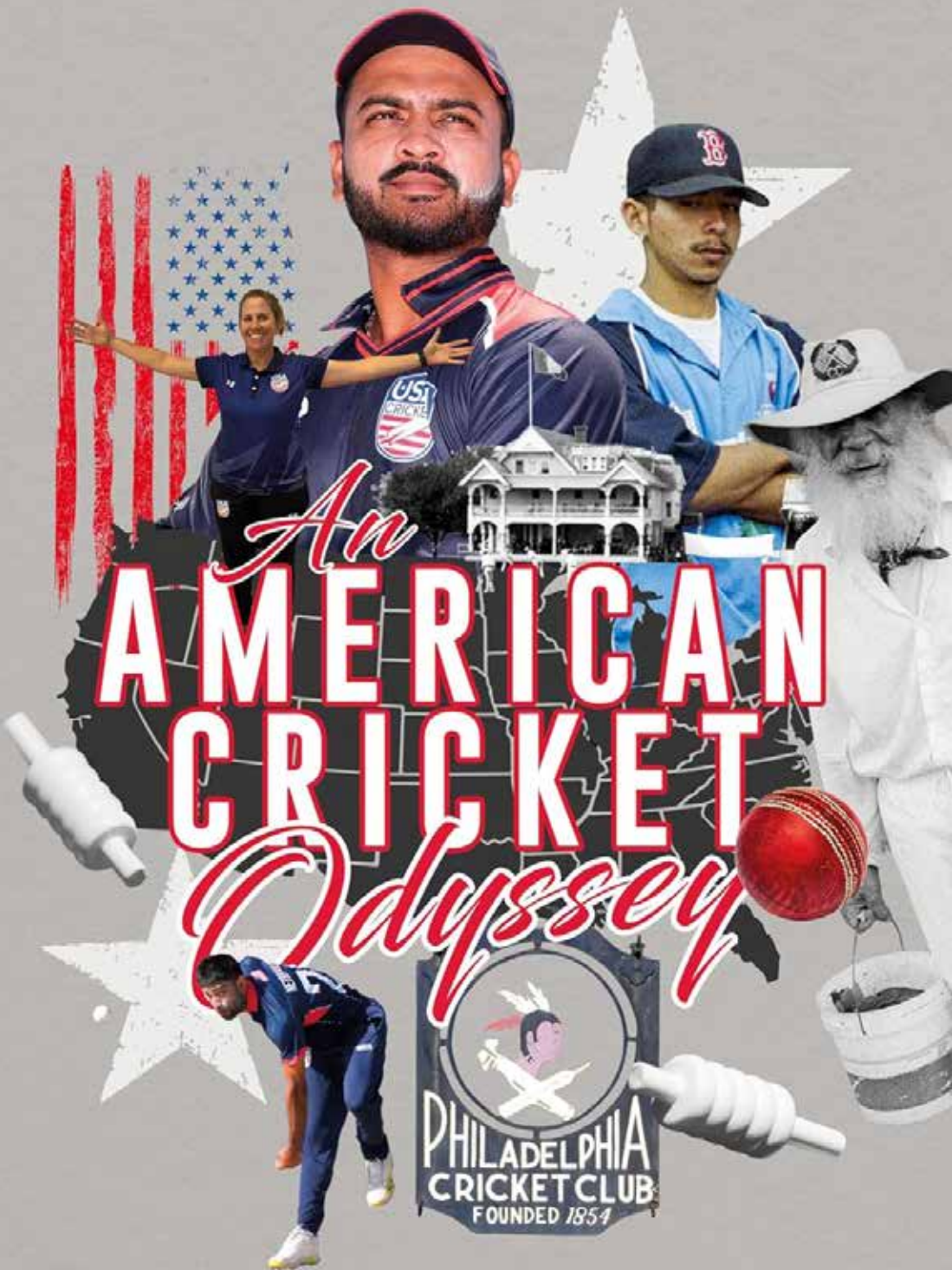
BETH SIMPSON AND MARK GREENSLADE



A JOURNEY INTO THE SOUL OF CRICKET IN THE UNITED STATES

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An AMERICAN CRICKET *Odyssey*

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The Gentlemen of Philadelphia

IF AMERICAN cricket has a spiritual home it lies in Philadelphia and in particular amid the neatly cut hedges and trim lawns of the city's north-western fringes, the locales of Germantown, Chestnut Hill and Main Line. For it is here that the game lasted longer than anywhere else in the US, where it survived as a regional subculture right up until World War One. Even today reminders of its one-time glory can be glimpsed in the grand clubhouses and elegantly maintained grounds that belong to Merion, Germantown and Philadelphia cricket clubs.

