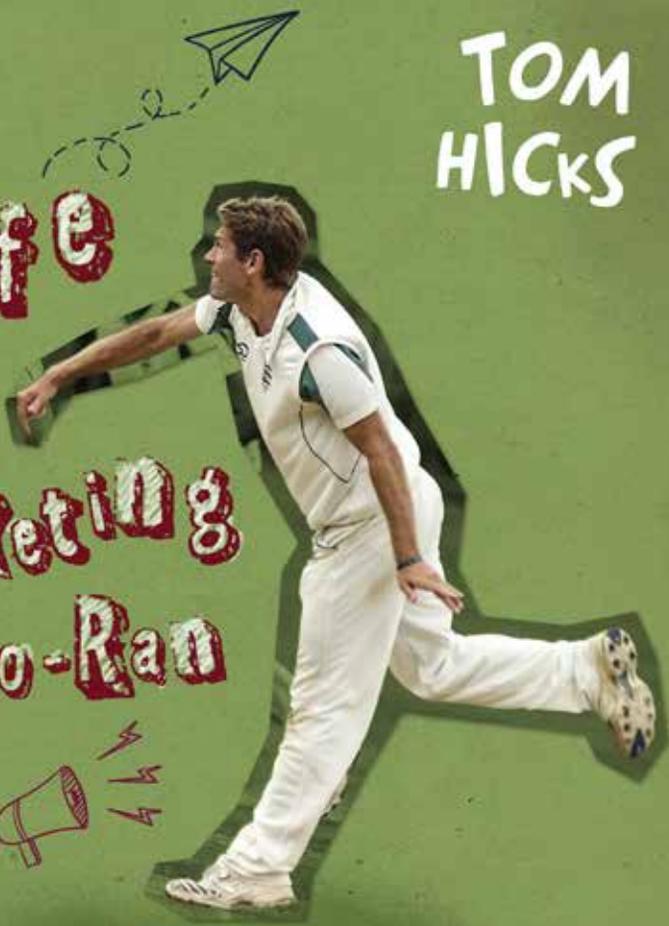


TOM
HICKS

The
Life
of a
Cricketing
Also-Ran



BOWLER'S
NAME?



**TOM
HICKS**

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**The
Life of a
Cricketing
Also-Ran**



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Chapter One

Early Days

THIS IS a book about cricket.

And about me.

If you picked it up, you probably know what cricket is, and there's a good chance you like it. It's highly unlikely you've ever heard of me.

If I am honest, I am a nobody. A statistic. An occupant of a very low rung on the cricketing food chain. If you Google my name you will find hundreds of articles about the multi-millionaire American former owner of Liverpool Football Club. If you are a cricket fan, you might have slipped as you were typing in the name of Zimbabwean run-machine and England Test batsman Graeme Hick and landed on my name. But if we are honest, I am really utterly anonymous.

So what on earth makes me think I'm qualified to write a book about cricket?

Well, firstly, I'm not a totally terrible cricketer. And although you've never heard of me, I managed for a good 25 years to rub shoulders with some of the game's greats, and to play on some of the world's finest grounds as I shuffled along in cricket's margins. As a former captain of Oxford University and Dorset County Cricket Club, I made a career in a world which no

longer exists. After fossilising for decades, university cricket is no longer first-class and the Minor Counties Championship is also now a relic. I guess that makes me a dinosaur.

And yet I've led teams out at the Home of Cricket; I have a first-class fifty and five-wicket haul to my name; there is a Wikipedia page about me which someone must have written; I've been sworn at by Test legends; nightclubbed with the fastest bowler of his generation; showered with one of my England heroes; shared cigarettes with an Ashes winner. I even have a World Cup winner's medal on my mantelpiece. And more.

I may still be a dinosaur, but I'm a dinosaur with a tale to tell.

The Best Team in the World

I'm not entirely sure where my passion for cricket came from, but I certainly became obsessed with the game from an early age, completing mini-projects at home on the Ashes, reading Bradman's *The Art of Cricket* and *Barclays World of Cricket* cover-to-cover, as well as any other cricket literature I could get my hands on. I suspect I covered some ground which was not age-appropriate, dipping into the autobiographies of Ian Botham, Phil Edmonds and others, and many of the jokes flew above my head. But it was a world I wanted to be part of.

