

TIM BROOKS



A
CORNER
OF EVERY
FOREIGN
FIELD



CRICKET'S JOURNEY

FROM ENGLISH GAME TO GLOBAL SPORT

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Chapter 1

Origins

WAS it John Le Mesurier who once likened watching cricket to a religious experience? In a very moving interview I can still recall I believe it was. Of course many others have shared the sentiment over the years and cricket has a surely unique appeal among sports to man's deepest, most spiritual needs. This explains why short smash and giggle forms of the game are so quickly labelled shallow and vacuous by traditionalists and devotees. It is a sport that doesn't so much attract followers as acolytes. If we run with the thesis that cricket is the most spiritual of sports, what then is its genesis, its creation myth? In the beginning there was willow. Well, being such a quintessentially English story it was probably oak but an opening paragraph is no place for pedantry I'm sure you'd agree.

In the absence of certainties it is safe to assume it all began, as everything does, in its simplest form. Bored boy whacks pebble with stick, enjoys it and tells his friend.

He enjoys it too and soon a group of boys are playing something recognisable as a game. Everything that was to come sprang from an innate, fateful moment of inspiration that led to that first, furtive thrill of velocity, strength and precision. If cricket was a play, and there are worse analogies, that primordial six was Lear on the Heath, stripped of everything but his instinct.

While many have tried to put a date on cricket's beginning, trying to identify and document that first moment is a futile, if no doubt entertainingly diverting, venture. History rarely offers definitives in social experience. Even if it could be isolated and labelled that moment wasn't cricket, yet was cricket distilled. What would eventually become cricket evolved from primitive bat and ball games recorded as early as the 13th century. The established story goes that cricket was one of a number of variants that sprung from a simple hockey-like game generally referred to as club-ball. It was most definitely a game rather than a sport and even 'game' implies more structure and form than it had. We are, as you'd imagine, largely in the realms of conjecture but what all accounts agree on was that this proto-cricket was played by boys, not adults, and was definitely not a team game until much later in its development.

Most academic interest in the origins of cricket has focused not so much on dating but on the word's philological roots. What is rather alarming, particularly as a proud Englishman who chose the title of this book, is that some have speculated that cricket may not have originated in England at all. Some say it is of Norse origin, perhaps coming over with the Normans, others

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that linguistically it must be French, possibly sharing the same base origin as another sport that has survived to the modern day, croquet. The prospect of the most English of games actually being an import from France (of all places!) has been the focus of a number of feature articles in recent years. Cricket may not be the easiest to fathom but it is ours, damn it. Surely it is ours!

The philological studies vary considerably and assertions seem to be made on very flimsy deduction. But it seems likely that *cricket* refers to the stick used to strike the small object. Initially this would have been a curved piece of wood, similar to a modern hockey stick, designed to stop and flick whatever was used as the ball. As fascinating as the philological arguments for a foreign origin are, the truth is that there is no corroborating evidence at all for the early game being played beyond England. Similar games were played no doubt, but without any distinctive enough to characterise as cricket.



Cricket was born in the weald, the vast forested area that once covered large swathes of Kent, Sussex and Surrey. From here it spread to the downland of Sussex and Hampshire. The first games were probably played by boys seeking amusement in the forest glades being cleared for timber or iron ore by their fathers, using tree stumps as the target and curved branches as the bat. They may have used pebbles or pieces of wood for a ball. It is likely that the aim of these early games was to prevent the ball hitting the stump, rather than to dispatch it as far as it would go. It is in the spread of this game from the weald

to neighbouring downland regions that it acquired some of its distinct characteristics due to the different topography and landscape. In the absence of tree stumps they used what was at hand, a wicket being a simple sheep gate comprising two vertical sticks and a bail between them. This variant borne of necessity and pragmatism provided a distinct advantage over games in the weald, as the bail dropping was proof that the defences had been breached. A shepherd's staff would have made an ideal bat too.

