Belmont House, near Faversham, which is definitely in East Kent. From this time, rather than busying himself with matters concerning the estate that he had so unexpectedly inherited at an early age, he immersed himself in Kent cricket. He had played once for Kent in 1870, before the amalgamation of the two clubs, but it was from 1873 onwards that he began to personify Kent cricket.

Although Lord Harris played half a dozen matches for the county side in the first couple of years of its existence, his playing career for Kent really only got under way in 1873. Lord Harris related the story of how on 10 July that year he was 'going up to London to see Eton v Harrow and, on the day before, to play for Lords and Commons v I Zingari, a regular match in those years, and so had my cricket bag with me. At the Faversham station was Mr Knatchbull-Hugessen on his way to see Kent v Lancashire at Gravesend. Seeing my bag, he was delighted, supposing I was also on my way there.' Despite Lord Harris protesting all the way to Strood, the persuasive arguments of Knatchbull-Hugessen won the day. The two men got off the train at Strood and after Harris had telegraphed to Lord's to explain his defection, they made their way to the Bat and Ball ground at Gravesend, where one unfortunate and unnamed professional had to stand aside to allow Lord Harris to play. Harris scored 26 and 6, and Kent won the match against Lancashire by three wickets, but it shows how much times have changed. Such meddling in the selection of the

side, even by a committee member as Knatchbull-Hugessen was, would not be tolerated today. Having said that, a county that operated with 37 vice presidents, all 'noblemen and gentlemen of the county' and a committee of 20 was unlikely to be able to keep track of everybody's actions all through the summer. But from then on, Lord Harris became a firm fixture in the county XI.

It is probable that no county cricket team has ever been quite so completely dominated by one man as Kent was in the latter part of the 19th century. In the winter of 1874, he accepted an invitation to become honorary secretary of the club, and in 1875 he was invited to captain the county side. In that year too, he was nominated as president, and accepted the honour with alacrity. He was then 24 years old, and still completing his degree at Oxford, which unsurprisingly finished that summer without much distinction – a pass degree in 'Arts', which is about as low as it gets without actually being sent down.

But nobody would ever accuse Lord Harris of being an academic. He was a cricketer, and a man of Kent (or possibly a Kentishman: his birthplace in Trinidad is definitely west of the Medway). As *Wisden* put it in their review of Kent's season in 1875, 'Lord Harris, as President, Hon. Secretary, Captain of the County Team, greatest aggregate and highest average scorer for the County, must have been head and hands full of Kent cricket in 1875.' There was a sting in the next sentence, however. 'It is to be regretted that such influential energy and very fine and successful batting displayed by his lordship should have resulted in so unsuccessful a campaign.' There was no doubting his devotion to the cause, however. 'If there be one man more than another whose position, influence, earnest devotion to, and practical knowledge of, the glorious game, can, in due time, work Kent up to its old

position among the cricketing counties, that man is Lord Harris.' *Wisden's* words were prophetic, although the due time was well into the future. It would take another 30 years for the dreams of Lord Harris to be fulfilled.

Sir Pelham Warner, in his book *Lord's 1787–1945*, describes Lord Harris as being 'interested in every aspect of the game – the actual playing of it; the laws; the organising and financial sides; and the general welfare of the professional cricketer. He was an admirable Chairman of a committee ... he was deferential to the opinions of others, did not force his own views, and was fair and balanced. He inspired confidence.' This all sounds a bit too good to be true, but Warner went on to add that Harris was 'occasionally a little testy, some thought it was as well to agree with him, but he was ready to listen to the other side. I have heard it said that he was a little difficult to play under, being apt to be somewhat cantankerous and abrupt in his manner.' The fact that he remained a power in cricket, both at Canterbury and Lord's, until his death in 1932 is a testament to the value he gave to the administration of cricket, and how much he was appreciated by his colleagues, even if occasionally he was 'somewhat cantankerous'.

