

JON BERRY



FROM
AZEEM
TO
ASHES

English Cricket's Struggle
with Race and Class



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Chapter 1

Early spring in the Caribbean. It's 29/3 again and Root's captaincy is put out of its misery

*Be not afeard. The isle is full of
noises, Sounds, and sweet airs, that give
delight, and hurt not.*

Caliban: *The Tempest*

IF ONLY the isle really was full of noises. Unfortunately not, as far as cricket was concerned. It hasn't always been that way, of course. But in the early spring of 2022, there were precious few sweet airs to delight anyone.

On 8 March, in contrast to the dank gloom of an English afternoon, captains Kraigg Brathwaite and Joe Root stepped into the Antiguan sunshine and tossed the coin, resulting in England's decision to bat first. Of the dozens of WhatsApp groups of which I'm either an active member or from which I can't be arsed to unsubscribe, one is composed of friends who follow our twin passions of cricket and football. When it comes to England's Test team, we have a long-standing trope: wherever England are in the world, they're 29/3. At

about 2.40 on that grey afternoon, Root played a sort of half-hearted leave at a decent inswinger from Kemar Roach, turned in stunned dismay to see his off stump pinged back and trooped off disconsolately, leaving England 27/3. Dan Lawrence and Ben Stokes eked out two more singles and I reached for my phone but had been easily beaten to it.

What did the home crowd make of this disastrous, if inevitable, start by the visitors? It's a meaningless question. As the England captain made his sheepish way back to the pavilion, there was no barbed jeering, no raucous send-off, no gleeful flag-waving. The guys charged with pumping out forced jollity from the decks and speakers remained stubbornly – almost respectfully – silent. TV camera operators scoured the crowd to find the occasional, isolated local face, possibly waving a flag or raising a can of drink in salute. But Root's dismissal was, for the most part, met with the same sullen, grudging disappointment had it been at Headingley.

Not that the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in North Sound was empty. Far from it. Most of the fixed seating was occupied and the open spaces on the grass terracing, side-on to the wicket, was gradually filling up as foolhardy sun worshippers staked their claim for the day. Eagle-eyed telly watchers or those like me who've been fortunate enough to watch cricket there, could see the local moms setting up the barbecues, whose fare becomes increasingly irresistible as the effect of Banks's beer kicks in during the day. There are plenty of people watching – it's just that most of them have travelled 4,000 miles to get there.

In the past, I've been one of their number. Despite the hype, most of them (us) are not so much barmy army, more like the reserve unit of Dad's Army. Old, white,

retired, financially comfortable and, for the main part, unapologetically conservative in outlook and politics. Once they've been shipped there by travel companies, they're cosseted from hotel to air-conditioned minibus to an evening with Aggers. It's true that there is a less genteel section of England followers than these county stalwarts, but, broadly speaking, both they and this paler constituency represent the lovers of the traditional and the familiar in the game. They'll have paid good money to be at this bland Lego block of a stadium set slap in the middle of the countryside and their dollars will be happily pocketed by locals.

All the same – and numerous conversations bear this out – most of them would prefer to be some seven miles away in the centre of the capital, St John's, watching their cricket in the happily ramshackle Rec – Antigua's legendary Recreation Ground. It was here in 1986 that Viv Richards smashed a Test match century from 56 balls, shredding an England bowling attack that included his mate, Ian Botham – with whom he can be seen exchanging observations of an indeterminate nature at various points during his exploits.

To call Viv Richards the island's favoured son might be a cliché, but there's no doubting its accuracy. In the centre of St John's sits the island's small museum. It is dominated by the interwoven themes of sugar and slavery, the two elements that should make any visitor take stock while enjoying the lavish and fertile beauty of this beach-fringed tourist haven. There's also a bit of geological explanation but apart from that, it's about Viv.

There may be a dozen cricketers who could lay claim to being the ultimate icon of West Indian dominance in the 1980s and 1990s, but few could question the inspirational value of Richards, whose very bearing issued a challenge to

his opponents, both sporting and political. The broadcaster and campaigner Darcus Howe, himself the nephew of C.L.R. James, the doyen of Caribbean writers on the game's correspondence with politics, wrote that 'to see Viv Richards walking out to bat at the Oval, which was just down the road from where I lived in Brixton, without a helmet (no matter how fast the bowler was) and wearing his Rasta armbands of gold, green and red, was inspirational.' Richards spoke of how he batted 'for equal rights' and, despite the offer of life-changing sums, was never tempted by so-called 'rebel' tours designed to normalise apartheid in South Africa.