Most of the modern-day custodians of the game are able to furnish you with US cricket's one indisputable claim to fame – that the first international match, not just in cricket but in any sport, took place in 1844 between the United States and Canada. They might also tell you that the sport has a long and proud history in the US, that games drew

crowds in their thousands in the 19th century and that England toured here in the 1850s. Cricket was a sport that was played in America throughout the 19th century, but its great failing lay in the fact that it never truly became an American sport.

The reasons for this are numerous. Undoubtedly the rise of baseball around the Civil War period was a major factor. Baseball was quicker to play – one game lasted just an hour or so compared to three to five days and, unlike cricket, required hardly any equipment. No need to erect stumps or roll out a wicket; baseball required just a bat, ball and something that could be utilised as a base. It was an ideal pastime for the thousands of soldiers that were stationed around the country during the Civil War, bored men with energy to spare in the long and tedious downtime between battles.

Cricket also carried with it a heavy whiff of the old country – i.e. England. Immigration to the States increased throughout the 19th century, reaching a peak in the first decade of the 20th. Increasingly migrants were arriving from southern and eastern Europe rather than Great Britain and thus had no interest in (or even knowledge of) this arcane English sport. In the decades after the civil war cricket increasingly found itself boxed in as an elite pastime played by English first- or second-generation immigrants.

Whilst there are still reports of games being played in Merion, Colorado and even Montana around 1900, by the end of the century the game had pretty much died out in the Midwest and much of the so-called American 'heartland'.

In Philadelphia though it was a different matter. For one thing the sport was played to a far higher standard in the city and its surrounding areas. A number of Philadelphian select teams toured England, playing against first-class counties in the years 1897, 1903 and 1908. The last tour in 1908 even saw the Philadelphians beat MCC. There were also regular tours by the so-called Gentlemen of Philadelphia, a combined team who toured England in 1884 and 1889.

The Philadelphia scene also boasted the most famous American cricketer of all time, John Barton King (commonly known as John Bart King), an all-rounder who developed a fearsome technique of swinging the ball, which he termed the angler. The star of the Philadelphians, three English tours, when King retired in 1916 US cricket lost its greatest ever ambassador and certainly the only player who could stand comparison with the great English and Australian Test players of the day.

The game in the town was also played and supported by a very specific social set. The largest and wealthiest clubs,

all situated in the west of the city – Merion, Germantown, Philadelphia, Belmont – all drew their personnel and support from a leisured upper-middle class that self-consciously mimicked their English counterparts' genteel behaviour. For them, playing cricket was a social signifier, a way, in the words of the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* of 19 August 1872, that 'a gentleman can show his moral character' and 'learn lessons of self-control, patience, endurance and perseverance which he can obtain in no other way'.

Yet whilst it's correct that a haughty Anglophilia permeated much of Philadelphian cricket circles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, certain clubs and individuals went out of their way to create a uniquely American cricketing identity. Foreigners were expressly forbidden from playing for the city's representative sides and the Young America club of Philadelphia was just one that banned non-Americans from playing for its teams. In the long run though, this stance proved to be unsustainable – Young America merged with nearby Germantown CC in 1890. Without a fresh influx of young players, year by year the demographics of Philadelphian cricketers grew older, clubs closed, and the scene gradually withered and died after World War One.

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For anyone genuinely interested in the history of the game in America, the starting point lies miles to the west of Philadelphia at Haverford College. It is here one golden October morning in 2004, one of those triumphant truly autumnal days that seem perfectly balanced between summer and winter, that we find ourselves driving up the long leafy approach to the college campus. As if by magic, as we approach the entrance a number of white-clad figures are emerging from a pavilion to our left. It looks as if a game is going to be played.

