

BEN DOBSON

SOMETHING CHANGED



**BEEFY, BOADICEA,
BRIXTON, BUNTING AND
HOW CRICKET HELPED
CHANGE THE NATION**



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Frontispiece

Sunday, 2 August 1981

IT'S A broiling hot afternoon. The summer so far, the year so far, in fact the decade so far, don't seem to have offered up many days like this and a beleaguered British public is taking to the gardens, pools and barbecues of the land to soak it in. Some 20,000 of them are packed into Birmingham's Edgbaston cricket ground soaking up the same thing and more; England are about to take the most improbable series lead in Ashes history on the back of a one-man force of nature.

'He's bagged five wickets, he's grabbed a stump!' The exclamation and tone of the perpetually lugubrious commentator Jim Laker are as close to exultant as he's ever likely to get. Extraordinary events beget extraordinary reactions. In this moment Ian Botham, one arm raised to the heavens, the other wielding that stump as a ceremonial sword, seems the embodiment of something approaching a national rebirth and is bringing to a triumphant end a week which will, in time, be seen as the epicentre of a year like no other. Six days previously, in the gloom of the continually dank weather the summer has so far delivered, a young man had become the first and last civilian fatality of the riots which have punctuated the spring and summer across Britain's cities. Twenty four hours later, the bunting and a large swathe of the population had come out to seek some relief, some hope, blind or otherwise, in a display of patriotism absent since the sunny days of the Silver Jubilee four years previously, seizing on a royal wedding as a chance to change the mood. The morning after, England had

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begun the fourth Test in Birmingham and now, in glorious heat and sunshine at last, four days on they have secured their second preposterous comeback victory in three weeks to lead the Ashes series. The pomp and circumstance of the wedding, rather than subsiding, are entering their second phase with Edgbaston now a riot of a different hue to those of Brixton, Moss Side or Toxteth – one of Union flags and their peculiarly British sartorial equivalent less visible at Westminster Abbey – the same flag reprised in a pair of shorts. The mood is moving from depression to hope, from national self-deprecation to pride and belief. It feels long overdue.

PART ONE:

SOMETHING CHANGED

Something Changed

'There are rare moments in history when one man or woman can, almost alone, shape a nation. Now is such a moment.'

Old Moore's Almanack
December 1980

'A profound change came over Britain in the early 1980s'.

Andy Beckett
Promised You a Miracle

'There is a temptation to portray change as inevitable and its advocates as merely those who are best able to articulate it. Yet change, be it political, economic, social or cultural, is put in motion by specific decisions.'

Graham Stewart,
Bang! A History of Britain in the 1980s

CHANGE IS 'put in motion by specific decisions' yes, but also by specific events and specific individuals. In 1981, with a consequence for the rest of the decade and the future direction of Britain, things were put in motion by two particular dictators of change, Ian Botham and Margaret Thatcher – an unlikely combination at first glance but a powerful one on closer examination. What changed first in this singular year

within a transformational decade was a national mindset. Both these personalities were clear in their own minds that this was the key to a brighter future and was the thing above all others that they wanted to influence. Graham Stewart contends that, by the end of their careers at the end of the decade 'Britain was no longer a country gripped by a mindset of terminal retreat but was capable of overcoming difficult odds.' Retreat was not a word in the vocabulary of Botham or Thatcher and that new mindset had its source in their own heads before it could be assimilated by their publics. 1981 was a year in which change was anywhere and everywhere and the mood swung from the desperate to the euphoric.

In assessing both the importance of this specific year and the roles of the two gunslingers within it, it is necessary to consider a broader timescale to place it in its proper context and explain its relevance – where it came from and what it left behind, hence the span of this book. The transformation between an inclination to self-deprecation bordering on shame, fatalism or nihilism and a restored pride in the country was a definitive feature of Britain through the 1970s and 80s when the change of communal mood presaged more significant evolution. Some of it happened in the course of a few weeks, some was only to become visible over time. Its chief architects, Botham and Thatcher, would demonstrate by example over the course of their careers that difficult odds were there to be overcome – even those as apparently unassailable as 500-1 against. But 1981 was where it really happened, when something changed.

Lessons From The Past

At the mid-point of the decade, a discredited Conservative government seen by many, including some of its own members as too centrist, too wedded to consensus, hounded by increasingly challenging industrial relations and lacking inspirational leadership, has been ousted in favour of a Labour

administration many felt could do little worse. But it begins to dawn that a left-leaning socialist government is perhaps not as in tune with the innate nature of the British electorate after all as rather more radical policies start to bite and the unions are bought off at a price of increasing inflation, economic woes and currency crises. The opposition has elected a new leader to address what it perceives has cost them the election, with a turn to the political right deemed the only way back into the public's affection. A third, minority party is playing a role which confuses the landscape and both the traditional parties. The media is bringing dire warnings of very dark and dangerous days ahead; the country has lost faith in the future and some are even questioning people's right to have a pride in their homeland. The nation's sporting fortunes are one hope of a little relief from the incessant negativity and we continue to pin our faith on England and watch in large numbers in a triumph of hope over expectation.

Is this 2025? It certainly could be. In fact, in this case the portrait is of Britain 50 years earlier, at the start of 1975. As this book neared its completion and its journey to the publisher, the headlines in the newspapers could have come straight from that era. The ever-understated *Daily Mail* front page screams 'UK FACES CRISIS LIKE THE 1970s, REEVES WARNED'; in the *Daily Telegraph*, the editorial subtitled 'We may all be paying the price of the Reeves Premium for a long time' argues that the chancellor's income from punitive and previously camouflaged tax rises in the recent budget, rather than going to the public services the voters would have anticipated are in fact being swallowed up in the increasing payments required to service a national debt which is out of control; the new Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch's interview is headed 'Unions have taken back control in Labour's Britain.'

In his book on the Thatcher era *No Such Thing As Society*, the historian Andy McSmith considers what shifts in

public mood and thinking paved the way for both Margaret Thatcher's arrival at 10 Downing Street in May 1979 and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in January 1981, and allowed them to sustain and dominate the 80s. 'Some saw a sickness in Western democracies ... in which individual liberty was being sacrificed to an obsession with social justice.' Does that sound familiar? It may be that we are not far from just the same adjustment today as a stasis and resignation seeps into the public and political consciousness. A close ally of prime minister Keir Starmer, reports the *Daily Telegraph*, has warned 'lots of people are not saying "something must be done" but "nothing can be done"'. That was Britain's mood in the 1970s to a tee. At such times, those for whom 'nothing can be done' is anathema step up. Enter Thatcher and Botham and 1981.

So I found another strand to my narrative before I was done. Although this book is indeed about change and a significant time in the nation's social history, it also has relevance in the here and now – all this has been a reminder that for all the inevitability of change there is also nothing new under the sun. The mirrors of 50 years ago are all around us. What we don't know today is how the addressing of the perceived crisis will play out over the next ten years – how the wheel will be turned. But in what follows perhaps there will be a hint of a lesson from history for our society today.