I was found one summer holiday with my nose deep in a book on cricket I'd found in the boot of the car, unaware that this was intended as a birthday present for me which had yet to be wrapped up. In those days, if there was cricket about, in any form, I'd sniff it out. Early photos of me on holiday show a little boy of five or six fully padded up in roasting heat in France. My parents tell of being scolded by French families who thought they had put their son into some kind of torture device, rather than him pretending to be David Gower, and forcing any relative who came close to offer endless throwdowns. Another photo shows me next to my brother, who won the fancy-dress

prize at a village fete for his caveman costume. Again, there I am, dressed like a baby Gower.

There were endless tournaments of ‘pencil cricket’, like the dice game ‘Owzthat’, played between teams made up of internationals, county scorecards found in the newspaper and school teams. So you could quite easily find the Under-11 Clayesmore Prep School team thrashing England, with our *victor ludorum* Nic Hillyard scoring a double century against the likes of Gladstone Small and Phil DeFreitas. But if that was not strange enough to comprehend, the majority of the cricket my brother Guy and I conducted – on paper or in the garden – was by using our vast array of soft toys and teddy bears as the cricketing All Stars. So detailed and ingrained was our imaginary world, that I can still recite the Toys’ first XI now and give you a description of their skills and characteristics. Here is the side which was undisputed in quality in the Hicks household in the late 1980s:

1. Big Ted: Captain and elder statesman. Think Graham Gooch. Had been my mother’s favourite teddy and as such, fell foul in later years of being retired at the statutory age of 18. Rather like Alastair Cook, finding an adequate replacement was hard, although Big Sooty (a panda glove-puppet) and Brown Sooty (no relation) both had a go. Big Ted actually had a proper bat made for him by our lovely neighbour, Bob, which doubled up for late-night indoor games when mum and dad were out at the pub quiz.
2. Big Jumbo: As the name suggests, a big elephant. Indian heritage but England qualified. Solid foil to Big Ted. The Sutcliffe to his Hobbs.
3. Little Florri: Adam Gilchrist before he was even a thing. Little Florence was a miniature finger-

puppet frog, who combined being a stylish right-handed bat with being an extremely agile wicketkeeper. Like several of this team, he also made it into the Toys football team and rugby team (oh yes, we had these as well, as goalkeeper and scrum-half respectively). Quite literally, the greatest sportsman since C.B. Fry.

4. Little Sooty: Another finger puppet. Little Sooty fitted into the pouch of the aforementioned Big Sooty, but outplayed his big brother (the toy designers were probably thinking more mother and baby, but what were we to care?) Dependable right-hander in the mould of Graeme Hick, with the occasional off-spin to boot. Became captain after Big Ted's retirement.
5. Crums: The only girl to make the team, although I think this probably made us quite progressive considering the era. Crums was a tiger glove puppet bought at Longleat, who channelled Ian Botham – big hitting but without the tearaway pace of the 1981 vintage. Think that spell in Melbourne in 1986 when he strangled a five-wicket haul bowling at 'gnat's pace'. A game-changer.
6. Goonie: Goonie was one of my brother's favourite toys. A glove-puppet gorilla and boyfriend to Crums, who bowled at the speed of light with the action of Ezra Moseley. Would usually take the new ball, although the Toys' West Indian pace barrage was as feared as even the greatest four-pronged attack the real Caribbean ever produced. Goonie probably batted too high at No.6, but offered a left-handed variation to the top order. The only issue with this being that both Guy and I are right-handed.

7. Bommer: A late addition to the squad, given to me on the eve of the Oval Test in 1989 (when Alan Igglesden and John Stephenson were about the thousandth people to get an Ashes cap that summer). Bommer was a walrus who also bowled fast with a high, chest-on action. I think I was going for something like Martin Bicknell but quicker when deciding on this one.
8. Brownie: Also fast. Bowled like Jeff Thomson, with a high front leg and slinging action – unmistakable. Hailed from a combination of the Caribbean and County Armagh. Clearly I'd picked up some of the news stories of the time, as we came up with the tragic narrative of Brownie Bear's parents being killed by the IRA.
9. Wonkwing: So-called because he was a bird with a wonky wing. Fast-medium but like the bowler on whom he was fashioned – Terry Alderman – deadly. Always one to go for when the Gooch-like Big Ted was batting ... Wonky went everywhere with me – on tour, to university. A real good-luck mascot, whose shape meant he didn't play rugby for the Toys, but acted as the ball itself.
10. Little Munk: Another finger puppet. This one was Malcolm Marshall, which was perfect as the bending run-up was required to negotiate the shape of our patio.
11. Whistle: Steady off-spinner and tortoise. Spin was not a big feature of the Toys' team, which is surprising since Guy and I both went on to bowl off-spin. A small garden does not lend itself to tweekers, though, and who wants to bowl spin anyway?
12. Little Jumbo: Recognising the need for leg-spin, Little Jumbo was our one concession to this, but as