We're here to visit the CC Morris Cricket Library, the foremost repository of artefacts and memorabilia about the game in the United States. We ask one of the men in white, a tubby guy in his 40s with a slight Scouse accent, where the museum is. It seems we've stumbled across the annual Toronto v British Officers game.

The British Officers aren't actually officers. Not anymore. The club was founded after World War One by a group of Brits who wanted to play the game with their US counterparts. These days they comprise a mixed bunch of expats from around the Test-playing nations. As the game is just beginning it seems like a good idea to find the library before we get too engrossed in proceedings.

So we tiptoe through the quadrangle, past scurrying squirrels and students clutching files, until we come to a

church-like building. This must be it. The door is closed. We knock three times, and the door is opened by a small greyish man. 'Are you the curator?' we ask.

He is. Stuart McDougall is his name and he's only been at Haverford for the last eight months. The actual museum dates back to 1964 and is named after one of the last great cricketers that the college produced before the game died here after World War One.

The room inside is a treasure trove of books, videos, old blazers, ties and cards. There are the photos dating back to the 1860s and a horde of old *Wisdens* on the bookshelves. Mr McDougall is a gracious host chatting with us about the game and the history of cricket here at Haverford. He doesn't get many visitors.

'I do get research questions sometimes,' he smiles. 'Some of our members come in to borrow things and occasionally you'll get a reporter doing some sort of story. Some of the members support it because they think they should support it.'

In amongst the old almanacs and videos perhaps the most fascinating artefacts are the library's collection of *American Cricketers*. This periodical was required reading for every Philadelphian player of the time and leafing through its back issues today provides a fascinating insight into the long, slow decline of the game in the city. The editions after World War One are particularly sad. Local match

reports dwindle year on year, one by one the prominent Philadelphian clubs become defunct, and the magazine devotes more and more space to players' obituaries and reports of matches abroad. When the *American Cricketer* closes in 1929 it marks the end of an era.

Yet at Haverford the cricketing flame was kept alive by men such as Howard Comfort, a graduate of the college who perhaps more than anyone represents the link between the pre-war era and the revival of the game since the 1970s. Comfort captained the side in 1924 when they won the Halifax Cup, the competition competed for by Philadelphia's foremost clubs and a number of their East Coast rivals which ran annually from 1880 to 1926.

Comfort returned to the college in 1953 and coached the Haverford team for the next three decades, finally handing over to the present incumbent Kamran Khan in the early 1980s. 'Down the years there were many prophecies that baseball would eventually kill off cricket at Haverford, but these were all proved false,' recalls McDougall. 'Most American cricketers between 1930 and 1980 learned the game at Haverford. Even if the game seemed an anachronism to many at the time, the college's commitment didn't ever seem to waver.'

According to McDougall the college authorities invested heavily into the ethical dimensions of the sport, the idea that

it acted as a force for improvement among their students. 'This school is very socially conscious,' he says, emphasising the last two words. 'You look at the library and see the kinds of notes posted on the bulletin board – organisations like Amnesty International. This is a very liberal place.'

Outside it's coming up to lunch, so we adjourn to find out how the match is progressing. Toronto have managed to stretch to 199/8. Despite the long tradition of the game at Haverford, the teams are playing on an artificial wicket, causing the ball to rise, making the bowler bowl a fuller length, and thus making things easier for the batsman. Runs are plentiful. The British Officers are set a target of 200 in 40 overs.

While they're waiting for their turn to bat, we get chatting to the British Officers team. There's Brian, the garrulous expat journalist who regales us with tales from his time as publicity officer at Radio One. Another fellow looks and sounds like the spit of Alan Clark, the one-time Conservative MP. Then there's Alfred Reeves, the honorary president, a guy in his 70s who rekindled the club in the 1960s after it had lain dormant for over 40 years.

Though he left Britain nearly two decades previously, Alfred retains the bluff no-nonsense front of a Yorkshireman. He explains how he came to play cricket again in America when he chose a job offer in Philadelphia over one in Seattle.

'Quite by chance my wife and I got an apartment overlooking the Merion ground. I wandered down and noticed that it said "cricket club" on the gates. Well, I wandered up to the gates and waited for someone to come over and say hello. Eventually someone did. So, I said to them "I notice that you play cricket here", and they said, "Well, we used to."

