

Geoff Hart



THIS IS ME!



Cricket, My Brother and Me!



MY BROTHER
'ROY'

Fifty Years Watching
English Cricket



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Chapter One

Down and Out, Down Under

I COULD see the ferry approaching and instinctively started to run. I arrived at the Regatta just as the ferry docked, but turning round saw Roy still more than a hundred yards behind me. We had travelled halfway round the world to watch a game of cricket and thanks to my brother's notorious swollen ankles we were going to miss the start. The ferryman read the anxiety in my face.

'Don't worry, mate. There's another one along in ten minutes. At that speed he should arrive just right.'

And with that he pulled up the gangplank that doubled as a gate and continued along the Brisbane River in the direction of the holy Gabba, the Brisbane Cricket Ground that derives its odd nickname from the suburb of Woolloongabba, in which it is located.

Roy's ankles, always slightly pudgy, had swollen to the size of pomegranates during the long flight and he had been seeking sympathy ever since. However, what I was feeling at that moment was naked hostility. I gave him a hard stare, not all that effective from a distance of a hundred yards, but it made me feel better. Unexpectedly he reacted by breaking into a gentle trot. He therefore arrived

at the boarding point in good time for the next ferry which, as promised, appeared ten minutes later. Gratefully we stepped aboard.

The ferry route from the Regatta terminal near our apartment in Auchenflower passed under the Go-Between Bridge before following a right-hand bend in the river and heading towards the Victoria Bridge. Along this stretch the whole city opens up before you. Brisbane is an unlikely but very successful blend of attractive modern architecture and Victorian grandeur, the latter reflecting its colonial history. Beyond the Victoria Bridge the ferry makes a brief stop at the beautiful South Bank Parklands with its public lawns, gardens, swimming areas and awesome man-made beaches. It is also the site of the enormous Wheel of Brisbane, built in 2008 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the State of Queensland.

The ferry continues on under the Goodwill Bridge before docking at the Maritime Museum, a short walk from the Gabba.

It soon became clear that almost everyone on board was heading to the same event as us. Given the group of passengers included the *Test Match Special* commentator and *Times* journalist, Christopher Martin-Jenkins and Simon Barnes, chief sportswriter of *The Times*, it was fair to assume we would arrive on time after all.

I had never been a big fan of Martin-Jenkins on *TMS*. I much preferred the wayward style of his co-commentator, Henry Blofeld. Roy on the other hand liked CMJ as he was known, particularly favouring his extremely precise and well-informed account of every ball. Being an affable sort, it was inevitable that Roy would attempt to strike up a conversation with the man about the prospects for the day's play. Unfortunately, he never got the chance as about 50 other fans had the same idea.

Not for the first time I thought how wonderful it would be to draw a good salary for travelling the globe watching cricket in perpetual summer. If I were in that position you would never be able to wipe the smile off my face. As might be expected there were plenty of other people keen to discuss the cricket, the Australian supporters in particular. As a result, by the time we got off the ferry for the short walk to the ground, I at least was well and truly ready for our adventure to begin. Roy was by contrast still struggling to unwind. He is a massive cricket fan and a real lover of the way the Australians approach the game. I think he was feeling quite overwhelmed by the whole occasion, and I could see it would not take much to tip him over the edge. Soon I would realise how accurate this assessment was.

I have become used to the fact that Roy tends to arrive at cricket matches with a large bag containing every item that he might potentially require. This includes clothing suitable for both the Sahara Desert and an ascent of Everest as well as every weather condition in between. What we did not know was that there was a bag restriction imposed at the Gabba and any item wider than 40cm had to be surrendered at the entrance gate. Roy became instantly on edge at this point as he seemed to believe that he would never see his rucksack again, although the very helpful steward was at pains to explain that one merely surrendered it like a coat at a cloakroom.

He seemed to be calming down and was just handing the bag over when he suddenly convinced himself that he had put the tickets in one of the bag's many pockets. He abruptly took the bag back and started furiously searching in every pocket, cavity and flap of the bag ... and then again! He was close to hysteria when I innocently suggested they could be in his jacket or trouser pocket. He yelled at me that they were in the bag, but I ignored him and while he stood there

in a catatonic state, I proceeded to go through his pockets. Moments later I held up the tickets, but rather than feeling relieved he remained rigid and appeared to be in some sort of daze. Eventually he grabbed them from my hand and presented them to the bemused steward.

