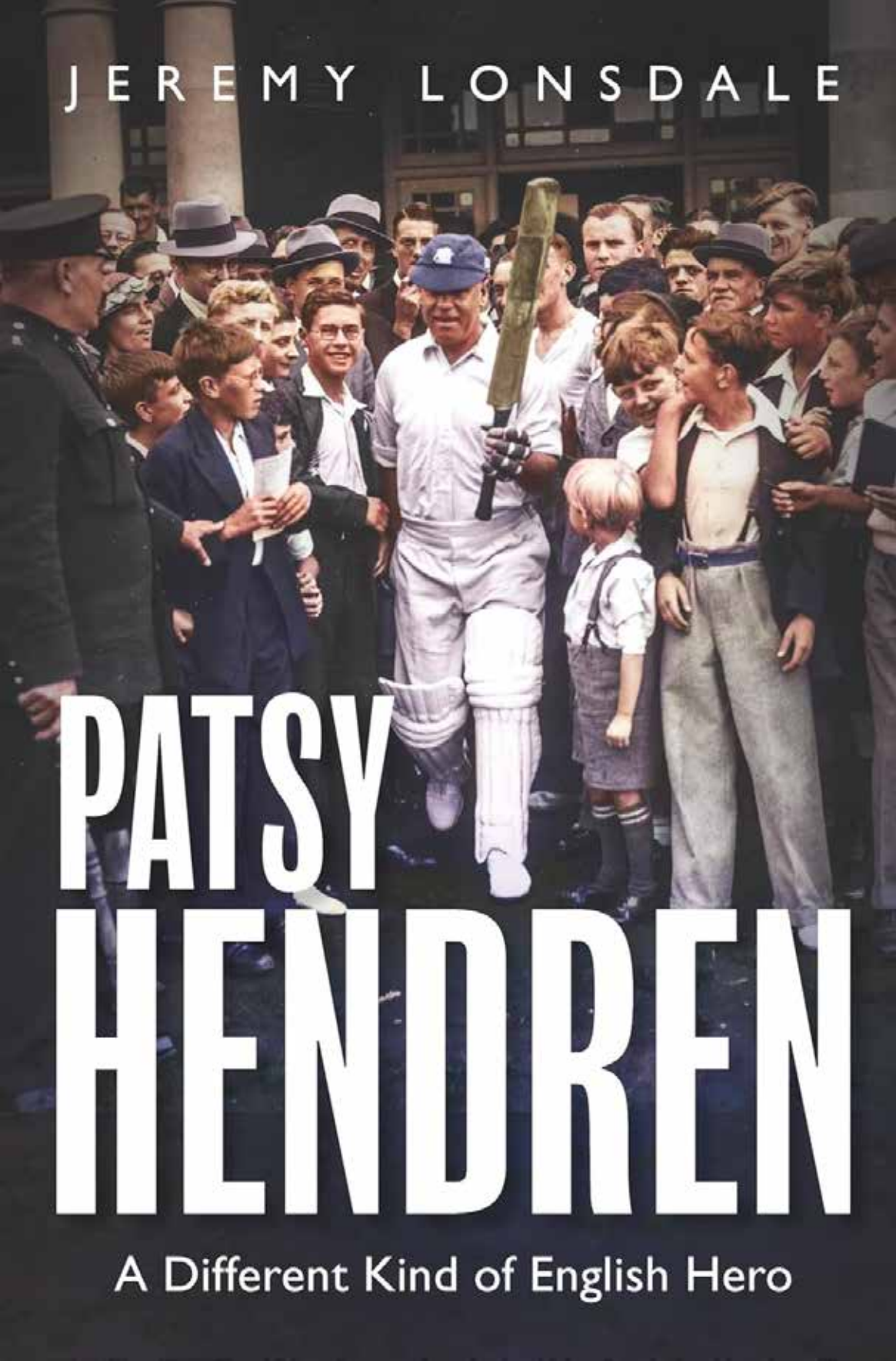
JEREMY LONSDALE



PATSY HENDREN

A Different Kind of English Hero

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Introduction

ON THE evening of Saturday, 23 October 1926, listeners to the British Broadcasting Company's 2LO radio station enjoyed a 90-minute programme of music selected by Middlesex and England cricketer, Elias Henry Hendren, known to millions as 'Patsy'. It was the second such programme hosted by a well-known person unconnected to broadcasting, a reaction to recent criticism of the quality of radio output. Hendren's selections included his own choices as well as those of Lord Hawke and Jack Hobbs among others. Hendren acted as announcer and ended the evening with a 'humorous recitation' of 'The Cricket Club of Red Nose Flat', described as a 'burlesque of cowboy cricket, with revolver shooting as part of the game'.