It is impossible to chart how this simple medieval game evolved, how widespread it was or how many people played. By its nature it wouldn't have left any trace to archaeology and it didn't feature in any known written record until the mid-16th century. This could be because it was rare and confined to a limited area, but it could also be because it went largely unobserved and unremarked upon because it was played by boys, not men, and was informal and occasional. Pastimes and activities that are regularly cited in medieval literature and records are generally linked to the court or were gentlemanly pursuits. At this time sport meant chivalric, courtly pursuits like archery, hunting and jousting. The people who enjoyed them were worth writing about. The lives of peasants, labourers and simple artisans feature rarely if at all in an era where the means of writing and the patronage of publishing was largely the preserve of privileged classes. So perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised that cricket took a while to be recorded, or assume that it did not long predate its earliest attested reference.

Guildford hosts a few county games a season and its club has produced some England cricketers so it is perhaps fitting that the first recorded playing of cricket was in

Surrey's county town. In a legal document dated 1598 a game of cricket was referred to that must have taken place in the early 1550s. To offer a frame of reference it was the Tudor era, just as England was getting used to being a protestant nation, when the *Mary Rose* was being constructed from the ancient oaks of the weald. Although short, this first reference is telling. There is no indication from the context that cricket was a novel or unusual activity. It is recorded matter-of-factly, as if the reader would immediately understand the reference. This suggests that at least in the local area the game was reasonably well established. It is a fairly safe assumption therefore that it was played at least in a form recognisable as cricket in the 15th century. There is, sadly, no further detail to describe the game, its players or its context. But next time you are in Guildford watching a chanceless century by Ollie Pope, smile at the thought that your journey there was actually a pilgrimage to the cradle of the game.

We travel forward to 1611 before the next reference and the next major milestone for development of the game. You should add Chevening, near Sevenoaks, to the pilgrimage list, because this is where the first actual game of cricket was recorded. In Guildford 60 years before it had just been two boys playing with a bat and ball but the Chevening record shows that by the early 17th century cricket was being played by adults and was a team sport. Village cricket, that most English of institutions, that most cherished subject of the watercolourist, was being played over 400 years ago. Other references indicate that there were certainly occasional inter-parish matches within

Kent or Sussex prior to the civil war although there is no evidence of common organisation or a formalised league.

The progression from an impromptu game between boys to a team sport is a fundamental one and it happened far earlier in cricket than any other major modern sport. The emergence of teams gave cricket one of its most compelling attributes, that it is a team sport comprising a series of individual duels. A batsman facing a bowler, their skill pitted against each other, was a deeply personal episode within a team contest. That added dimension laid the foundations for a game to become a sport. Cricket had found its resonance and appeal as a team contest. The catalyst for cricket's early development was a social dimension and a desire to represent a place. This social context was critical to cricket's success as a sport, the way it developed and how and why it went global.

The harmony of church and square is part of cricket's pastoral charm and an image portrayed in many a birthday card. The parish as an archaic form of civic organisation was critical in the early spread of the game. In medieval times a popular parish social gathering were fetes organised to raise alms for the poor through the sale of local ales. These had a reputation for being rather too jolly and boisterous and puritan administrators replaced them with payment of poor rates. This removed a popular social occasion and villagers looked to alternatives, with cricket being a beneficiary.

Whether we'd recognise that first game in Chevening as cricket is an interesting question. The first descriptions and illustrations of games were still a century or more away. The fundamental elements of batting, bowling and fielding

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would have been present but in the details it would have been a very different spectacle. There were no common rules at this time so there would have been considerable variations as teams applied their own conventions to their games. The number of players was not fixed and methods of dismissal may also have varied. A modern observer witnessing one of these early games would be struck immediately by one fundamental difference: the ball was rolled along the ground. The batsman would protect the wicket and if possible strike the ball through the field to score a run. It would have been played on a village green or common land so the ball may have deviated on uneven ground. This would have required considerable concentration on behalf of the batsmen to navigate the demons of the pitch. Other than assistance from the pitch it was tough for the bowlers, as there was no leg before and a deadly accurate ball rolling between the two stumps and failing to dislodge the bail would be a reprieve for the batsman. The batsman would score notches rather than runs, marked on a wooden precursor to the scorecard. To get a notch a batsman would have to run to the other end and return. It is likely that early totals were very modest, perhaps around 30 per team.