‘Have a nice day, mate,’ the steward said, at last able to revert to his normal script and we entered the ground with Roy emotionally exhausted before a ball had been bowled.

As we settled into our seats, high above the action, Roy proceeded to introduce himself and me to the group of guys sitting around us. As would be expected they were with the same touring company as us and at least six of them were good friends and had travelled as a group. Roy soon established that they knew their cricket, which was important as we seemed destined to sit amongst them for the whole match.

As the start of play drew nearer Roy began insuring himself against disappointment.

‘I presume you know we haven’t won at the Gabba since 1986,’ was his first pronouncement.

I was ready for him.

‘When we faced them in 2005 we hadn’t won the Ashes for 18 years. Things change; eras come to an end. You’ll see.’

Roy was renegeing slightly here. We had harboured the idea of a tour to Australia for many years. We had decided that this was the time to do it because the 2005 series had instilled in us the belief that we could finally win in Australia, not something we had genuinely believed in for a long time.

We sat with our individual thoughts, me visualising an England win at the Gabba while Roy wondered how he would cope with defeat. I had picked up a copy of *Being Freddie* at the airport which included Andrew Flintoff’s account of the 2005 campaign.^[1] I had it in

my bag and decided it would help me to focus on positive thoughts.

In the absence of Michael Vaughan, who was injured, Flintoff had been made captain, a move I approved of whereas Roy would have preferred Andrew Strauss. History was to prove him right.

Suddenly my mobile went off. I stared at the screen on which my daughter Emily's name had appeared. It was 10.50pm at home. I felt mild panic, but answered, nevertheless.

'Hi Dad! You won't believe it. We just saw you on telly.'

'You didn't. Are you sure it was us?'

'Of course I am. I do know my own father. Roy was staring into space – nothing new there – and you were rummaging in your bag. The Gabba looks incredible.'

Emily and her husband Andy had sort of 'lived through' the 2005 Ashes with us and still felt that tie, even though we were now on the other side of the world. I guess that seeing us there at the game made them feel part of it.

'Don't worry, dad. We'll smash 'em.'

I was glad that she was no longer on the phone when Steve Harmison bowled that first ball of the series so wide that it went directly to Andrew Flintoff at second slip. The guy next to me had not yet donned his glasses and for a moment thought it was a catch. Roy soon put him right and I think from then on he thought we were doomed. He wasn't wrong.

I have to admit that at that moment of catastrophe my normal optimism completely deserted me. I had a sinking feeling that is hard to describe. I have only experienced such desperation once since then, on the night of the election in December 2019 when the exit poll predicted a landslide for Boris Johnson. It is a tribute to the human spirit that Roy and I both recovered to enjoy the match and the whole trip.

So far our recovery from the shock of that election has been less robust.

At the end of day one Australia were already 346/3 with Ricky Ponting 137 not out and looking indomitable. Alongside him Michael Hussey seemed very assured on 63. As we walked back to the ferry that evening it was already hard to see how England could win the match from here. Although the possibility of a draw still existed, psychologically I joined Roy in preparing for defeat.

We had decided to make the cricket fan's ultimate pilgrimage to Australia shortly after the 2005 Ashes in England, widely acknowledged as the greatest Test series in the history of the game. Looking forward from that historic success there seemed reason to believe that England could do well again in 2006/07. We had booked through a tour company flying from Heathrow to Brisbane with a change at Hong Kong. The two flights were comfortable and largely uneventful, particularly for Roy who was asleep for most of the time. Eventually we arrived at Brisbane airport with me knackered and Roy fully refreshed having dealt with potential jet lag in the best way possible.

We walked through the airport chatting in that 'well we made it' pioneer sort of way as if no Brit had ever ventured this far before when suddenly our way was barred by a burly Australian policeman. His springer spaniel was showing a lot of interest in my rucksack which for some reason Roy was carrying.

'Could you empty that bag, mate?' the policeman asked Roy who, although somewhat nonplussed, complied at once. The policeman showed no interest in any of the contents until Roy finally pulled out a rather manky banana which I remembered at that moment had been given to me by my daughter Lucy as I left home aboard the transfer bus to Heathrow.

‘You can’t go 200 miles on the bus with nothing to eat,’ she had told me in a very imperious manner. She was the only seasoned traveller in the family. I had accepted the gift, put it into my rucksack and thought no more about it, until now.

‘I am formally notifying you that I believe an offence has been committed in contravention of the Food and Agricultural Import Regulations and Standards. As a result ...’