we were both a bit rubbish at landing our leggies,
we rarely opted for L.J.

Our games followed a strict format, with each bowler only getting two overs and batsmen retiring at 25, but being able to resume the innings once the other brother had had their turn. You had to bowl and bat in the manner which was appropriate to the agreed skills of that player. That is, if you had chosen Big Ted, it was bad form to start slogging across the line, whilst if you chose Wonkwing, you were duty bound to keep the pace reasonable and not fling it down as hard as you might with Little Munk or Brownie, say. This kept us from arguing too much, and prolonged our games, as did being able to blame a dismissal on Little Sooty's poor shot selection, rather than seeing it as a personal failure. Given that my brother was prone to the most epic of 'wobblies' as we called them, this sort of preservation was in both of our best interests.

My mother remembers games of Monopoly which would end up with the board overturned, plastic hotels flying across the dining room and metal top hats and irons pinging into the furthest-flung corners of upholstery. She recalls that on one occasion he went to bed in such a fit of pique that he even woke up still angry. He had all the excuses – the pitch was too bumpy, the ball was too hard, or too soft, the shed had cheated (yes, such was my brother's sense of injustice at getting out, or letting in a goal, that he felt inanimate objects had come alive, simply to conspire against him).

So when it came to garden sport, for me it *was* about winning (when is it ever not?), but this was balanced with an understanding that cricket or football on your own is about as much fun as playing 'ball-in-a-cup'.

However, our forces were aligned when pitted against a common enemy. We had a shared nemesis in the small but menacing shape of our next-door neighbour – 'Bossy Barbara'.

Barbara was about 4ft, with wispy hair – on her chin, that is – and an even shorter fuse than my impatient younger sibling. And yet she was married to the kindest, gentlest soul: Bob, who would often fill us with chilled Robinsons Barley Water whilst helping us make wooden toys in his shed. Barbara on the other hand seemed delivered from Satan to be the scourge of any young boy who had the audacity to want to have fun in her vicinity.

If the ball happened to clear our fence and end up next door, a dark shade descended on our garden and a chill wind made our little hearts shudder. One of us would have to take our life in our hands and run the gauntlet to fetch it. It's funny how history repeats itself. Now, when my children are playing garden cricket, they face an equally intimidating foe. And do you know what? I'm just as scared to ask for their ball back as I ever was back then. I hope I never become a grumpy so-and-so like that.

School Cricket

Of course, at school, sport was more serious and you couldn't go around pretending you were some finger-puppet frog if you wanted to get into the team, although I have later had some hilarious partnerships with Guy in real cricket in which we pretended to be our toys, unbeknownst to the opposition.

It did take me a bit of time to adjust to the real game and, in my first innings at under-10 level, I walked out to bat with no gloves and continued to do so as it was more comfortable. It wasn't long before I really started to enjoy the matches and the choice to be a spinner paid off, as there were no restrictions in those days, and I could bowl spells as long as I, or the teacher/coach, liked. The choice to bowl spin, I think, came from another cricket book – Ladybird's *The Story of Cricket* – which showed a grip, and I thought I'd try it out. Once a couple of fellow pupils had made themselves look silly by running past a flighted off-break, or chipped it up in the air, I realised that

there was a lot of success to be had from loopy spin, and so I never went for anything else.

And although I wasn't an amazing batsman, I was certainly better than most at school and scored my first hundred in the under-11 team against Chafyn Grove School from Salisbury, using a borrowed GM Striker – the even better version of the Maestro, which was the go-to bat of choice in the school kit bag (although the County Turbo was not far behind). Had there been a Duncan Fearnley Magnum, it would have been a really tough choice (not the Colt, which was my first real bat, left for me to find in my bed one evening by my parents, which I lovingly linseeded and sanded, and knocked in for hours, much to their displeasure).