'A few days later I was in our apartment when I said to Betty, my wife, [all excitedly] "I can hear a bat and ball, I can hear it!" I put on my whites and climbed over the wall of this apartment, and I could see some people knocking a ball around. I said, "Do you mind if I join in?" I saw this chap running up to the pavilion and shortly after he left with a guy with a striped blazer and straw hat, bow tie. He came up to me and asked, "Do you bat?" So, I said "Yes, shall I put my pads on?" I put my pads on and batted for them that day. At the end of the match, the captain and the secretary asked, "Would you join us for dinner tonight?" ""Of course, I'd love to, I say. I was in heaven! At one point someone stood up and said, "We have a new member and he is here now, he climbed a wall and made a few runs today and he'd like to speak." So of course I had to stand up then, didn't I?'

Alfred started playing regularly for the Merion team. But as this meant playing only eight or nine games each summer, this proved to be a frustrating experience for a

cricket fanatic such as he. At the end of his third season one of his team-mates made a suggestion. 'They didn't seem to get many people and well I said you won't until you start playing more and encouraging people to come along. Then this one fellow Peter Staunton said, "Alfred you're frustrated, I'm frustrated. Why don't we start a team?" "How would we do it?" I asked. "Well, I've been digging around and there was a British Officers team going back to 1875. It died out in 1939 when the war started. Why don't we see if we can get the ground back?" So, he went and bowed to all the right people.'

The right people included the trustees of Haverford and thus the British Officers found their home here. Players were recruited from the expat community and from friends, many of whom had never played cricket before. Alfred simply asked them if they had played tennis before and convinced them that cricket required similar hand-eye co-ordination. These days, he explains, the club floats between 50 and 65 members, mostly expats. 'We have no problem recruiting. A lot of people who come to this country either come on a contract or they come with a big company who easily transfer you around the place. We seem to lose five or six every season and sometimes they are the best players, damn it. But on the other hand, new people always seem to come in.'

While we speak the shadows are lengthening and British Officers are closing in on their target. At six o'clock and with just one over to spare they pass the winning post to the cheers of everyone in the pavilion. Smiles all round. At the presentation both team captains declare that it has been one of those days when cricket was the winner.

British Officers play in a competitive league but there are a clutch of clubs that play what might be termed village cricket, for the sheer love of the game. Three of these clubs are from Philadelphia's illustrious cricketing past and have been revived in recent years to some success.

A few days later we drive to the beauteous surroundings of Chestnut Hill, Northwest Philadelphia and the home of the oldest cricket club in America – Philadelphia CC. It's another gorgeous autumn morning and we're here to meet Tom Culp, the motivating force behind the revival of cricket at the club, and surprisingly, a native-born American.

Philadelphia CC was founded in 1854 in Camden, New Jersey, moving to its present home five or six years later. Tom explains this while presenting us with a book that commemorates the club's 150th anniversary in 2004, a lavish coffee table affair that describes the club's illustrious past, the exploits of JB King (King played for Philadelphia during the final phase of his career), the expansion of the club into tennis, golf and the development of a social

scene that would eventually supplant cricket as the club's *raison d'etre*.

For the game stopped being played here in 1922. For over 70 years cricket in any shape or form was wholly absent from the beautifully kept oval we saw that day. The club retained the name merely as a nod to its origins (and probably much to the bemusement of its many guests). Then around the mid-1990s a fellow named Ian Crookenden arrived on the scene.

'He's the director of tennis and he wondered why we weren't playing cricket,' explains Culp. 'I guess there had been an attempt about 10 or 15 years before to revive it and I think there was about half a dozen people who tried to get it going, but there just wasn't the enthusiasm for it. Ian was the driving force within our club. I happened to be in the room that time he proposed it and I remember saying "Well, I don't know how to play but I'll help organise it because I can do that."

'So we just started recruiting people and I mentioned it to my son. He started playing – that was a great drawing card for me because we both learned the sport at the same time. I was over 50 and he was just nine or ten, so it was really great fun in that regard.'

Tom is happy to admit that the newly reconstituted Philadelphia CC were 'terrible, just terrible' at first. 'Batting

was a little problematic because we all had baseball swings. We were hitting across the ball instead of curling it. It took us even longer to get the bowling right.' Gradually though they improved and, with the recruitment of a number of Brits, Australians, Indians and Caribbeans, have gained a measure of respectability in their performances.