‘Excuse me, officer!’ Roy had stopped the man in his tracks. Probably a bad idea, I thought. ‘If you are arresting me for possession of a banana, you need to know it is not my banana.’

The policeman gave him a quizzical and slightly hostile stare.

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘It’s not my banana,’ Roy repeated.

‘The banana was found in your bag.’

‘It’s not my bag.’

‘Did someone ask you to carry the bag into Australia for them?’

Roy hesitated for a second before his innate honesty overcame any misguided sense of family loyalty.

‘Well, yes. My brother here needed a pee and asked me to hold his bag while he went looking for a toilet.’

The policeman looked at Roy long and hard. He did not seem to like what he saw. Reluctantly he swivelled to face me, holding the banana aloft.

‘Is this yours?’ he enquired.

It seemed frivolous at this stage to bring my daughter, Lucy, into the equation although in terms of ownership it was strictly speaking her banana. I decided to keep it simple. ‘Yes, sir, it is.’

The police officer hesitated, albeit only briefly. ‘I am formally notifying you that an offence has been committed

in contravention of the Food and Agricultural Import Regulations and Standards, as a result of which I am verbally warning you that any further contravention could result in a fine or a period of imprisonment.'

There was a pause and I was desperate to ask him if that was it, but common sense prevented me. Eventually, I was informed that the banana was being confiscated and the police officer started to walk away, no doubt glad to see the back of us. The springer spaniel on the other hand looked back at me with a slight snarl as if to say, 'I've got your number, mate.'

We had booked our trip down under with a well-known tour company which did a great job in every respect bar one. We had made the booking relatively late and the huge hotel where everybody else was accommodated was already full. As a result, we were billeted in a self-catering apartment in one of Brisbane's inner suburbs. When we opened the door to the apartment we couldn't believe our eyes. Except for the bathroom, the whole apartment was one gigantic room about 50 feet long. At first we weren't sure what we thought about it, but given the positive mood we were in decided it was some sort of privilege to be allocated so much space! Also, with the beds so far apart it meant that Roy's snoring would not be a problem. The only real downside was its suburban location a good two miles from the centre of town and what we perceived as 'the action'. However, once we discovered that the Brisbane River, complete with regular ferries in each direction, was only spitting distance from our lodgings we were happy enough. It probably meant that we missed out on the official company welcome and tour T-shirt, but that wasn't high on our list of priorities.

On our first day in Brisbane we wandered along the river taking in the sights and stopping for the occasional beer. At one stop for 'refreshments' we sat outside with our drinks

and watched a beautiful exotic bird as it hopped around from table to table. We were just eulogising over the bird's unusual markings and vivid colours when the barman came across and flicked a tea towel at it.

'Bloody pigeons!' he exclaimed as the bird flew off, no doubt seeking a more hospitable environment. One man's exotic bird is another man's vermin, it seems.

Later that evening we made a fine discovery. Not more than 40 yards from our apartment was an excellent Chinese restaurant. We spent an enjoyable evening there and made a note to return, which we did several times. During the course of the evening the jet lag started to catch up with me big style so we decided to call it a day. When we arrived at the entrance to the flat we realised that we had left the keys on the restaurant table so Roy went back to fetch them. I sat down on the step and immediately fell into a deep sleep. When he returned Roy had some difficulty rousing me.

'It's just lucky someone else didn't find you first,' he said.

The following morning I woke up very early to a beautiful day. As Roy still seemed to be fast asleep I decided to go for a walk along the river before breakfast. Immediately I was met by a swarm of people of all ages out exercising. It seemed as if half of Brisbane was out walking, running, rowing or cycling. I saw young mums running with almost new-born babies in slings. One woman out for a run even had a small cart harnessed round her waist with an infant on board. I knew the country was sport mad, but here was some clear evidence of why Australian sportsmen and women are so often winners.

Australians love the outdoor life. Why wouldn't they? It is a beautiful country and the weather is wonderful. Men seem happiest when participating in sport or talking about it with their mates. However, from many conversations we had with local people, I did detect a possible downside to

their sporting obsession. Whereas a young kid who loves participating in sport would thrive in Australian society I am not sure how a sensitive, bookish child would be regarded in a country with such a strong idolisation of sportsmen. In a conversation about this during our stay it was even suggested to me that non-sporty men fake enthusiasm in sport to avoid alienation.