Eight years after his record-breaking century, since superseded by Brendon McCullum and equalled by Misbah-ul-Haq, the Rec was witness to Brian Lara reaching the highest individual score of 375 before going on, a decade later, to overtake Matthew Hayden's subsequent 380 and reach 400. Both of Lara's innings were against England. One can only imagine the weary dread with which that nation's bowlers would have looked forward to encounters there. Their mood would not have been improved by the utterly delirious accolades afforded every boundary by the patrons at St John's – a crowd markedly different from the puffing, perspiring tourists at the future North Sound.

The newer ground – functional, practical and sterile apart from the moms' barbecues – had been built to accommodate games for the 2007 World Cup. An early 'benefactor' of China's belt-and-road investments across the globe, it was constructed at a cost of US\$60m. Stark and unloved, such stadia are now all too familiar to football fans uprooted from communities, chip shops and boozers and dragooned to anonymous prefabs in uniform retail parks. And yet, in 2009, unrefined and indecorous St John's, boisterous home

to Chickie's Disco and Gravy the cross-dresser, had the last laugh.

On 13 February Andrew Strauss and a lithe Chris Gayle made their way gingerly to the pitch prepared for the start of the second Test at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium. Although the strip seemed sound, if a touch green, it was clear that neither captain was exactly striding across an outfield that appeared to be largely composed of sand extracted from a nearby beach. Gayle won the toss and asked England to bat. What followed was as comical as it was embarrassing. Jerome Taylor took the new ball and, where one might have expected him to charge in with full fury, he set off like a man plugging through slush in ill-fitting wellingtons, his normally elegant run-up reduced to a stumbling shamble. It took just ten balls for all concerned to decide that the arena was most definitely not fit for purpose and the game was abandoned.

Any follower of cricket is acutely aware that it's a game whose administrators have rarely enjoyed a reputation for being either nimble or imaginative. Not so in the hours that followed the North Sound debacle. Antigua found itself home to two cricket teams and the accompanying media. In contrast to the festival days of Viv's whirlwind knock, when relatively few Brits embraced the atmosphere of the rickety double-decker in the Rec, the island was awash with cricket fans carrying plenty of good folding money. For once, the obvious solution was embraced: back to St John's and the Rec. The move was brilliantly captured in the affectionate observation of journalist, Paul Weaver, who was following the tour for the *Guardian*. 'Anyone asking himself whether the ARG will be ready for today's hastily arranged Test match between West Indies and England should really know better,' he wrote. 'Of course it won't be. It wasn't ready for

its first Test match in 1981 and it never suggested anything remotely resembling organised preparedness over the next 25 years, right up to its last Test match in 2006.’ As it turned out, the Rec served up a compelling game of cricket, with the hosts holding out for a nervous draw after a game of some 1,500 runs and 36 wickets.

In between Lara’s 400, a brief excursion for some World Cup games at North Sound and the return to St John’s, the island had also been witness to one of the game’s more bizarre episodes. As cricket braced itself for the groundbreaking impact of the Indian Premier League (IPL), Texan fantasist, Allen Stanford, currently residing in the Coleman Penitentiary in Florida where he will be for the foreseeable future, decided that cricket was just the thing he needed to enhance his portfolio. He set about the business of dangling huge sums of money – which he didn’t have – in front of credulous and greedy cricketers and their administrators. It didn’t end well.

Stanford had acquired the old Airport Cricket Ground in Antigua to use as the base for his adventures. When he landed a helicopter at Lord’s with a bag full of fake dollars in 2008, it was entirely in keeping with a man who was there to set up a \$20m one-off game between England and his own Superstar XI – a game which turned out to be a complete dud with a ten-wicket victory for the latter. Prior to the action, he had attempted to exercise a kind of cricketing *droit du seigneur* by flirting with England players’ wives, a misstep for which he later apologised. By that time, he had already been appointed as a Knight Commander of the Order of the Nation of Antigua and Barbuda, an honour of which he was stripped a few months after the \$20m game debacle and the revelation that he was skint and always had been.

