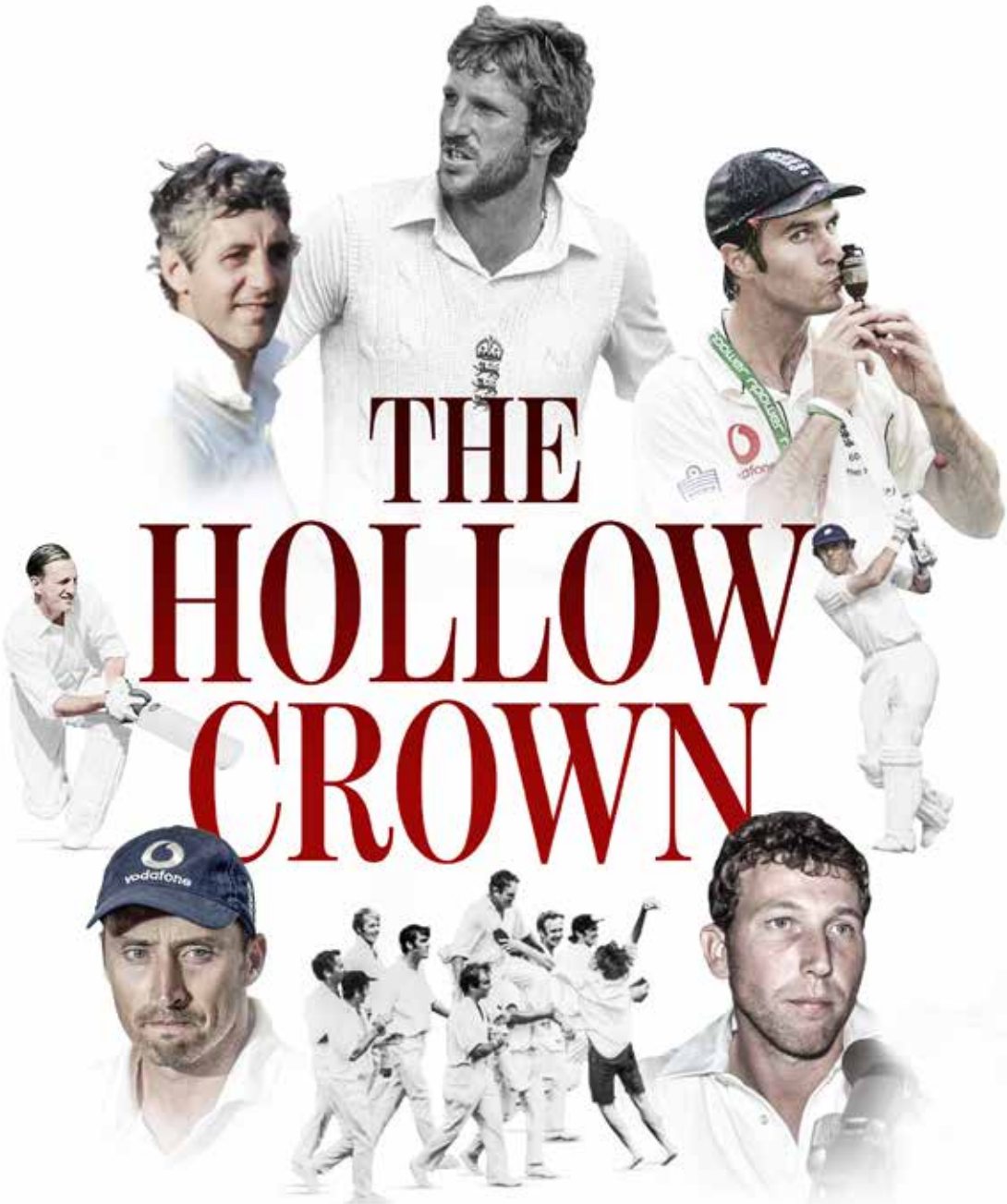
MARK PEEL



THE HOLLOW CROWN

ENGLAND CRICKET CAPTAINS

FROM 1945 TO THE PRESENT

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pitch

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The Twilight of the Amateur: 1945–52

IN July 1945 the British people took a giant step forward by voting in the first majority Labour government committed to greater equality and social reform. Yet, alongside this mandate for change, there was a yearning for familiarity reflected in the MCC, the private gentlemen's club that had governed the game of cricket since the late 18th century and was renowned for its feudal outlook. Fully embracing the amateur ideal, there appeared little willingness to move with the times, even though the number of amateurs, impoverished by higher inflation and punitive taxation, was diminishing fast. Consequently, MCC were forced into making a number of bizarre short-term appointments that seriously disrupted any sense of continuity in the team.

