

Scyld Berry

DISAPPEARING  
WORLD



The 18 First-Class  
Cricket Counties

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# Derbyshire

‘THERE IS no finer county in England than Derbyshire,’ Jane Austen declared in *Pride and Prejudice*. More than two centuries later, her argument remains tenable.

Since Austen’s time indeed the Peak District has become finer still, and for more people, because mass trespassing on Kinder Scout in the 1930s made it the beacon of freedom for fell-walkers. Chatsworth, the inspiration for Mr Darcy’s estate, has been further extended, both House and gardens; and Dovedale is still as beautiful as it sounds. If in future more people prefer to holiday at home than abroad, Buxton and Matlock Spa may even become fashionable again, staging ballroom dances of which Jane herself would approve.

The view of Derbyshire from Lord’s, however, is not perhaps so affectionate as that of our most famous novelist. Before the pandemic, the ECB said that in ten years’ time not all 18 first-class counties would exist in their current form – and when their strategists in the St John’s Wood offices are debating, we can imagine their eyes focussed on Derbyshire, and perhaps Leicestershire, as their index fingers hover over the ‘delete’ button. Of county grounds, only the Oval and Lord’s are in closer proximity than Derby and Trent Bridge, a dozen miles away in Nottingham, while Derbyshire’s membership, around 1,200, might be the lowest in the country.

Popular imagination too finds something unattractive about Derby and Derbyshire, as if they were synonyms for dourness. Collieries have closed; our stock image, rather than the Peak District, is of Belper or Bolsover; and the county has an image of industrial decline even though Rolls-Royce is based in Derby, which claims to have a higher proportion of graduates than any other English city. Those baggy caps which Derbyshire cricketers wore, like a poor man's version of the Australian baggy green, only added to the dour impression. From Sheffield we looked south, and down:

*Derbyshire born, Derbyshire bred,  
Strong in the arm, thick in the head.*

The reality, however, in cricket too, is brighter than one might suspect. Derbyshire have won the County Championship, which Northamptonshire and Somerset have not: they did it in 1936, with home-grown players, when county cricket was a far more level playing field. They have never won the T20 title, but they won the 60-over NatWest Trophy in 1981; and the 40-over Sunday League in 1990 and the 55-over Benson and Hedges Cup in 1993. Their pace attack under Kim Barnett's captaincy was as robust as it was when they claimed their Championship title.

Depending on your definition of 'produce', it can be argued that Derbyshire through the ages have produced as many pace bowlers for England as any other county, and they keep on surfacing, like miners of yore after a shift underground: when a Lions team is announced it could well include a Sam Connors or George Scrimshaw. More surprisingly, it can be argued that more top wicketkeepers have played for Derbyshire than for any other county bar Kent: it has not only been into the gloves of Bob Taylor that the ball has melted. Derbyshire has resources, in addition to the natural finery of its scenery: can they be maximised?

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A personal interest has to be admitted. When I was about 12, I would take the train from Sheffield to Chesterfield then walk through the town past the crooked spire – I had heard, if not fully comprehended, the joke that it had bent when a virgin was married in the church and would straighten when another one was – to Queen's Park.

A wooden bench beneath the trees of this sylvan setting was a world from my normal upbringing on the terraces of Bramall Lane.

Derbyshire cricket, in truth, still tended to the dour side, before overseas players could be registered with immediate effect and without two years of residence, starting in 1968. While Nottinghamshire, down the road, signed the greatest post-war cricketer, Garfield Sobers, Derbyshire and Yorkshire did not sign any 'bloody foreigners' – to descend to the language of the day – for that first 'open' season. In 1970, however, Derbyshire relented and made what was, by their standards, an exotic signing.