Real cricket aficionados can tell a cricketer's era from the bats they remember being fashionable when they were growing up. If you are ever stuck for conversation with a cricketer, I promise you, they won't be able to resist this one.

Important bats of my era

- *Duncan Fearnley Magnum*
- *Gray Nicolls Dynadrive*
- *Kookaburra Ridgeback*
- *Hunts County Turbo*
- *Gunn and Moore Striker or Maestro*
- *Slazenger V12*
- *Stuart Surridge Turbo*

Of the era, but not the one you really wanted

- *Powerspot Tufcoat*
- *Duncan Fearnley Colt*
- *Gunn and Moore Skipper*
- *Hunts County Reflex*
- *Stuart Surridge Jumbo*

A tradition at my prep school was that if you scored a hundred for the school you received a bat as a reward, and so after my century, during which my dad was umpiring (surely a coincidence...), I was dropped several times, and after which I insisted on pouring a cup of orange squash on myself as I'd seen real cricketers do with champagne, the headmaster called me up in assembly to hand me ... an SS Jumbo.

Proud as I was to get the award, this was certainly not the bat of choice, screaming as it did of middle-order Indian no-hoper, rather than what a GM Maestro might have done for my street-cred, making me more into a Steve Waugh-type player. And these things matter when you are 11.

Nonetheless, I did put the Jumbo into action later that season for my county team, using it to score an unbeaten (although certainly not chanceless) ton against Somerset at Taunton School. This remains the only time I scored three figures under a county banner at any age, not a record of which I am proud.

By Royal Appointment

My first representative wicket has a blue-blooded story attached. It was for the Dorset Under-10s at Port Regis School – a rather well-to-do prep school – when I was just eight. I don't know how they selected these teams, but I do know that I was entirely unprepared and felt a total fish out of water. Not least because I did not have any white trousers (at school we played in our school shorts, with a white shirt instead of the normal grey), my jumper had been knitted by my grandma and my boots were full rubbers with a rather natty frill over the laces. They were, in fact, golf shoes bought from a local charity shop, but it took meeting my team-mates, who all seemed to have the requisite gear, with sewn-on badges and no knobbly knees in sight, to make me realise it.

It is all a bit of a hazy memory, but I am pretty certain I opened the batting with an enormous, jovial lad called Andy Long, who hit the ball extremely hard and later bowled a very heavy ball – not an expression you often hear at under-10s. In fact, Andy went on to a pretty successful professional rugby career with Bath, and did actually win a cap or two for England in the front row. He was certainly a legend of the junior scene in Dorset, so I was pretty starstruck even then. I have a vague recollection of scoring six singles before being dismissed. No duck at least.

I doubt very much whether I would remember this game at all, were it not for the excitement which greeted me when I returned to the picnic blanket where my parents and my nan were sitting. Nan – or Nanny – as we called her (I have to distinguish, since at places like Port Regis, most of the pupils have actual nannies, or *au pairs*) had clocked that our next to bat, and wicketkeeper for the day was Peter Phillips. That is, Peter Phillips, son of Princess Anne. Not just cricketing royalty, actual royalty!

Now, Nanny was a feisty south London lass, who was known for her Sid James laugh and huge appetite for life. She was not going to let this opportunity go begging, and so whilst the poor lad was waiting for his turn to bat, she marched around the boundary to where he stood and promptly addressed the Queen's grandson with the question:

'I'm here to watch my grandson, where's your gran today, then?'

History does not relate whether Peter Phillips dignified this impertinence with a response, but Nanny dined out on the moment for weeks.

Again, I barely remember bowling on that day, although I do have a picture somewhere of me in my shorts, tongue out, delivering some embryonic off-spin in this game. What I do

know is that somewhere there may still exist a scorecard which reads ‘Stumped HRH Peter Phillips (*sic*), Bowled Hicks’. I’ve watched every episode of *The Crown* vainly expecting a cameo.