The first post-war captain was the incumbent Walter Hammond, a professional-turned-amateur when he assumed the captaincy in 1938. Although still able to hold his own against India in 1946, his age, health and temperament told against him when leading MCC in Australia in 1946/47. Beaten 3-0 by superior opposition under his old rival Don Bradman, the 43-year-old Hammond, afflicted by fibrositis, looked well past his

pomp and his lack of runs contributed to his dark moods, which did little to boost team spirit. At the end of a gruelling tour he retired, to be succeeded by his vice-captain Norman Yardley.

Yardley was one of the most affable men to ever captain England and he possessed a good cricketing brain, but he lacked the personality to impose himself on the team. Having beaten South Africa in the golden summer of 1947, when Bill Edrich and Denis Compton ran amok, he was unfortunate to come up against two great sides: Don Bradman's 1948 Australians and John Goddard's 1950 West Indians, both of whom proved far too strong for England.

With Yardley unavailable for overseas tours after 1947 because of business commitments, England were subsequently led by five different captains – seven if one counts two stand-ins – on their next five trips. In 1947/48 MCC took the extraordinary step of asking the 45-year-old Gubby Allen to lead in the West Indies, which made him the eldest England captain since W.G. Grace in 1899. Having played no Test cricket for over a decade and barely any first-class cricket the previous summer, it was hardly surprising that Allen pulled a calf muscle while exercising on the boat, causing him to miss the first three first-class matches, including the first Test, and at no stage was he fully fit. The side he led was an experimental one and they paid the penalty for underestimating their hosts by losing the series 2-0 and failing to win a first-class game throughout the tour.

With MCC due in South Africa the following winter, the selectors now plumped for George Mann, the captain of Middlesex and the son of Frank Mann who'd led MCC in South Africa in 1922/23. Without Test

experience, Mann's appointment raised a few eyebrows, but his limitations as a top-flight cricketer were more than compensated for by his sterling character, reflected in his outstanding war record. A man described by the eminent broadcaster Brian Johnston as having all the virtues and none of the vices of an old Etonian, he proved a marvellous diplomat, motivator and tactician of a side that won the rubber 2-0 and went through the five-month tour undefeated.

Because of his commitment to the family brewing business, Mann was only to captain England in two more games – the first two Tests against New Zealand in 1949 – before handing over to the 38-year-old Freddie Brown, whose career had experienced a remarkable revival on becoming captain of Northamptonshire that year. After two games in charge against New Zealand and the final Test against the West Indies the following summer, Brown won plaudits for his inspirational captaincy of England in Australia in 1950/51 when his own personal exploits and wholehearted defiance made the series much closer than it might have been. A firm favourite with the home crowds, thousands assembled in front of the pavilion at the end of the final Test at Melbourne to cheer him on and to greet England's elusive victory.

He returned to captain England to victory over South Africa in 1951 before retiring – although he did reappear in one Test against Australia in 1953 – his departure marking a changing of the guard at Lord's.

Walter Hammond

WALTER HAMMOND was born in Dover on 19 June 1903, the only child of a corporal (later a major) in the Royal Garrison Artillery. His early years were spent on service stations in Malta and Hong Kong with parents with whom he wasn't very intimate. Returning home on the outbreak of war in 1914, they settled in Portsmouth and Hammond was educated at the local grammar school before his mother sent him to Cirencester Grammar School in 1918, where he was a boarder. It was there that he learned of the death of his father, killed in action near Amiens. His loss in no way brought him closer to his mother, since he spent most of the holidays on a friend's farm in the Cotswolds.