That is the only thing that matters, for as Tom is keen to point out, the present-day Philadelphians are merely a social cricket club. They are not in a league and because tennis takes precedence during the peak summer months at the club they only play from the beginning of April to mid-May and again from mid-September to the end of October.

Yet the club, playing friendly games against the other Philadelphian teams and sides from New York and Canada, has now been going strong for over a decade. They even managed to go on tour to Argentina where they played as the Gentlemen of Philadelphia, reviving the old touring name their forebears had used all those years ago.

Culp is aware enough to know that the revival is not completely cemented. 'It's really very personality-dependent. By that I mean that I'm willing to do all the grunt work, all the lugging equipment around, ordering it, scheduling matches, etc. I happen to want to do that because I have so much fun playing when we do it. If somebody doesn't want to pick up that mantle – and that could easily happen – then

it could easily go away. And you've got to keep finding younger players. We are finding them, but not many. That's a big concern I have. If we had 100 players that would be one thing, but 30 is not too many.'

At the moment the cricket team is 'underneath everyone's radar', he says. 'We're in the club's budget, but it's so small. To use this example: we had a plasma TV stolen out of our bar last week, a very nice TV. Somebody just lifted it off the wall. The price tag for that TV is much higher than the entire cricket budget.'

If the Philadelphia CC budget is small, then the budget at nearby Germantown CC is microscopic. Germantown's story is a remarkably similar one and in fact their motivating force is another genteel American, albeit one with a Caribbean connection.

A white Barbadian who has lived in Philadelphia since the late 70s, we meet Bart Withstandley at the office of the stair company he owns in New Jersey. And he immediately floors us by showing us an antique bat inscribed with what looks like the signature of WG Grace. It seems one of Withstandley's friends found it when he clearing out his loft. 'He showed it to me because he knew I was a cricketer,' he explains. 'I took it home and I saw that there was writing on the back. I cleaned it up, put a magnifying glass on it, looked at it and I saw Grace and I thought, "Holy crap!"

'I went with someone from the CC Morris Cricket Library, their president Paul Hensley. Paul and I looked for books and we found Grace's signature. We looked at Grace's signature with a fellow from England who was the librarian at Lord's. And the three of us looked at the signature and it was identical!'

The bat has apparently been authenticated, and the story is that the great man gave it to a cricketer from Merion, who took it back to Pennsylvania, where it remained long after cricket at Merion ceased in the 1920s.

Withstandley relates this story with an obvious pride. It's an immediate reminder of the Philadelphian cricketing heritage and the links with the English game.

Germantown's story is very similar to Philadelphia's. Both teams were formed within months of each other in 1854 with Germantown moving to its present location in the 1880s. Like Philadelphia, it's a grand setting, a beautiful pavilion that you easily mistake for a provincial English ground, and likewise cricket was revived at the club at roughly the same time in the 1990s. Bart takes up the story:

'About 15 years ago we had a president of the club who said, "I see the name of the place is the Germantown Cricket Club. I suppose we had better play cricket. Is anybody interested?" So a whole bunch of people signed

up. We went to a meeting the president called. And he said, "Right, has anyone here actually played cricket?" Two hands went up. One of them was mine and the other one was at the time a 65-year-old Indian. And he said, "Okay you guys can get it organised."'

So Bart did. And like Philadelphia, Germantown went through an uncomfortable phase of recruiting players, forging themselves as a team and finding their level as a competitive social cricket team with, as Bart describes it, 'no delusions of grandeur'.

Germantown has a regular roster of around 25 players and whilst Bart is adamant that there's no chance of cricket dying out at Germantown again ('at least not while I'm around'), you get the impression that its presence isn't yet secure.

The problem, he says, is the lack of kids playing the game. New players, when they come around, are invariably expats from the cricket-playing nations. None of the Philadelphian teams appear to be breeding a new generation of players, each still being dependent on a steady stream of Asian, Caribbean, English and Australian workers arriving in town and by some stroke of luck locating these reborn clubs.

Most outsiders, in fact most Philadelphians, have little idea that their city supports this urbane oasis where the

game from the old country is played much the same as it was one hundred years ago.