Lord Harris also, as secretary, did much to revive the county's financial status. Membership subscriptions rose from £338 in 1874 to £520 the following year, and by putting up the entrance fee to the ground during Canterbury Week from sixpence to one shilling, the take at the gate virtually doubled within two years. None of the Canterbury Week matches that summer were against county sides, and all of Kent's home county matches were played at Catford Bridge, the home of the Private Banks Cricket Club. The decision to play at Catford was in order to save money, but financially it did not prove to be worth doing, and both players

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and spectators missed seeing the county side playing at different grounds through the summer. The experiment was not repeated, and in 1876 they played at Gravesend, Faversham, Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone, but not at Catford. Again, no County Championship matches were played at Canterbury.

Harris only held the presidency for one year, but remained as secretary until 1880, and as captain until 1889. He became chairman of the club in 1886, a position he held until 1931, the year before he died, and he was also chairman of the Young Players Sub-Committee from 1897 until his death. For 48 years he took at least one leading role in the management of Kent County Cricket Club, while at the same time being a deputy lieutenant of the county (from 1884), Under-Secretary of State for India (in 1885), Under-Secretary of State for War (from 1886 to 1890), Governor of Bombay (1890 to 1895), Lord in Waiting to Queen Victoria (1895 to 1901) and aide-de-camp to the next two monarchs, Edward VII and George V, among other lesser duties. He was a busy man, but cricket and Kent were always closest to his heart.

Lord Harris gave up the captaincy of the county side when he was 39 years old, by no means a veteran in that era, but his appointment as Governor of Bombay meant that not even he could find time to play for Kent and govern a large part of western India at the same time. His final game for the county at Canterbury took place during Cricket Week, with all the flags fluttering and the tents brimming over with the cream of Kent society, on 8, 9 and 10 August in 1889, against Gloucestershire, for whom W.G. Grace, three years Lord Harris's senior, was opening the batting. Harris made 33 as Kent just failed to force a victory, and he probably guessed then that this would be his last

innings for Kent on his favourite ground. After his final game for Kent that summer, against Nottinghamshire at Beckenham, he told his team at dinner that 'the umpire has called last over, gentlemen', but he was not entirely correct. There would still be a handful of games to play for the county before the umpire finally called time.

In the light of the enthusiastic reviews given in the local newspapers over the years to Canterbury Week and the efforts of The Old Stagers, it is refreshing to read *Wisden's* views on Canterbury Week in the final season of Lord Harris's captaincy. 'It is almost too much to hope, but in the Jubilee Year of Canterbury Week, The Old Stagers may possibly give us an epilogue with a little real fun and a little real poetry instead of the dreary productions, only half rehearsed and not half sung, which have been put on to close the season for years past. One of the many clever dramatists now writing for the stage could surely find time to send the management something that was worth hearing and worth remembering.' A heartfelt plea, but barely heeded.

Lord Harris's five-year term of governorship of Bombay was not a political success, but he did a great deal to popularise even further the game of cricket in the subcontinent, at least among the British in India. This was a small plus in an otherwise very undistinguished gubernatorial career. On his return to England, at the age of 45, he played three games for Kent in 1896, including a match against Somerset at Taunton in which he scored a brilliant 119 and put on 220 in partnership with W.H. Patterson, but apart from that he did little. He played one more game in 1897 and a final game for the county in 1906, their triumphal year. That match was against the touring West Indian side, who were then well short of Test class, and probably only up to county second

eleven standard. The match was at Catford Bridge, where Kent had played all their home matches in 1875, and the 55-year-old Harris made 33, the same score that he had made in his final game at Canterbury, as Kent eased to an innings victory.

During the 1870s and 1880s, when the County Championship was still finding its feet and the champion county was decided by general agreement in the press and among the cricketing public, Kent did not manage to claim the title. These were the years when the title was awarded to Nottinghamshire, either outright or shared, ten times, Lancashire four times and Gloucestershire, full of Graces, three times. Derbyshire, Middlesex and Surrey also took the laurels in these decades, but neither Yorkshire nor Kent could claim the crown. From 1890, when Lord Harris left for Bombay and the championship was regulated by MCC whose points system produced a winner each year, Yorkshire (seven titles) and Surrey (six titles) were generally well ahead of all the other counties, although before Kent's unexpected championship in 1906, Lancashire (twice) and Middlesex (once) had also taken the title. Kent had never been placed higher than third, a position they achieved in 1890, 1900 and 1904.