When England made their last Test tour of South Africa, I heard more about Chris Wilkins and how he used to run down the pitch in the face of fast bowlers like Mike Procter, Garth le Roux and Vintcent van der Bijl, and hit them for six back over their heads – all without a helmet. Wilkins was a dasher as batsman and person. Peter Kirsten, who was soon to follow Wilkins as Derbyshire's overseas player, could be rated the best batsman the county has had, but 'Wilkins, from South Africa, gave the batting a lustre it had never possessed in post-war years,' *Wisden* recorded. 'He was the most successful newcomer in the history of Derbyshire cricket.' Wilkins could also keep wicket, or bowl pace, and was a 'gun fielder' in the covers: he would have made a mint in franchise cricket. Having played many shots, Wilkins was reported to have shot himself.

I have to admit to a second soft spot, beyond Queen's Park. At my Sheffield school was a boy called Arthur Morton, whose grandfather – of the same name – had been one of Derbyshire's most stalwart all-rounders. In 1920 Derbyshire had the worst record of any first-class county ever: they played 18, lost 17, and one match was abandoned. Northamptonshire went through several seasons in the 1930s without a victory but no county has been defeated in such a high proportion of Championship matches; and it was because they had only two decent players, Sam Cadman and Morton.

Cadman and Morton not only opened the bowling in 1920, they did almost the whole of it. Morton took 89 wickets and Cadman 58, both at 20 runs each; nobody else took more than ten. Then they had to pad up and coax their team-mates to make half a total. Nobody apart from them reached 300 runs that season, except the captain Leonard Oliver, who scored 170 in one innings. Otherwise, even though they averaged only 15 apiece, Cadman and Morton were Derbyshire's two best batsmen as well.

After watching a game at Trent Bridge with my mother, on the way back to Nottingham station, I had found a copy of the 1921 *Wisden* in a second-hand bookshop in Arkwright Street and lent it to Arthur Morton, who took it home to read about his grandfather, who had pre-deceased. I could see the family trait which the grandson had inherited: stockiness and a big backside, the ideal physique if you had to earn your living by walking through galleries of a non-artistic kind, the physique advocated by someone else who escaped the mines by playing cricket, Fred Trueman. Against Somerset, for instance, Morton opened the bowling and bowled throughout their first innings (36.4 overs, 20 maidens, 37 runs and eight wickets), then did the same in their second, for another 29 consecutive overs, until the game was lost.

## DERBYSHIRE

Derbyshire's last home game in 1920, against Leicestershire, was not so much the finale they wanted as the epitome of their season. Morton opened the batting with Cadman, and scored 105, carrying his bat. Then he opened the bowling, with Cadman, and bowled 49 overs of medium pace. When Derbyshire batted a second time, Cadman and Morton scored 35 runs – out of a total of 53. Derbyshire lost to Leicestershire by an innings. It might have been a sombre end-of-season dinner, and the awards ceremony brief.

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Atop the all-time list of Derbyshire's bowlers, in every sense, is Les Jackson. He was not only *the* Derbyshire bowler; he was *the* English deck bowler. He was a miner from the age of 16, through the Second World War, and learned how to bowl in the Whitwell colliery team until he turned pro aged 27. He ran in close to the stumps, slightly round-arm, so the ball came down the line of your middle stump and there was not much room for manoeuvre thereafter, especially after it had jagged one way or the other off the seam. It is no coincidence the thigh pad became part of the English batsman's kit during Jackson's heyday in the 1950s.

Given the surfaces he needed by the Derby groundsmen Walter Goodyear, Jackson took 1,670 first-class wickets for his county at only 17.11 each. His long fingers could also shape the new ball away. Many seasons he conceded less than two an over – and one of those runs might have come off an inside or outside edge. He played for England in 1949 and 1961, but there was a case for Jackson playing every home Test from 1949 to 1961, alongside Fred Trueman and Brian Statham. He should also have gone to Australia in 1950/51, but England's *eminence grise*, Gubby Allen, did not want another northern pro, especially a miner, so the selectors opted for John Warr (who averaged 281 in the Test series,



with the ball unfortunately). If Jackson had been given a tour of Australia at a still-formative age, would he have altered his method, raised his release point, and found an extra yard? But then other 80mph bowlers, like James Anderson in 2010/11 or South Africa's Vernon Philander, did not have to speed up to succeed in Australia.