Young Guns go on Tour

My bowling was going great guns, and at Under-13 level, I took more than 50 wickets in a season for Dorset, including seven- and eight-wicket hauls, as well as five-fers for fun. I even took five wickets in my first ‘international’ match, for the West of England against the Netherlands, back at Port Regis. Playing for the region was the next step on what today would be called the ‘player pathway’, and I was selected to go on tour with the West of England to the Caribbean in the winter of 1993/94. There is still no feeling quite like opening a letter which has a team-sheet with your name on it, and the excitement was palpable. Not least for mum and dad, who could see a tropical holiday looming for the first time since they’d had kids.

This was when you really did start feeling like professional cricket might be a realistic future for you. Things started happening, like residential training camps where former players would come and speak to you about subjects such as the ‘mental side of the game’ which you’d never thought about before. I seem to remember Chris Old giving up his Christmas Eve to address the squad in the meeting room of a Travelodge somewhere near Bridgwater. There is a certain sort of modern tragedy in this, particularly considering the last I heard of Chris Old – hero of Headingley 1981 – was that he was working on the tills in a supermarket in Cornwall.

You had to keep a food diary, training plans were handed out on photocopied paper, with ideas for fitness work as well as the obvious batting, bowling and fielding drills. Some players even had sponsorship deals with bat companies and the chat was all about what sort of discount you were on (most companies

were happy to give 25% as a matter of course, if it meant you spent hundreds on the whole kit and caboodle). Measurements for things like blazers and tour kit were taken, and when we made the final of many round-trips to Taunton before the tour, there laid out for us was a whole pile of official kit, all embroidered and personalised. Did we feel special, or what?

Flying out to Port-of-Spain on Christmas Day 1993 to play cricket, I couldn't have asked Santa for a better present. To say we took time to acclimatise would be a huge understatement. Up until then, my only experience of touring was the three-day Under-11 festival in Cornwall, and there's not much similarity between Truro and Trinidad.

Whilst we had been prepared for the experience in the manner of young professionals, it appeared the memo had not reached the locals, as the grounds we played at were typically ramshackle, with poorly prepared pitches and outfielders of long, coarse grass. We were resplendent in our pristine new whites, fresh out of the cellophane, whilst our opponents were doing well if they had collars on their shirts and their trainers were white, not black. It was hard not to be disparaging, although we soon found ourselves chastened when play began as we were taught a lesson on and off the field. It was a great experience to show us how – clichéd though it may sound – sport levels the playing field. I believe we all grew more tolerant and understanding of different cultures as a result of that first trip.

The highlight was playing on New Year's Day at Queen's Park Oval – the famous old Test arena in Trinidad. It was a huge honour to be selected to walk out and play on a ground where England were due in a few weeks' time, and also an honour to be presented to Trinidad's greatest son, Brian Charles Lara. We had seen Lara practising in the nets as we arrived and he was hot off the back of making his name with a stunning double-hundred in Australia. When he walked down the line, shaking

our hands, we were not to know that he was about to change cricketing history during that England tour. Nor was I to know that my next meeting with the world record-breaker would be in altogether different circumstances, several years later.

In the opposition that day was another future West Indies star – Daren Ganga – whom I dropped from a simple caught-and-bowled. Fair play to Daren, he went on to make more of his opportunity to play professional cricket than I did, with a smattering of Test caps and a career as a respected commentator.

After that match, we left Trinidad for the rest of the tour in Grenada and Barbados, but before we left the ground I put a message in one of the dressing room lockers for England captain Michael Atherton. I doubt if he ever received it, but I feel that act shows just how inspired I was by getting the chance to walk in the shadows of my heroes. I hope that all professional clubs in any sport do all they can to open the doors for young hopefuls to visit, train and play in their facilities, as it can fuel the imagination like nothing else. That the memory is still there for me is testament to that.

I was also excited on that tour to meet Larry Gomes – the West Indies batsman, who was well known to me from our well-worn VHS *On Top Down Under*, charting the one-day success of the England side in Australia on the 1986/87 Ashes tour. Gomes appeared one morning at our hotel, for no apparent reason, and came right up to our group with the welcome: ‘Hi, I’m Larry Gomes.’ I’m not sure if this is just a Caribbean thing; the next time I met Brian Lara, he did something similar, but with all respect to Gomes, he’s hardly the household name Brian is.