The players at Chevening would have been working men, who we must assume learnt the game as children. We don't know the occupations of the players in that first match but judging by the composition of later teams it is reasonable to infer that they would have included blacksmiths, horse grooms, bakers and other staple tradesmen of the agrarian economy. Cricket began as a rural, working class sport. Class would become one of

cricket's defining characteristics, with the sport at the fulcrum of English society's obsession with status. But that was to come. In the reigns of the early Stuarts it was a simple, unaffected local game. It had yet to add the layers of cultural, political and moral context that was to see it heralded as the very embodiment of Englishness.

Almost without exception the earliest references to the game are found in a legal context and the picture painted one of suspicion and condescension. Cricket was clearly not approved of, had a subversive reputation and was certainly not a suitable pastime for a gentleman. This was partly due to how dangerous it was. The legal cases focus on damage to property, injury and even death. We know all too well that in spite of modern protections a hard ball can be fatal, and in the absence of balls pragmatic alternatives may have been even harder. But the main reason the earliest games were so dangerous was that you could strike the ball as often as you liked. A batsman could scoop the ball into the air near a fielder and then run over to strike it again. Unsurprisingly this led to many injuries and some untimely demises. This helped give cricket a reputation as a rough, brutish, dangerous game that encouraged violence. The elements that make the game exciting such as power, strength and velocity could also make it thuggish, if not played in the right spirit. The concept of the spirit of cricket very likely predated any organised form of the game.

This roguish reputation became further entrenched under the puritan rule of Oliver Cromwell, who ironically is the first person ever known to have played cricket in London. Cricket did not feature on a list of permitted

activities and those caught playing cricket on the Sabbath were fined for unruly, unsaintly behaviour. Although the puritans attempted to force cricket out of existence this persecution was to prove pivotal in its subsequent rise in profile and popularity. While seeking succour from conformist Cromwellian London the aristocracy of southern England left court life for the pastoral charm of their country estates. Missing courtly intrigue and desperate for diversions, they watched their estate workers playing cricket and a thought occurred to them that transformed the game. It was a thought borne of boredom, wealth and one-upmanship: betting.

By the latter half of the 17th century betting was rife amongst the upper classes. Social capital and notoriety was won by placing eye-watering bets and getting one over a rival. Traditionally this urge was sated at the horse races or at bloodsports such as cock fighting but as betting mania grew the aesthetes sought other things to bet on. For the earls and dukes in Kent and Sussex the answer could be seen from their vaulted leaded windows. Picture the scene. William Sackville, of Knole House, Sevenoaks, erstwhile hunting estate of Henry VIII, is bored to distraction in his exile from hedonistic London. He strolls around his deer park and sees estate workers cheering, running and striking a ball. He pauses to watch, taking in the scene. He then rushes back to the house and sends a hurried, excited message to his friend the Duke of Richmond, at Goodwood, near Chichester. Sackville visits and they watch a game. 'You think your men are better than mine?' he asks. 'I'll wager they are,' his host replies with relish. A game is scheduled. A local youth joins the staff as an

under-gardener. He doesn't know a petunia from a potato. But you try defending against his pace and accuracy. And so country house cricket was born.

As the wagers grew so did the pressure to field the best team. Physical prowess became a key attribute of employability in the area. The players in local parish teams became a talent pool. Cricket had piqued the interest of those in society circles. Not for its own merits but as an excuse for a bet. The game itself was just a means to an end. It was only the result and the stake that mattered. Those first country house games set a theme that runs deep through cricket's history: class. The amateur patron and the professional player.