You have to wonder too what the other members of these society clubs think of the cricketers who provide their clubs with their names and, to some extent, their history. 'In general, I think everybody at the club appreciates the fact that cricket is still played at the cricket club,' says Bart Withstandley, 'if for no other reason that when people ask them what club they belong to they say, "Oh I belong to the Germantown Cricket Club." And when they ask, "Oh, do they play cricket there?" the member can now respond, "Absolutely!"

'Even if it's nothing more than a curiosity and even if these people have no interest in the game at all they are almost universally interested in the fact that the game is still played there. For them it's a mark of what the old club is supposed to be about.'

Over at Philadelphia the feeling is the same. 'There's not wild enthusiasm,' says Tom Culp. 'Most of them don't understand what's going on but the members of the club who know that we're playing cricket – and most of them at least know that – are highly supportive of the activity just because of the historical significance of it. They think that it's great that we're out doing it.'

How could they not? The sensibilities that pervade these great corridors are much the same as those that the

original cricketers had all those years ago: the sense of fair play and sportsmanship that represents cricket and indeed sport at its very best. Once a year this enclave of old-school Philadelphian cricket celebrates these values (and indeed, itself) at an event called the Philadelphia Cricket Festival.

Every May all five clubs – Merion, Germantown, Philadelphia, Haverford and British Officers, plus a number of invited guest teams – play in a round robin tournament that utilises all the grounds round Philadelphia and Haverford. 'You just travel around and play two matches a day,' enthuses Culp, who has a huge smile on his face at the mere mention of the festival. 'It's such fun and we have a social event on at least two of the evenings, a big banquet, usually with a guest of honour. We had Sir Garfield Sobers one time. Gary Kirsten has been here a couple of times.'

The festival was first organised in 1993 as a four-team event but it expanded as the flame of Philadelphian cricket flickered into life once more. Now guest teams come from the UK, Canada and the Caribbean as well as elsewhere in the US and the event is an established part of the Philadelphian social calendar. It's even being marketed as a tourist event where onlookers (and the odd cricket junkie) can imbibe the genteel olde worlde atmosphere.

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The following year, we make our way back to Philadelphia to take in the festival first hand. Rolling up at Merion, we find time to collar Paul Hensley, who apart from being president of the CC Morris library, is also one of the festival's co-organisers.

Hensley has been involved since the festival's early days and has seen the festival grow from a small private affair to one that engrosses the whole neighbourhood and in this particular year, involves 18 teams. 'You know if we took all-comers we'd probably have 30 teams, but we don't have enough pitches for that. At one point Haverford had five pitches on campus and we have sort of tested the waters because we have identified one that could be rehabilitated. Do we want an extra pitch? Don't know. I know we wouldn't have more room at the Merion dinner on Saturday night for a couple more teams. We're just out of space.'

The festival then is at its limit, and though Paul muses about the idea of holding 'qualifying games', you feel that that would run counter to the easy-going beneficent nature of the event. It's organised on a purely voluntary basis. Any money that's made goes to charity – at the time of writing the festival was setting up a fund to support youth cricket.

This year's guest is Shaun Pollock and the South African all-rounder has already been much in demand: 'He's played with quite a few teams this year,' smiles Paul. 'He's

a really nice guy and really cool. I was there when he was at Haverford the other night and he was playing with the Haverford kids. He was coaching the kids how to field and giving them advice – I wish I had had that when I was an undergraduate.'

Some of the guests have little idea about the history of Philadelphian cricket and the miniature world the clubs here have created. 'I was showing Garry Sobers around one year as our guest and we walked into the library and he was reading the history and he had this very puzzled look on his face,' remembers Paul. 'Then we jumped in the car and drove over to Merion and walked through the lobby there and we came on to the porch overlooking the field and he just looked at me and said, "You guys are really serious about cricket, aren't you?" And I go "yeah, we really are".

'And it finally sunk in that not only is there this glorious past to tell people about but we have a really great infrastructure that somehow by luck has managed to survive all those years.'

And as Paul speaks we can hear the reassuring sound of leather on willow, punctuated every so often by the peal of church bells. The sun is shining and modern America and all of its problems are far away and everything, at least for a little while, is right with the world.