I’m not sure if my team-mates were equally as excited by the opportunity to rub shoulders with famous players past and present, but I lapped it up. Whether it was Everton Weekes (one of the great Three Ws of Barbados legend), Dennis Breakwell (who tended the grounds at King’s College, Taunton, but

was also a close mucker of Joel Garner, Viv Richards and Ian Botham), or just getting the chance to see the ultimate great – Sir Garfield Sobers – across the pavilion in Bridgetown, I always felt the glow of reflected stardom and would seek it out at any opportunity. Once a cricket nut, always a cricket nut, I guess.

England Duty

The next big-ticket selection for an aspiring young player during my teenage years was to make it into the winter training camp at the National Centre for Excellence at Lilleshall. The centre no longer exists, with Loughborough now the official place for cricket development, but in those days it was a byword for elite training, in cricket and soccer. When the letter came for this one, I was really made up. This meant, for whatever reason, that I had been picked as one of the best in my region, let alone county, and in fact only two other players from the West were going, and I was the only spinner. There were only two off-spinners there for the three-day camp. Me, and a lively lad from Northamptonshire by the name of Graeme Swann. The coaches were all big names, with Micky Stewart, the former England coach leading a session on batting, and the England psychologist Steve Bull doing sessions on ‘mental toughness’ and ‘positive mental attitude’ which were the buzz-phrases of the day. The spin coach was Fred Titmus, one of England’s finest off-spinners. He was so positive that even when you bowled a massive full-bunger or rank long-hop, he would say, with a sparkle in his eye, ‘Ah, lad, but it’s got a deadly quality; it’s going to hit the stumps!’

He worked with John Barclay, another great offie, who I loved working with, too. We really were very fortunate. I don’t remember much about Graeme at that stage other than his charisma and self-belief. I was probably a bit intimidated as well;

this was a guy I thought would definitely play for England, at least in our year group.

School Days

Meanwhile, my day-to-day cricket took place at school and for the age groups in Dorset. School was for the most part at Clayesmore, a small but beautiful private school, less well-known than its local counterparts, Bryanston, Canford and Sherborne. If you add Milton Abbey into this mix, you have some of the loveliest cricket grounds in the south of England. Private school pupils have no idea how lucky they are playing on manicured grounds in gorgeous settings.

I was lucky enough to have a cricket-lover for a deputy headmaster in the form of Roger Denning, a former Durham student and left-arm spinner, whose sons were also cricket-mad and lived a few doors away from us on the school site after dad took up the post of housemaster. I wouldn't underestimate the importance of having ready net partners for long afternoons and weekends of practice, as well as the free use of all the school facilities. I don't think my parents saw us during our free time for a few years, and I bet they were delighted! Denning was great: not only would he happily send anyone playing for the first team out of his geography lessons to put the boundary flags out, but he also took the unprecedented step of extending the cow-corner boundary by ten metres on one side, purely as he recognised that my flighted off-spin would draw many batsmen into holing out on the slog. How right he was – we stationed our best catcher there and even in my first year at senior school (year nine equivalent), I took 30 wickets, with at least ten caught where in previous years the ball would have gone for six.

I was also lucky enough to open the batting with a promising young player who was making waves in the school cricket world.

Matt Swarbrick scored a thousand runs in his final season at the school, including something like ten centuries in a row, on his way to bagging a contract with Hampshire after completing his A-levels. With Swarbs rattling on at around six runs an over, it was easy enough for me to tick over and keep giving him the strike. The pressure was off to such an extent that in my GCSE year I scored well over 600 runs, averaging in the sixties – a fine return in any other year – which was largely unnoticed in the shadow of his exploits. To be fair, our fixture list was not as strong as all that: we played the second teams of Millfield and Sherborne, and my two hundreds that year were against the Forty Club (members qualified by being over 40, so the Dorset branch saw a regular turnout of sawdusty, bearded folk with canvas pads and jaunty cloth caps, who couldn't chase down a single for love nor money), and the equally harmless Dorset Police (some of whom were the same chaps who played for the Forty Club). Still, you can only play what's in front of you.

We had a yearly tour with school, too, which took us to Victoria College, Jersey, Bearwood College in Berkshire and Abbotsholme School in Staffordshire. These trips allowed us to add to the season's stats, but also represented a rite of passage, as boarding alongside some of the sixth-form lads under minimal supervision might have been expected to do (nothing too sinister, but my first taste of, and suffering at the hands of, cider happened on one of these tours, and my first cigarette). Cricket was already starting to give me an education for life.