On the whole we found Australians to be friendly and outgoing and easy to get along with. We experienced their friendliness first hand one evening returning home after the cricket. I think it was the third day of the match and we were walking from the Gabba to catch the river ferry. We had been deep in conversation with a group of Aussies about the game and continued to chat about it together when they reached their car and said their goodbyes. About 20 minutes later we looked up to check how close we were to the ferry and realised we were completely lost. This must have shown in our faces and behaviour because almost immediately two guys stopped their car and shouted over to us. One looked like a real city slicker whereas his pal was overweight with a rural look about him, his red chubby face adorned by a huge Stetson.

‘Are you two boys okay? You look lost!’ said the city man.

We confirmed that we were indeed lost and when we said we were heading for the ferry they both laughed.

‘You’re not only about an hour away, mate, you’re also walking in the wrong direction. Where are you heading?’ asked the city guy.

I replied that we usually caught the ferry at the Maritime Museum.

‘No, he means where are you heading. Where would the ferry be taking you?’ asked his farmer pal.

‘Auchenflower,’ Roy informed him.

City Man was even more amused. ‘Christ mate, why do you want to go there?’

‘It’s where we are staying,’ said Roy with no hint of shame despite City Man’s suggestion that it was the back of beyond.

‘It will be midnight before you get there,’ he suggested. ‘Get in!’

We hesitated. ‘Do you want to go to bloody Auchenflower or not?’ said the Stetson. It was not so much a question as an order to get in the car.

It would have seemed churlish and ungrateful to explain that we particularly enjoyed the ferry trip so we slid into the back seat and our two new friends proceeded at high speed towards Auchenflower.

It turned out that they were two old school mates who got together each year to watch cricket, but who since school had obviously followed different life paths. This mattered not a jot and the two of them indulged in light banter throughout the journey started by the Stetson objecting that the confounded car seat was wrapping itself around him.

‘Is it getting warm?’ City Man enquired, obviously revelling in his pal’s discomfort.

‘Warm?’ he shrieked. ‘Me bloody arse is on fire!’

‘You must’ve activated the bubblebum device,’ said City Man, obviously enjoying himself. ‘It’s to enhance your comfort. Everyone else loves it.’

‘Bubblebum, my arse!’ he yelled rather ingenuously. ‘I don’t see the point of a car like this. It wouldn’t be much use for transporting sheep.’

City Man smiled to himself.

‘So where are you two Poms from?’ he asked, apparently bored with taking the piss out of his mate.

Roy, as is his way, answered the question in some detail and before long we were deep in conversation. City Man continued to propel his vehicle at an alarming speed and before we knew it we were back in Auchenflower.

Immediately we headed for the Regatta bar on the riverbank that had already been established as our local.

Australians love sitting outside having a few beers and I guess Australian beer suits their weather as well as their palate. However, for real ale lovers it was never going to hit the spot.

The beer was always served at a very low temperature so often the taste was frozen out. At the Regatta Inn we found a way around this. We soon developed the habit of ordering a jug with two glasses so that in the intense Australian heat it at least had a chance to warm up a bit before we drank it. However, every brand we tried, and we tried most of them, seemed to us to lack any real flavour. On the positive side, the beer was so strong we soon stopped thinking about the taste!

One evening at the Pig and Whistle, the Barmy Army HQ, Roy and I were, not for the first time, bemoaning the lack of ale when an Australian guy overheard us.

'You're just drinking the wrong stuff, boys. You need to drink the local brew!' he told us.

Was this salvation at last? Apparently unbeknown to us some master brewer, hidden from the view of tourists, was producing beer to die for right here in Brisbane. Eagerly we sought the identity of the ale in question.

'Just look up to heaven, mate!'

Our eyes followed his and there on the top of a very tall building, lighting up the night sky, was the immortal signature of the local brew: 'XXXX'. With a feeling of horror mixed with acute disappointment, we realised that the local brew of Brisbane was Castlemaine XXXX! We knew this stuff from home and neither of us could think of any beer that we liked less.

Likeable as they are, the Australians do not score highly on sense of humour. By that I am not wishing to imply that

they do not like a laugh or a joke, because they clearly do. However, their understanding of the more subtle British humour is sadly lacking. At the end of the Brisbane Test England were on the end of a fierce drubbing. Nevertheless the England fans, led by the Barmy Army, continued to laugh and sing. When Billy Cooper, the Barmy Army's famous trumpeter put his instrument to his lips, the Australian fans did not know what to expect. As he gave a particularly plaintive rendition of 'The Last Post' the England fans fell about laughing while the Aussies looked on completely bemused.