Charles Lennox was born in London at the height of the summer of 1672. His mother was Louise de Keroualle, a Breton noblewoman and mistress of King Charles II, the boy's father. Of royal blood but not in the royal line, the boy was raised in West Sussex and as a toddler was made the Duke of Richmond, just one of a range of titles bestowed on him by the king. Charles grew up in Goodwood House, near Chichester, Sussex, in an area widely regarded as a cradle of the game. Without the threat of kingship to burden him the boy grew to a life of indulgence and idleness, along which journey he became an early patron of the game. He made Goodwood one of the early centres for great games and through his wish for a strong local side on which to wager helped raise standards and spread the game in the area.

He split his time between Goodwood and the courtly society of restoration London. Charles and his circle celebrated his birthright with gusto, revelling in

the excesses and moral profligacy so despised by the puritans who had killed his father. Following his lead, London wanted sport in the broadest sense of the word. Richmond and his fellow cricketing nobles brought their pastoral pastime with them, and being men of influence who could afford gossip-stirringly huge wagers they made cricket a society sport. As Richmond entered his twenties he got bolder and the wagers grew ever larger. It was the beginning of the era of the great games. At the age of 27 Charles helped organise the first cricket match ever to be covered in a newspaper.

It was the first week of July 1697. The ducal rivalry had seen local teams bolstered by the best players in the wider area, drafted in at expense to help win the wager. This had created the first cricket professionals, drawn from parish sides to represent the local dignitary. In its turn this process led to the formation of the first county representative team, with Richmond's Sussex men facing those over the border in Kent. County rivalry and local pride, along with the thrill of the money at stake, created interest and drew the crowds. This was to be the biggest cricketing occasion yet seen. The stake was 50 guineas.

Four years after this match he bore a son, like him a Charles. The son shared his father's affection for the game and his passion and commitment made him the most active and significant of the game's early patrons. He played cricket as a boy, one of the first generations of his class to play the game as well as bet on it. At the age of 21 he became MP for Chichester but on the death of his father a year later he resigned to assume his ducal

duties. It was then that cricket became an almost all-consuming passion. He scheduled regular fixtures in the 1720s, captaining what was a de facto Sussex XI. Regular opponents were Sir William Gage, baronet, of Firle Place, Sussex, and Alan Brodrick, 2nd viscount Hamilton, of Godalming, Surrey.

The most famous of these proto county fixtures was played in Peper Harow, near Godalming, Surrey, in July 1727. It has been remembered as one of the most significant matches of cricket's early history as it was the first played to a written set of rules. There were rules governing games before this but they were subject to variation from game to game and location to location. These noblemen wanted to agree the rules to ensure they didn't lose a wager and dent their pride on a technicality or inconsistency. There was also a wish to standardise the game. This was one of the critical steps in the medieval game becoming a modern sport. The importance of these games, the concentration of talent and the fact they were played to consistent, agreed rules has seen them classed as first class matches, significant fixtures of superior standard.

Richmond's star player was his groom, Thomas Waymark, sometimes regarded as the first cricket professional and the game's first dynamic all-rounder. He was born in Mitcham, Surrey, in 1705, a town notable for having the first ever cricket club. He was ostensibly employed as a groom but was undoubtedly retained for his cricket ability over his skill with horses. He began his career in the 1720s but his most celebrated years came in the 1730s and 1740s. Principally playing for the duke, but also loaned as a 'given man' to other sides, he was considered

a class apart in ability and agility. His career spanned a formative stage of the sport's development and he played in most of the notable matches of the era. In the 1740s he left Sussex and his patron and moved to Berkshire, where he played for that county and London. He played in the match with the earliest surviving scorecard, a 1744 game between London and Slindon.