The size of the audience may have been boosted by the fact that a few hours earlier Hendren had scored four goals, including two penalties, as Brentford thrashed his former club Coventry City 7-3 in a Football League Third Division South fixture. It was his final season of professional football in a long career for the west London club. Only a few weeks earlier, Hendren had ended the cricket season fourth in the national batting averages, made a century against the Australians at Lord's ('my proudest moment'), and been part of an Ashes-winning England side, albeit his selection had generated controversy. He had then reopened the indoor cricket school in Acton he had overseen since 1924, providing instruction to a growing number of recreational and professional cricketers.

All this activity, as well perhaps as the chance of a break from cricket after renewed criticism of his Test match credentials, meant that Hendren turned down an invitation to go on MCC's first-ever tour of India and Ceylon. There was simply too much happening at home to justify being away for six months. A highly popular figure, Hendren's endorsement of various products meant his face appeared in the papers even when he was not starring on the sports field. And such was his fame that a recent general knowledge test for London policemen had included him on a list of notable people about whom examinees were expected to write short notes, along with Mussolini, Trotsky and Mark Twain.

Despite such celebrity, Hendren was exceptionally generous with his time and had long played a valued role in local life around his Ealing home. Shortly after his radio appearance, it was reported that his summer charity cricket match had contributed significantly towards the Mayor of Hammersmith's 'Million Penny Fund' in aid of the West London Hospital. It was also anticipated that he would shortly present prizes to the winners of a local school league and speak at several cricket club dinners over the winter.

This summary of events in late 1926 highlights the full and varied life of Patsy Hendren, one of the most prolific English batsmen ever and one of the finest fielders of his day. Much loved for his humorous antics by crowds around the country and abroad, his life revolved around sport until the late 1950s, by which time he had also been coach at Harrow School and Sussex County Cricket Club (and Butlin's holiday camp at Filey), as well as the Middlesex county scorer from 1953. He retired before the 1960 county season and died in 1962.

Different elements of Hendren's life complemented each other. He juggled 25 full summers with Middlesex with 15 winters of professional football, the fitness, strength and balance that made him an excellent winger for Brentford helping him to be a lightning-fast fielder. At the same time, his devotion to sport and the attendant celebrity were no impediment to a life of

conscientious voluntary service and as a devout and active Roman Catholic. Indeed, his reputation as an entertaining speaker made him a very effective supporter of numerous hospital charities and church building projects.

Despite fame which meant that letters addressed to 'Patsey Hendren, Merry Cricketer, England' still got to him, there was some uncertainty about his precise name. On the sports pages, he was variously E.H. (correct) or E.P. or P. Hendren (incorrect) and he often signed himself 'E Patsy Hendren'. The MCC secretary addressed letters to E.P. Hendren and he was recorded like this in the minutes after he joined the Middlesex committee. Christened 'Elias', he was generally 'Pat' to colleagues and 'Patsy' to the press and public from before the First World War.

He was also referred to as 'a cockney' although he had been born and raised in west London (far from the sound of the bells of St Mary-le-Bow) and was often described as 'Irish', although he had been born in England, like his father and mother. Hendren was very proud of his Irish heritage and particularly enjoyed visits to Australia in the 1920s, where this and his Catholicism were celebrated by the many Australians with Irish roots, and Hendren said he felt among friends. In England, on the other hand, where the relationship with Ireland remained complex and strained, especially immediately after the First World War, and was often avoided in discussion, these characteristics were treated with far less respect. Writer, broadcaster and journalist, Denzil Batchelor, for example, certainly overdid it when he wrote confusingly that Hendren was '*simultaneously* the spirit of Cockney sport – and wholly Irish', had a 'jolly round face, as Irish as a potato', and 'was a Cockney in the field and an Irishman at the crease'.