The one time I saw Jackson bowl was when he came out of retirement for a Sunday game against the International Cavaliers. It was at Queen's Park on a lovely afternoon and the ground was packed to see the local legend. Barry Richards opened for the Cavaliers, while Les bowled his allotment straight through with barely a run scored. Knowing Richards a little, I guess he did the decent thing and let Jackson bowl without going after him; yet it was still a master craftsman at work, going through his paces. You would not have wanted to be an 'abdominal protector' when he was bowling.

Josh Paxton, from Ilkeston, was the first pace bowler in Derbyshire's annals. He took 40 wickets in his six games in the mid-19th century against the All England XI, who banded together to play round the country as professionals, and were therefore far and away the best cricket team in England or the world. William Bestwick was so tough he opened the bowling for Derbyshire with his son in the 1920s; Bill Copson and Alf Pope were key to that Championship title in 1936, with younger brother George Pope to emerge the following year; Cliff Gladwin and Harold Rhodes partnered Jackson; Alan Ward was the fastest in the land around 1970; Mike Hendrick had something of Fred Trueman about his action and glower; Derbyshire gave Devon Malcolm his chance. Such great West Indian bowlers as Michael Holding and Ian Bishop chose Derby as their overseas home. Shacklock, back in Victorian times, is said to have inspired Conan Doyle with the name for his detective.

Top bowlers need top wicketkeepers and Derbyshire have produced them, although again the England selectors have not used them as often as they could have, perhaps because their batting was not the same standard. Both William Storer and Joe Humphries kept for England before World War One. Storer was so versatile that he not only played for Derby County, and kept wicket in six Tests for England, and scored almost 13,000 first-class runs at 28, he also took 232 wickets with leg spin! When Derbyshire's game against Nottinghamshire at Chesterfield was abandoned in 1920 without a ball being bowled, it was Humphries' benefit match and therefore a financial disaster.

Harry Elliott took over and missed one match – one single match – from 1920 to 1927; and contributed to their Championship title by not conceding a bye in the 25 innings completed by their opponents. George Dawkes admittedly came from Leicestershire originally, but still: of the 25 wicketkeepers who have made 1,000 first-class dismissals, three played for Derbyshire in Elliott, Dawkes and, prince of them all, Bob Taylor. 'Chat', the first England player to give me an interview on my first England tour (of Pakistan in late 1977) still stands – or squats – at the top of the all-time list with the mind-boggling total of 1,649 dismissals.

If you never saw Taylor in action, imagine Jamie Foster of Essex, or a shorter version of Ben Foakes. His feet were weightless, his pads light as air, his agility of footwork seemed to know no bounds; and every ball of an over would, at some stage, melt into his gloves, because he had the essential quality of the wicketkeeper who is born not made: he wanted the ball.

Taylor was a pioneer of the new English style. Traditionally keepers had not bothered to catch balls going down the leg side; that was the bowler's fault. Then Godfrey Evans threw himself to take the leg-side ball, at least if it was an England

Test or a big crowd were watching. Taylor, following the example of Keith Andrew at Northampton, developed his footwork to move down the leg side, unobtrusively, without diving, without showmanship: hence the saying that a keeper is never noticed when performing well. Nowadays, of course, the keeper has to combine quick footwork with the ability to throw himself at full stretch, thereby maximising his span.

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Chris Wilkins was not, by any means, the first overseas player to represent Derbyshire. The first English team to tour the West Indies did so in 1895 – a good amateur side of Blues and MCC members – and they played in the Windward Island of St Vincent, in the capital Kingstown. I have on my desk (it is a bit cluttered) a photograph of the match staged there, taken by Morton Bros and Co, Kingstown. It was played at Victoria Park and shows a large crowd – with every spectator, every man and woman, wearing a hat or bonnet – as they stand and watch a stiff-legged batsman in a sola topee against a background of verdant hills.