The duke may have lost his star player but his love of cricket only intensified. He established a team at Slindon, a small, picturesque village in the South Downs close to Goodwood, who were arguably the best cricket team in the world in the 1740s. Other than proximity the reason for the duke's interest and patronage was that the village had produced one of the best young players of his generation, a certain Richard Newland. His career helps take the story on from Waymark. The standout talent of a trio of cricketing brothers, he was the leading batsman of the 1740s and the leading light in a village team that regularly beat county sides. His stardom was such that his presence would see bets on his personal performance, with one bet that he'd score 40 runs himself, an incredible score at the time when batting was so difficult.

At this stage there were still two variants of the game. The eleven-a-side format we recognise but also a personal duel, known as single wicket. This pitted the most talented players against each other, the ultimate distillation of an all-round performance. The top single wicket players became celebrities and their contests drew large crowds. It was said to be a remarkable feat of endurance as much as a display of skill, players having to field off their bowling.

By the mid-1740s Newland's fame was such he assembled his own XI rather than play for the village side. With cricket beginning to blossom under the early Georgians, though still largely restricted to London and the southern counties, representative teams became more popular and brought the best players together from their various parishes. The patrons' teams, like Slindon, provided the nucleus for county sides. The next logical step was of course an 'all England' XI. With considerable pride at stake, not to mention social capital, leading teams of the time wanted to prove they were the best. From the 1730s there are references to teams such as the London cricket club taking on the rest of England, by which was meant the leading players from all other clubs. Newland was a regular in such teams, thereby spreading his fame far beyond Slindon. Cricket was gaining in popularity and the 'great matches' attracted considerable public interest. A 1744 fixture between Kent and All England was so popular the organisers charged 6d entrance fee and publicans ensured the punters were lubricated and well nourished. Eerily forecasting the food forecourts of T20 venues, local traders vied for lucrative stalls at the game. Cricket could not only draw a crowd by now but could generate income too.

By the middle of the 18th century there were signs of a power shift from the southern shires to London. Through influential and charismatic patrons and players cricket joined the roster of activities adopted by the club scene, a society institution that was at the epicentre of Georgian London. Betting remained absolutely central to its allure but the upper classes were now enjoying taking

to the field themselves, albeit many were a little too stout and uncoordinated to make much of an impression on scorecards. This trend saw grounds like Richmond and the artillery ground in Finsbury become famous venues of the game. Just as London was beginning to claim hegemony the focus switched back to the shires with the formation of the most talented group of cricketers yet to play the game, in the small east Hampshire village of Hambledon. In 1750 the Duke of Richmond had died and a year later Newland retired to farm his land in Slindon. Without these two titans of local cricket Sussex lost ground to Kent, which became the dominant county force in the late Georgian era. But Newland's contribution to the game was not finished, as while tilling the land in his retirement he taught his nephew, Richard Nyren, the game.

Nyren moved west from Slindon to Hampshire around 1760 and was influential in the founding of the Hambledon club. The club played at the windswept Broadhalfpenny Down ground, which by the 1770s became the most famous ground in the world. This small, out of the way hamlet drew the best players in the country and the cream of society, a more remote cricketing variant of the Epsom races. Nyren's bowling was described as 'provokingly deceitful'. Though a village team, Hambledon players were professionals, earning match fees equivalent to a decent week's wages by those wanting to wager on the best team in the country. As such Nyren, his fellow opening bowler Thomas Brett and Billy Beldham, regarded as the best batsman of the early era, could dedicate their time to training. In Nyren's case he balanced this with running the Bat and Ball pub by

the ground. This professionalism saw the sport develop the technique and nuance it is such admired for, moving beyond sheer strength and athleticism. Beldham and teammate Tom Seuter were the first batsmen to come forward to the ball, often leaving the crease to drive. Their skills influenced visiting players desperate to bear comparison with the best of their age. To combat their dominance bowlers began using deceptive flight and variations. Nyren described Beldham's technique as 'the beau ideal of grace, animation, and concentrated energy'. Cricket was starting to distinguish itself as a sport of rare skill, embodying romantic ideals of grace and beauty.