Although no academic, Hammond's sport, and cricket in particular, really blossomed at school and, on the recommendation of his headmaster, he joined Gloucestershire in 1920. Forced to miss most of the next two seasons after his qualification to play for the county was challenged by Kent, he scored his maiden century in 1923, and in 1925/26 he toured the West Indies with MCC. He excelled with the bat in the representative matches but contracted a serious illness which, in a pre-antibiotic age, nearly cost him his life. While Hammond claimed it was blood poisoning, his biographer David Foot later argued that it was syphilis or a related sexually-transmitted disease, which helped account for his contrasting moods thereafter.

Returning to full fitness in 1927, he scored 1,000 runs in May and made a promising Test debut in South Africa that winter, before

scaling the highest peaks in Australia a year later with 905 runs in the series at an average of 113.12.

He enjoyed another profitable tour of Australia under Douglas Jardine's leadership in 1932/33, followed by scores of 227 and 336* in two Tests in New Zealand.

For the rest of the decade, Hammond and Bradman towered over their contemporaries in a class of their own, the former, according to Hutton, the best batsman he ever saw on all types of wickets. Handsome, muscular and immaculately attired, his technique was such that he was all grace and timing, his peerless off-drive unparalleled in Bradman's estimation. 'Hammond in his heyday offered all the glory and the colour of medieval chivalry,' wrote the Yorkshire cricket writer Jim Kilburn. 'He graced a cricket field by stepping on it.' [16]

Yet for all his success and the adulation it brought him, not least with female company, his private life remained troubled, his insecurities heightened by his humble origins, his innate shyness and his failure to form close relationships. His marriage to Dorothy Lister, the daughter of a Bradford textile merchant, in 1929 turned out to be something of a sham and he continued to see other women. While he could be good company, he was moody and uncommunicative with his team-mates, rarely having anything positive to say to them.

Some of this rift was down to his snobbery. Keen to better himself socially, he refined his accent, dressed stylishly, drove a Rolls and consorted with polite society. In order to fulfil his ambition to captain his country, he turned amateur in 1938 and he led them against Bradman's Australians, the rubber ending 1-1 after Len Hutton's 364 at the Oval. He won qualified praise for leading England to victory in South Africa that winter and beating the West Indies at home in 1939, his tactical shrewdness offset by his undue caution and singular personality. 'Wally had spent 14 years of his life as an army sergeant's son,' declared his Gloucestershire and England team-mate Charlie Barnett. 'It was a difficult upbringing. He had to do as he was told. So when he became a cricketer he expected people to carry out his orders without question.' [17]

After war service in the RAF, the return of peace gave Hammond a new lease of life. He captained England against the Australian Services XI in the Victory Tests of 1945 with rare abandon and led them to victory against India in 1946, but while heading the national averages for the eighth successive year, serious fibrositis limited his number of appearances. With MCC bowing to Australia's request to send a team there in 1946/47, the emphasis would inevitably be on tried-and-tested players. Because of his cachet as one of England's greatest cricketers and his continued prowess with the bat, he remained the logical choice as captain, age notwithstanding. Friends advised him not to go – he was 43 and struggling with his fitness – but the lure of leading MCC in Australia overrode all other considerations. Although the batting, led by himself, Hutton and Denis Compton, looked formidable, the bowling lacked penetration, and with only three players under the age of 30, their prospects against a revitalised Australian side looked bleak.

On arrival in Australia, Hammond was feted, not only for his stature as one of the giants of the game, but also as the captain of MCC out to re-establish historic links between the two countries. Crowds rose to him as he came in to bat, the Mayor of Adelaide called him 'one of the greatest sportsmen of all time' and, when visiting the Melbourne Tivoli to watch the British comedian Tommy Trinder, he entered the theatre to a standing ovation. His double century in the opening first-class match against Western Australia further enhanced his reputation, but little of this goodwill brought him out of his shell. The *Daily Telegraph*'s E.W. Swanton found him rather suspicious of the press and anything but an easy mixer. It was the same with his team. As captain, he normally travelled around Australia in his Jaguar with the manager Rupert Howard while the rest went by train.