St Vincent scored 139, the English team 63. The local fast bowler Charles Ollivierre proved too much of a handful for the tourists. He is often stated to have been born in St Vincent, but the Ollivierres came from the nearby island of Bequia, where they worked – at least seasonally – in whaling; and his birthplace has been revised to Bequia. When the first West Indian team toured England in 1900, Ollivierre was one of the black contingent who did the bowling and carried the bags. He must have been injured, because he ceased to bowl during the tour, when the team struggled in completely alien conditions. Yet by the end the most successful batsman to emerge was Charles Ollivierre, who took part in double-century opening partnerships against Leicestershire and Surrey. *Wisden* reported that he ‘has

strokes all round the wicket, and in some ways reminds one of Ranji'. Outstanding praise.

To that point, the only overseas players in county cricket had been a handful of Australians, all with familial ties to England, the wonder of the age that was Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji, and a Parsi doctor who played one game for Middlesex, M.E. Pavri. But the cotton-mill magnate from Glossop who captained Derbyshire needed cricketers to lift his county off the bottom of the Championship table so, during that summer, Samuel Hill-Wood contracted Ollivierre to undertake two years of qualification by residence, then play for Derbyshire – *as an amateur*.

By using the amateur changing room, rather than the professionals', it seems that Ollivierre thereby avoided racial abuse. Rumour has it that Derbyshire's wicketkeeper William Storer was the outspoken professional on this subject, and he had 'previous'. It has recently emerged, from Australian newspaper sources, that he was reprimanded during the fifth Test of 1897/98 for saying to one of Australia's players: 'You are a cheat and you know it.'

A couple of sepia photographs of Ollivierre show a taller batsman than Ranji, with hands far apart, the right one well down the handle, and thus well-equipped to hit leg-side: this was the hitting zone which Ranji had been first to pioneer, in opposition to off-side orthodoxy, but he normally leg-glanced along the ground. Ollivierre looks lean, whippy, rubbery. His physique had enabled him to bowl quick and work in the whaling industry: you can see him throwing a long harpoon. Even in the 1980s when I visited Bequia, and the island was still allowed by the United Nations to catch three whales per year by traditional methods, the boat was one that Captain Ahab would have used, manned by oars, the harpooner standing in the prow braced to hurl. The cricketer growing up with such manual skills might well have

been the first to introduce to England the strokes which we now call ‘whippage’.

Having qualified for Derbyshire, Ollivierre played in what was described by the *Daily Telegraph* as ‘the most astonishing victory in the history of cricket’; and only in the Ashes Test of 2019 at Headingley was it unarguably surpassed. It was staged in 1904 at Queen’s Park, Chesterfield, which always seems to have had a quicker pitch than Derby. Essex totalled 595 and for Derbyshire, in reply, Ollivierre scored 229. In his definitive work on county cricket, *Summer’s Crown*, Stephen Chalke quotes a newspaper account: ‘He [Ollivierre] imparts into his late cut an extraordinary amount of energy. Few men affect a more commanding pose at the wicket.’ We can see Ollivierre not merely strutting, he was flying. After Essex had collapsed in their second innings for 87, Ollivierre hit an unbeaten 92 against the clock to win the biggest of turnarounds by nine wickets.

It was not to be the start of great things; rather, it was the closest that Ollivierre came to a peak in the Peak District. Born in 1876, he was developing eye trouble by the time he was 30. Sir Samuel Hill-Wood, as he became, no doubt fixed him up with the best opticians. The first England Test cricketer to wear spectacles, Dick Young, was soon to do so, in 1907/08, but there might have been more to Ollivierre’s affliction than short-sightedness. He soon retired, after a fruitless season in 1907, to live in Pontefract on the pension Hill-Wood provided. In the 1980s, after writing about Ollivierre, I received two letters from a Dutch cricketer of note who said that Ollivierre had spent his summers in the Netherlands, where he was a kind coach, before he died in 1949 – the first of a very distinguished line of players who went from the West Indies into county cricket and enlivened it.