To be fair to Stanford, he'll have a tale or two to tell his cellmates, with whom he will share the common complaint that he was framed. On conviction he lamented that his demise 'was caused by wrongful prosecution – an over-zealous and wrongful prosecution'. While this may be familiar territory for the inmates at Coleman, his chosen area of enterprise may be rather more baffling. 'Cricket is not a very big sport in prison,' he observed. Yet, however comedic his Mitty-like attempts to play on the big stage may have been, he was certainly reading the runes about cricket's potential for generating the down-and-dirty dollars which would be driving the short, increasingly dominant, form of the game for the coming decades.

It's probable that much of this history of the island's cricketing heritage would have been known to the paying public in North Sound in March 2022 as Jonny Bairstow marshalled the lower order around his solid century to take England to 311 and a position from which they might have won the game but timidly failed to do so. Having paid good money to watch the longest form of the game, the tension between tradition and the cash cow that preserves it would have been familiar to them all. While most would have been all too content to be sitting in the sunshine enjoying post-Covid liberty, away from Europe's grotesque circus of politics and war, as lovers of the game they'd have been sharply aware that cricket in general was teetering on swampy ground.

The initial shock waves of Azeem Rafiq's revelations and what they exposed about the game may have dissipated temporarily by March 2022, but in many ways a snapshot, literally, of the ground on that Antiguan afternoon would have been illuminating. A good place to start is with the good burghers occupying the best seats.

As already mentioned, I've been of their number. I'm enculturated. I take a flag bearing my name and that of my wife, embellished with the emblem of the football team that has been disappointing me for over 60 years. One of the reasons I take it is so that friends and family can gleefully text me to say that they've seen it. But when it comes to actually spotting me, needles and haystacks don't come into it. I know because I've tried to pick out acquaintances who I know to be in attendance. What identifying features might we be looking for? Ah, yes. White, late middle-age, greying hair, visible if not covered by straw hat or – racy devil – baseball cap, glasses, white polo shirt, possibly half-dozing. What could be more easily identifiable?

If there's homogeneity here, is there more diversity among the players they've come to see? In one respect, the XI who line up for England on this day present a surprise. An oft-cited reason for the small pool in which the game fishes for players is its lack of traction in state schools. Yet from this particular team, only two players – Zak Crawley and Jonny Bairstow – were educated exclusively at private establishments. The captain, Joe Root, moved into the private sector in his teens. The remaining eight all attended state schools, although their biographies clearly reveal that their talent for the game was nurtured at club and county level. In many cases, it is also obvious that strong family links with organised sport will have been the catalyst for their participation outside school. The weighting towards state-educated cricketers in this team is something of an anomaly. In recent years, it has been common for at least half the players in any starting set-up to have been privately educated. The explanation is obvious, but nevertheless I hope the reader will afford me a private intrusion.

I spent the first 30 years of my working life as a schoolteacher, exclusively in the state sector and in comprehensive schools. Apart from my first subject – English, as you may have guessed – I was always happy to help out with running sports teams. When it came to cricket, I was witness to its slow and horrible strangulation in the state sector. Until the mid-80s, I worked in schools which employed ground staff through the local authority. That is, dedicated craftsmen (and it was, as it happens, gender specific) who took time and pride in tending playing fields and for whom the production and maintenance of the cricket square was a source of professional pride. Two deadening factors then intruded and still squat on the game's potential development.

First, grinding annual spending cuts meant that ground staff disappeared to be replaced by careless contractors on tight schedules, allowing for only the most cursory care. Eventually, even the artificial strips brought in to replace real wickets became neglected, overgrown and unusable in any meaningful way. These same spending cuts dictated that cricket equipment, expensive and with a short shelf-life as it passed through so many hands, became another of its victims. Beyond these factors came a school curriculum so obsessed with generating exam results and striving for Ofsted approval, that a time-consuming game, gradually fading from public consciousness and free-to-air TV, became unsupportable and unattractive to pupils and teachers alike.

Such constraints did not, and do not, apply to the private sector. In 2022, *The Cricketer* magazine produced its annual *Schools Guide*. The editor, Huw Turbervill, was keen to praise the schools who had managed to keep the game alive during the pandemic and how it was 'incredibly heartening' to see

how many of them had made a comeback after such a difficult period. Acknowledging some unevenness in the development of the game in schools, Turbervill speaks glowingly of how 'what has been consistent across the spectrum is that the dedication to the game in schools has not only remained unaffected, but [has] increased'. The magazine then goes on to list the top 100 senior schools, the best 50 prep schools and, in a nod to modernity, the top 20 all-girls' schools. You only need to remove one batting glove to count the number of non-private establishments in the full 170.