Conscious of his side's limitations, Hammond opted for a policy of containment from the very start. Edrich recalls that he told them on board ship that the state matches should be used primarily as practice for the batsmen and consequently they lost the habit of winning. In the game against Queensland prior to the first Test, Hammond's captaincy was subjected to a withering assessment by

Brian Sellers, the abrasive captain of Yorkshire who was covering the tour for the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. If he gave another display like that, Sellers opined, England stood little chance in the Tests. Not only should he show greater consistency in his field placings, he needed to smile more and offer greater encouragement to his players. While Sellers's comments were in bad taste given his position as an England selector, they pointed to a fundamental truth manifest throughout the rubber.

Although Hammond had publicly expressed his hope that his old adversary Bradman, the Australian captain, would be fit enough to play against England, such generous sentiments, even if valid, soon dissipated on the opening morning of the first Test at Brisbane. Entering at 9-1, Bradman proceeded tentatively to 28, whereupon he attempted to drive opening bowler Bill Voce and the ball flew high to Jack Ikin at second slip. The catch seemed clear-cut, but Bradman stayed at the crease and was given not out, the umpire declaring it was a bump ball. The reprieve incensed Hammond, who approached Bradman at the end of the over and muttered, 'That's a bloody fine way to start a series.' He knew the importance of getting the Australian captain early and now, with fortune eluding him, he saw the Bradman of old laying waste to his bowlers as they toiled in the heat. 'Hammond never forgave Bradman for not walking,' wrote the Australian cricket writer R.S. Whitington. 'Indeed, his bitterness over that incident affected his judgement and attitude for the rest of the series.' [18]

His bitterness was exacerbated by Bradman scoring 187 out of his team's 645 before letting loose Ray Lindwall and Keith Miller, Australia's most intimidating pair of opening bowlers since Jack Gregory and Ted McDonald in 1921. Caught twice on a drying wicket after two ferocious thunderstorms on consecutive nights, England had no chance in near unplayable conditions and, valiantly though they fought, they lost by an innings.

From Brisbane, the team went their separate ways. While the majority departed to Gympie to play Queensland Country XI, a brooding Hammond drove Hutton and Cyril Washbrook through the night to Sydney, barely saying a word the whole journey, before

depositing them at their hotel and disappearing for the next four days. 'Amazing fellow – Wally was a difficult man to live with,' recalled Washbrook. 'He never asked anybody their opinion.' [19]

Aside from the turmoil in his personal life – his divorce from his wife Dorothy had been splashed across the Australian press and his new love, Sybil Ness-Harvey, a South African beauty queen, was struggling to adapt to life in Britain – events at Brisbane had rekindled his rivalry with Bradman. While their relationship remained correct in public, the England captain was the first and only person known to have spurned an invitation to his home, and he dissuaded his team from socialising with him.

As his troubles mounted, Hammond became ever more aloof. He rarely spent time with his players off the field, and seldom praised and encouraged them. 'He tended to be individualist and uncommunicative,' recollected Compton, 'worse still, he didn't seem to be part of the side. There was an absence of that sense of community and all being in it together which is an important element in keeping up the spirit of a side, and to which, of course the captain has the most vital contribution to make.' [20] 'Hammond in Australia in the first post-war series was a shadow of his former self,' wrote Edrich. 'The rapport we had developed had diminished and his judgement became impaired by the burden of leading a side shorn by war of penetrating bowlers. He became edgy, retiring and irritable, especially when he complained about us fraternising with the Australian Test players.' [21]

His captaincy lacked imagination and enterprise. His instructions that his batsmen should occupy the crease on a perfect wicket at Sydney mystified Compton, as England's timidity against the Australian spinners cost them dear. All out for 255, they were forced to watch Sid Barnes and Bradman score double hundreds in Australia's 659/8 declared, and although they adopted a more positive approach in their second innings they were still badly beaten.