Nevertheless, Hendren was often England's hope and England's disappointment; the epitome of 'English determination developed to the highest pitch of proficiency by the experience of generations of cricketers', as CLR James put it in 1930. A regular towards the top of the national batting averages for many years, his triumphs

and failures were a routine feature of English cricket conversation during the inter-war period. For many he was English cricket, AG Macdonell, author of the 1933 novel *England, Their England*, calling him the lineal descendant of George Hirst, both of whom 'expressed the rustic, English game'. The writer and journalist Neville Cardus suggested his 'thudding on-drives' and twinkling feet 'express the thoroughly English humour which gathers around the seats near the Tavern'. Ten years after his retirement, one writer described the early English film industry as 'a thing as much native of these islands as the plays of Shakespeare, the music of Purcell, the bowling of Wilfred Rhodes and the impudent batting of Patsy Hendren'. The BBC used Hendren for a talk – 'Playing for England' – during its 1937 Coronation programming, and he featured in a public information film urging the nation to save for the war effort in the alarming days of June 1940.

The England of Patsy Hendren was the expanding suburbs of west and north London such as Ealing, Golders Green and Canons Park, all of which he made his home. It was the England of newly established sports clubs, garden fetes and fundraising for hospitals and churches. And of late-season charity cricket matches, local theatres and music halls, and the increasingly vibrant popular press whose sportswriters cultivated Hendren's image as a sturdy and amiable battler. John Betjeman, that poet of melancholy Englishness and suburbia, once improbably rhymed his name with 'rhododendrons' in fantasising about the tennis-playing Pam ('See the strength of her arm, as firm and hairy as Hendren's'). He was also 'London's pride', the poor boy who became the toast of wealthy St John's Wood. Indeed, Peter Wilson, *Daily Mirror* sportswriter for many years, called him the 'Puck of St John's Wood', a reference to the demon or faerie in English folklore. Other writers considered he played with 'an Elizabethan roistering spirit' and would have made a splendid sea captain.

Yet, while some knew him as the 'Lord of Lord's', others could not comprehend the connection. 'Pat neither looks like Lord's

nor bats like Lord's,' one observer suggested. 'His colleague, Jack Hearne, with his dignified walk and stern face, his straight bat and classical stroke play, is much more "Lord's" than this round, little chubby-faced fellow with the pug Irish nose.' Cardus snobbishly agreed that he could not 'fix Hendren into my notion of Lord's; he is quite indecently provincial in his relish of a thumping boundary.' One Australian newspaper considered that, while an English cricketer, he was 'yet not entirely an Englishman'.

If Hendren could not be neatly categorised, he was enormously popular because of his prodigious talent and his outgoing personality at a time when many cricket followers felt (as perhaps they always do) the game lacked characters who appeared to enjoy themselves. He was the great comedic presence in inter-war cricket, deadly serious in intent, deadly *and* entertaining in execution, so much so that the Yorkshire writer JM Kilburn considered that while Hendren remained, 'cricket will not be without smiles'. His devotees existed on both the popular banks and within more rarefied circles. *Athletic News* believed he 'pleases the main pillar of humanity, the average man', and Cardus that his appearance made spectators leave their drinks at the bar in the Tavern. At the same time, in 1930, the then best-selling English novelist, Hugh Walpole, wrote: 'I have for years worshipped the ground that "Patsy" Hendren treads on. This very summer I have on two separate occasions stood on that same ground, having, in hotels in Nottingham and Manchester, almost touched his elbow; stood, indeed, beside him on each occasion for half an hour struggling to pluck up the courage to speak, and not daring to do so.'

Yet, the 'cheeky chappy' image – to some, largely the creation of cartoonists and popular journalists – fails to capture a man of greater complexity, seriousness and reserve. An orphan at 14 who was brought up in a family in which three siblings died young and a fourth was killed in France in 1916, his reluctance to discuss his childhood was noted by his biographer and Middlesex colleague Ian Peebles. A methodical man who enjoyed a daily regime of drills

and exercises, Hendren was also described by Peebles as 'thoughtful and rather sensitive', while others saw a 'careful and deep student' of cricket. After each innings he worried less about how he had made runs and more about how he had got out, revisiting his stroke in front of a mirror in the pavilion, like his hero Bobby Abel. Anxiety about his performance lasted throughout his career and he described playing in a home Test match as 'nothing short of an ordeal' as he tried to avoid newspaper headlines and conversations debating 'Is Hendren good enough?'