To be fair to Turbervill and his colleagues at *The Cricketer*, they are fully aware of this unbalanced provision and tackle it as an issue in their columns from time to time. Its April 2019 edition presented some stark figures. Of some 4,169 secondary schools in Britain, 286 are independent. Of the 333 schools that submit results and averages to *Wisden*, 87 are from the state sector. Former player, Simon Hughes, reports on a survey conducted in 2017 which revealed that only 12 per cent of secondary school children played cricket on a proper pitch in a four-week period during the school summer term. Former (private school) teacher and *Times* school cricket correspondent Douglas Henderson bemoans the fact that even in the independent sector, counter-productive exam fever cuts across time available for summer sport.

A drive or stroll past any independent school reveals, at a glance, the superior nature of their grounds and facilities. What is not so immediately obvious is the extent to which these are put to use. There is no mandatory time allocation for physical education for state schools in England, merely a suggestion that two hours a week should be dedicated to it. A 2018 survey by the Youth Sport Trust revealed that this two-hour stipulation is largely honoured in state primary

schools but rarely achieved at secondary level where some 98 minutes' worth of activity is the norm. The results demonstrated a clear downward trend in time allocated for physical activity. When questioned about the reason for this trend, an emphasis on core subjects and the withdrawal of children from PE for 'interventions' in exam-driven subjects are the most frequently cited reasons.

Meanwhile, over in the private sector, a survey conducted two years earlier for the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) revealed a weekly average of 330 minutes played over 40 sports. The report also noted that from the 169 schools that participated, a staggering 1,400 pupils had played for their country across a wide variety of sports. In the distant euphoria following the 2012 London Olympic Games, it was left to the Sutton Trust to point out that one third of GB's medal winners were privately educated, a figure that has remained stubbornly fixed in subsequent Games. Seven per cent of the UK's children go to independent schools.

If the eight fully state-educated players, all of whom were white, who turned out at North Sound represented a slight anomaly in the composition of England's cricket, the nation's footballers consistently hold up a more representative mirror to society. Of the 15 players who took the field for the Euro final at Wembley in July 2021, seven were either black or of mixed heritage. Of the 23-man squad, only one, Tyrone Mings, had been privately educated and that was only a brief, two-year football scholarship at Millfield, something of a breeding ground for sporting success, although not, as scores of lazy editors have learnt to their cost, Ian Botham, who attended Milford Junior School before going on to his local secondary modern and onward to lordly stardom.

So the snapshot at Viv's stadium would have been an illuminating one. A white, well-to-do, ageing set of spectators – many of them stalwarts of their counties and probably reliable supporters of their local clubs – there to watch a team of white cricketers who, even if they hadn't all emerged from private schools, had come through systems patronised by, and familiar to, those who were there to see them. You may think that the following observation may be brusque and unkind stereotyping, but experience tells me that the prevailing manners of the English middle classes at play make it unlikely that conversation in the stands and bars would have been crackling and sparking as they pondered the ways in which the Rafiq affair had put a firecracker under the backside of English cricket. Issues of race and class have a tendency to paralyse this particular constituency. There to watch the start of the red-ball reset and enjoy winter sunshine, they'd have given a wide berth to anyone who wanted to dig into these tangled weeds. And besides, you can't say anything these days, can you?

All of which, admittedly, might be unfair on those who really just did want to watch a bit of cricket in the sun after two miserable and restricted years. Or the minority who were genuinely concerned about the root causes of the game's nagging problems. The unspeakable mess into which English cricket had dug itself hung like a sceptre over proceedings, but live sport is nothing if it not a blinding diversion from the maelstrom of the outside world. This unrepresentative team, followed by a relatively privileged clique in a foreign land, many of whose residents had become indifferent to an expensive and financially inaccessible form of the game, could be unhappily conjoined to stand as a metaphor for cricket's problems. Those problems were manifold and

complex and had been bought to the fore by the egregious treatment of a young man who, in other circumstances, could have been the poster boy for progress and diversity in the English game.