The third Test at Melbourne proved a more even contest and, but for some bad luck and bad judgement, England might well have won. Despite injuries to two of their bowlers, Voce and Edrich, they reduced Australia to 192/6 in their first innings, only for leg-spinner

Colin McCool to rescue them with an undefeated century. In reply to 365, England, with Edrich in fine fettle, finished the second day at 147/1. The next morning, he was soon out, lbw to Lindwall off an inside edge, and when Compton also departed in contentious circumstances, Hammond looked a picture of fury as he made his way to the wicket. He was soon out to a rash stroke.

A century partnership by Ikin and Norman Yardley took England to within 14 of Australia's total, and when they captured their seventh wicket at 341 they still retained an outside chance of winning, until an eighth-wicket stand of 154 between Don Tallon and Lindwall put the match beyond their reach. Throughout this onslaught, Hammond attracted serious criticism by persevering with the same bowlers and adhering to the same field while boundaries were being scored in all directions. 'There was, too, a melancholy note about Hammond's captaincy which was lacking in drive and, sometimes it seemed, in thought,' noted the former Australian batsman turned journalist Jack Fingleton. 'Wright and Bedser often went from the bowling crease to the boundary between overs, while Hammond sailed like a schooner from slip to slip anchorage with hardly ever a consultation with his bowlers and fielders.' [22]

Two centuries by Compton at Adelaide enabled England to once again compete on even terms. During their second innings, it was Bradman's tactics that came under scrutiny as he lined the boundary with fielders, inviting Compton to take a single so they could attack his partner Godfrey Evans, a ploy that brought the Australian captain into conflict with Compton. His century permitted Hammond to declare but, bizarrely, he delayed it until one ball after lunch on the final day, supposedly as revenge for Bradman's delay in informing him that Australia would bat on at Sydney. Bradman called it the most inexplicable decision he'd ever known. Feeling that his rival's poor form was reflected in his negative captaincy, Bradman later wrote that 'Hammond showed little imagination on the tour and did not display the leadership and tact required of an overseas diplomat.' [23]

Although Hammond's absence was entirely due to his fibrositis, which had afflicted him throughout the tour, neither his batting –

168 runs in eight completed innings – nor his captaincy would be missed. The team responded to Yardley's intelligent captaincy by playing with spirit, and although they lost by five wickets the result was closer than the scores suggest.

The brief trip to New Zealand, which followed the Australian leg, at least permitted Hammond to bow out of Test cricket in some style. Cheered all the wicket by the large crowd at Christchurch and given three cheers by his opponents, he rolled back the years with some vintage shots in his 79. It proved some consolation for a traumatic six months in which, ill-fortune aside, he'd been outsmarted by his old rival. Although England were always destined to come second given their inferior bowling and fielding, Hammond, nevertheless, could have run them closer had he shown real leadership. 'It was heart-breaking to see morale, which had started so high when we sailed, sink into a general state of disillusionment,' wrote Swanton. [24] Alec Bedser, a great admirer of Hammond in his youth, had cause to revise his opinion. 'I found him to be below my ideal as captain. I was still inexperienced and would have appreciated some words of advice and encouragement from the great man on the first big occasion of my cricketing life.' [25] Wicketkeeper Paul Gibb, who'd flourished under Hammond in South Africa in 1939 but had been discarded after Brisbane, felt liberated at the end of the tour. 'Free perhaps from an ever-present awareness of my erstwhile skipper's presence, free from his quite unpredictable and rather untrustworthy moods.' [26] What particularly shocked him was his failure, and that of manager Rupert Howard, to inquire after the health of spinner Peter Smith and himself on returning to the tour after minor operations.

Hammond's first act on returning home was to marry Sybil, but the gilded life he promised her failed to materialise, and, lured by fanciful talk of starting a joint business in South Africa, he and his young family emigrated there in 1951, only to see their dream fade fast. An alternative job as a general manager of a Durban car firm provided little satisfaction, and after he was made redundant in 1959 he was invited to become the first sports administrator at Natal University. Glad to be back in the open air, the job brought him some respite in his final years, which otherwise were blighted

by a near-fatal car accident in 1960. Five years later, in July 1965, Hammond died prematurely of a heart attack in semi-obscurity, a sad end to a singular life in which a man blessed with such talent could never find ultimate fulfilment.