This book tells the story of one of the greatest sporting personalities this country has produced, a player who Jack Hobbs called 'my ideal bat'. It is the story of a superb entertainer who maintained his sporting prowess into his late forties and enjoyed a 'broad-shouldered lust for the game'. In his early years, Hendren struggled to make a distinctive mark in either cricket or football but by the time he retired from first-class cricket in 1937, he had scored the third-highest number of runs ever and the second-highest number of centuries, as well as taken the ninth-highest number of outfielder catches. Only Rhodes, Woolley, Grace and Hobbs played more first-class games; no-one has scored more first-class runs at Lord's. While his Test record is not of the highest order, he still played 51 times for England, and, while he appeared almost entirely in lower-division football, he still turned out more than 400 times for Brentford in senior matches, an enormous commitment of time and energy. Several managers considered he would have progressed further as a footballer had he not prioritised cricket. Despite this, he still had one of the most prolific dual careers ever.

The book also tells the story of a man who benefited from the expanding press coverage of sport and the growing demand for 'human interest' material, with its attention to personality and the veneration of 'manly' and skilful sporting heroes. Professional sportsmen like Hendren and Hobbs were sought out for their opinions and their photographs regularly featured on the

sports pages. Both also made the most of the new commercial opportunities provided by the inter-war sporting world. Hendren established a successful indoor cricket school in the mid-1920s, and his name appeared on hundreds of articles on cricket and football, both earning him additional income, respect and gratitude. He also exploited his reputation to appear in newspaper adverts for cigarettes, trousers and tonics, so that he was described as 'comfortably off without being affluent'. It has been suggested his income was on a par with that of Jack Hobbs, who made as much as anyone out of cricket between the wars.

Yet for all this contemporary adulation, Hendren was a private man who is arguably less well remembered today than he should be. There are several biographies of his contemporary and friend Jack Hobbs, but only one of Hendren. It appeared in 1969, written by Ian Peebles, who had the advantage of having played for Middlesex along with his subject, yet it focuses almost exclusively on cricket and says nothing about football and little about his wider life. In 1981, the journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft criticised the arbitrary nature of selections for the latest volume of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, noting it had included Hobbs and Wally Hammond but not Hendren, 'Tich' Freeman or Arthur Carr. And David Frith described Hendren to the author as 'under-sung' and 'half-forgotten'.

One reason for this may be that Hendren did not fit neatly within contemporary expectations of a great sporting hero in inter-war England, required to be an 'admired exemplar of masculinity'. He was not a stylish batsman like the 'elegant' Frank Woolley with his 'lissom canniness', or the 'trim and aloof' Jack Hobbs, who played strokes with 'textbook precision' and 'unhurried effortless efficiency'. Instead, he routinely ignored the accepted rules, often employing cross-batted strokes which displeased 'the puritans of style'.

Hendren also had none of the 'coltish' glamour of Percy Chapman, described by Peebles as 'large, cherubic and debonair' with golden hair and blue eyes. Indeed, a female writer in the *Daily*

Express in 1926 suggested rather unfairly that most women would call him 'ugly, with his pugnacious mouth and jaw, his friendly glower' (albeit adding 'and love him for each of these points'). Nor did he have the physique or the stride of the traditional sporting hero; 5ft 7in and thick set, by the early 1930s he was battling to keep his weight down. His passage to the wicket was often described as a 'waddle'.

Although well turned out on and off the field, Hendren also had none of the polish or poise of the 'immaculate' Herbert Sutcliffe, who affected middle-class manners and speech, and became, in the words of the writer Leo McKinstry, 'the silken revolutionary of inter-war cricket'. Nor did he share the deference and reluctance to offer opinions of many contemporary professionals, displaying his emotions on the field and often expressing unorthodox views on the game and its future.

For these and other reasons, Patsy Hendren was a different kind of English hero.