Given the logistical challenge presented by Hambledon's remoteness its fame and good fortune couldn't last forever and inevitably cricket was drawn back into Georgian London's orbit. If London was where the money was it seemed logical that London should host the big games. While Richmond Green had long been a venue for big matches and cricket would have been a familiar sight on the capital's green spaces, the city lacked a ground and cricket lacked a home worthy of its society status.

Among the plethora of gentlemen's clubs in Georgian London was the Star and Garter of Pall Mall. This counted aristocrats and royals in its membership and had a particular fondness for cricket, alongside horse racing and other pursuits of the season. The cricketers of the society formed the White Conduit club in 1782, named after the White Conduit Fields in Islington, then lying just beyond the city's early suburban sprawl. The gentlemen employed professionals to coach them and add quality to their ranks. Their list of members read like a

chapter of *Debrett's* and it was two aristocrats, the 4th Duke of Richmond and the 9th Earl of Winchelsea, who took a decision that would have a profound impact on the development of the sport. Wanting more privacy for their games away from the hoi polloi of Islington fields, they financed another of their members, William Lord, to find the club its own venue.

Lord identified several sites at the northern edge of the city and the club moved to the district of Marylebone. His first ground was on the site of Dorset Square. Once acquired the Whites Conduit Club moved to a permanent home and remodelled themselves the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC). With such influential members this became the de facto home of the London Cricket Club and took over from the artillery ground as the principal cricket centre in the capital. But from its inception the MCC were far, far more ambitious than merely being the most prestigious club in London.

These men of influence volunteered themselves as the rule-makers and arbiters of their sport. Quite why or how they felt they had this all-encompassing mandate isn't clear, beyond the fact that the club contained many of the leading patrons of the game and they came from a class bred to govern. In 1788, a year after they were founded, they assumed ownership of the laws of the game. Previously, leading clubs had met in what could be seen as a loose federation to organise and manage the game. MCC members would have played a key role in this process. But now they seized control. It was one of the most significant moments in our story so far. From its simple, sylvan, working class roots cricket had become a

tool of the establishment. It was overseen by a governing class who would mould the game through the prism of their world view. It was child's play no more.

What was the game like in 1788, the year *The Times* was founded, parliament was given a report on the madness of King George III, the year before the French Revolution? Its rules had been largely defined 44 years earlier, at the Star and Garter club of course. The earlier, lethal practice of hitting the ball twice and obstructing the field had been wisely outlawed. Overs consisted of four balls, there were coin tosses and no-balls. Deliveries could now be pitched rather than rolled and as a consequence the curved hockey-style staves were now early versions of the more familiar straight bats. In the 1770s certain key revisions were made, some to combat innovations that were just not cricket. For instance, when in 1771 a Chertsey batsman used a bat as wide as the wicket, it was decided a maximum width should be defined. At the same time the lbw rule was introduced. However, the addition of a third stump was not yet required, giving bowlers of the era the considerable chagrin of seeing a batsman's smug, relieved face when the ball went between his two stumps. The game was still confined to a few southern counties, though well established at some of the leading public schools. As a leading society draw it attracted large crowds and large wagers. It had also made a few furtive appearances in the world at large, but more on that shortly.

The MCC took the game very seriously and its members sought to use their influence to get rid of its rowdier elements and its undesirable variability. It was a gentlemanly pursuit and they wanted it to reflect

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gentlemanly virtues and ideals. To what extent this was a deliberate strategy or just reflected the beliefs of the class of its members isn't clear. In time the club would not only make the rules, but award status and administer the game beyond British shores. Was this by design, some kind of coup d'état by the privileged of the provincial? I think that is too dramatic. It was just a natural evolution of governance by a class who considered themselves morally and intellectually better placed to govern than anyone else. You could call it arrogance or you could call it duty and service, depending on your perspective. But all would agree that with the MCC at the helm cricket's journey was destined to take a certain path.