Hill-Wood turned his attention from cricket to football. He signed up enough professional footballers to take Glossop

into the second division, then the first, before settling on being the chairman of Arsenal after the First World War. Arsenal's crowds, at any rate in 1920, were probably larger than Derbyshire's.

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'Few men have done so much for cricket.' This is some epitaph to be accorded by *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*. This was said about another of Derbyshire's Taylors, William Taylor, who served as the club's secretary from 1908 to 1959, spanning two world wars, in the first of which he was badly wounded. No county has had a secretary who has served so long as his 51 years and it was his planning that led to that 1936 Championship title when, to lend continuity and stability, old Sam Cadman was coach.

As a lad William Taylor had been a medium-paced all-rounder, good enough to play a handful of games for the county, not good enough to become a regular. Instead, he carved his own niche. He acted as scorer for Derbyshire's away matches and, somehow, as 12th man as well. He was the son of a businessman who manufactured artificial fertiliser, and this knowledge was not wasted when it came to caring for the County Ground. Derby County FC, which had been founded by the county cricket club, had already transferred to the Baseball Ground before Taylor was appointed secretary, but there was still much to learn about the embryonic science of cricket groundsmanship. Under Taylor, Derbyshire enjoyed more continuity in the shape of Walter Goodyear, whose career as head groundsman at the Racecourse Ground in Derby spanned 44 years, but as he had already been head groundsman at Chesterfield for six years, let us round him up to half a century. It was Goodyear who designed the pitches for Derbyshire's seamers, both in the 1930s, when the Championship triumph was the climax, and for Les Jackson.

The strategy to win that title was not too crude or over the top in favouring seam. Derbyshire always played a spinner: Tommy Mitchell, their maverick wrist-spinner, took 121 wickets in 1936. He was a coalminer too, but he used his strength to rip the ball both ways. In this sense he was a forerunner of the Afghan wrist-spinners who have emerged on the T20 circuit: brought up in a highly physical culture, not a genteel or traditional cricket one, almost unable to bat, but able to rip through a side in a match-winning spell.

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Although Derby County FC moved out, the horses stayed, as the old name of the Racecourse Ground implies. William Taylor no doubt warned the young pros, like Cadman and Morton, about the shadier side of horse racing but they must have been too naive to listen. In his autobiography *A Cricket Pro's Lot*, Fred Root tells a merry tale about the impact of the racing community on the Derbyshire players. In the 1920s Root went on to play for Worcestershire and England, but he had been born in Derbyshire and started his first-class career there, hence the schoolboys' delight when George Beet and Root played in the same side.

Jockeys and stablehands would mill around the Racecourse, Root relates, and sometimes join the cricketers in the nets. One day the Derbyshire pros gave a plausible fellow one pound each – half their week's wage in some cases – to place on some 'guaranteed' winners and fixed the time to meet him back at the nets after the races. He was never seen again.

Even today, more than half a century on, Taylor's legacy is a well-run ground. Touring teams have nothing to complain about during a three-day match against Derbyshire. The re-orientation of the square by 90 degrees has worked, as it has at Old Trafford. Outdoor nets are splendid; so too the indoor

school with its various surfaces, where pace bowlers can fit in three-quarters of their run-up. If all is functional rather than scenic at Derby, annual relief comes at Chesterfield where Queen's Park continues to be glorious. I fondly remember Derbyshire playing at Buxton too, as did visiting teams, given the residential home for nurses next door.

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In 2015 Derbyshire switched from an old-fashioned committee structure to a board composed of the great and good, from instability towards continuity. Coaches had come and gone, including Kim Barnett, who had not only scored the most centuries and runs for the county but captained them to that 1981 trophy. At one stage four head coaches had reigned in four years. But the appointment of a wise old bird from Zimbabwe, David Houghton, who had been round the county traps at Worcester and Middlesex, prompted longer-term planning; and Houghton's successor, Mickey Arthur, brought even more energy to reviving Derbyshire.

A new feature, born of financial prudence, is that Derbyshire's batting coach and bowling coach work with all age groups, from under-11s upwards through the academy ranks into the first team. And why not? Why change your mentor just because you are 18 and have joined the staff? A coach has to know his pupil thoroughly. The former fast bowler Steve Kirby had a plum job as MCC head coach, but in this context you can see why he transferred to Derby for his first county assignment.

'For years we talked about producing our own players but it's been lip-service,' Houghton said. 'We got into the first division in 2013 [Derbyshire's only season in Division One after the Championship was split into two divisions in 2000] with local players who had come through our youth development programme. Give them peace and stability then



reap the rewards five to ten years down the line, that was my aim for the club.’

The county reached out to Repton, when a cricketing headmaster took charge, and Trent College, and Denstone. Houghton planned for all the county players and age-group teams to have a day out at each school, before Covid came, and then he returned to his native country to coach Zimbabwe.

Derbyshire is not synonymous with T20. In almost 20 years they have reached the quarter-finals only twice. The last occasion was in 2017, when they were drawn at home to Hampshire. Opening the bowling with the off breaks of Wayne Madsen, the old faithful who sustained Derbyshire’s batting for at least a decade, would have been a good move against a traditional English opener; against the Pakistan all-rounder Shahid Afridi it was a disaster. Looking down from above, as a T20 player before his time, Charles Ollivierre might have put his hand up for the opening over to bowl quick yorkers instead.

Derbyshire’s local league structure is sound, even if totals err on the low side. Their indoor school offers free use and free coaching to state schools, which is the sort of initiative that every county should have. Astroturf pitches have been installed in inner-city parks, which is important for Derby’s Asian community.

But then there are the depredations – when counties which own Test match grounds, like Nottinghamshire and Surrey, come calling. Derbyshire had unearthed a very promising fast bowler from Stoke-on-Trent called James Taylor and invested in him and his elder brother Tom. Yes, the Taylors keep on coming – but going too. James Taylor made his first-class debut when he was 16 and dismissed the West Indian opening batsman Kraigg Brathwaite. He went through the Derbyshire academy, was given a two-

year contract in 2017 ... and went off to the Oval, signed by Surrey.

There are financial compensations for Derbyshire, of course, if one of their former youngsters goes all the way into the England side, but he will not be around to inspire local youth or attract more Derbyshire members. This is the way of the world, the business world, but not consistent with cricket's traditional values, where the playing field should be level. Derbyshire finally found an opening batsman who could score 1,000 runs in a Championship season. It takes years of investment to produce one of those: in this case Ben Slater, born in Chesterfield. And the moment he 'made it' in 2018, Slater was signed by Nottinghamshire. All the hard work, none of the rewards.

Ross Whiteley was another who made his first-class debut for Derbyshire – where he could now have been one of their T20 stars – before preferring Worcestershire then Hampshire. Far-sightedly, Derbyshire awarded a four-year contract to the teenaged Matt Critchley, a wrist-spinner who could bat, and arranged for him to be mentored in Sydney by Stuart MacGill. After Critchley had scored exactly 1,000 runs in the first-class season of 2021 it was Essex that came calling.

Above and beyond the natural finery, Derbyshire is a county of resources. After a hiatus, they are making the most of them. Provided they do, they deserve to survive; and surely we owe it to Jane that they do. For, had she lived beyond the age of 41, she might have visited her favourite county again, and attended a village cricket match – somewhere near Bakewell, perhaps, while visiting Chatsworth – and fallen into conversation with the fine-leg fielder while walking round the boundary under her parasol, and accepted his offer of a drink after the game and, indeed, his subsequent proposal.