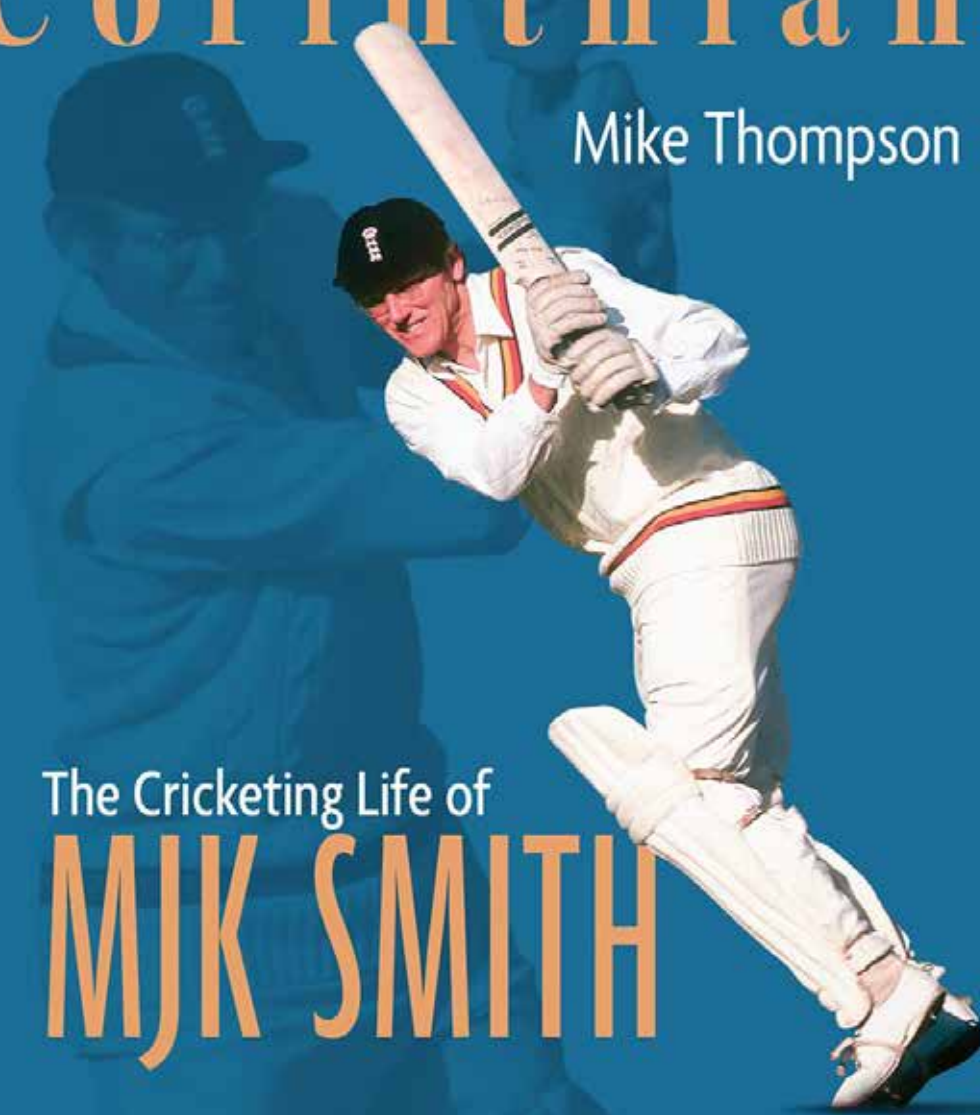


THE
LAST
Corinthian

Mike Thompson

The Cricketing Life of

MJK SMITH



THE
LAST
Corinthian

Mike Thompson

The Cricketing Life of

MJK SMITH



Contents

Foreword	7
Preface	9
Acknowledgements	13
1. A Leicestershire Village Childhood	17
2. Cricket at Stamford School	19
3. National Service and Oxford	23
4. Second Year at Oxford	32
5. Captain of the XI	45
6. Captain of Warwickshire	58
7. Test Match Debut	64
8. Annus Mirabilis	68
9. In the Caribbean with Peter May's Team, 1959/60	75
10. The Visit of the South Africans, 1960	101
11. The Visit of the Australians, 1961	113
12. In India and Pakistan with Ted Dexter's Team, 1961/62	116
13. An Improving Warwickshire	129
14. Championship Title Contenders.	134
15. Captaining Tours to East Africa and India, 1963/64	137
16. Championship Runners-up	150
17. Victorious in South Africa, 1964/65	157
18. Defeat by the South African Tourists	191
19. Captaining England in Australia and New Zealand, 1965/66	203
20. Mixed Fortunes	234
21. Swansong as Warwickshire Captain.	243
22. A New Career	246
23. 1970 – Welcome Back!.	250
24. Championship Runners-up Again.	254
25. Champions at Last.	256
26. The Final Three Seasons	261
27. MJK – A Man for All Seasons.	265
Bibliography	278
Appendix A	280
Appendix B	281
Appendix C	282
Index	283

Preface

AT THE beginning of 2022 I wrote to Mike Smith to ask him if he would be interested in my writing a book on his cricketing career. I was aware that an excellent biography of him had been written a few years earlier by Douglas Miller, but I had in mind something more detailed, focusing only on his achievements on the cricket field as a player and a captain. Somewhat to my surprise he readily agreed, with the caveat that his memory was not as good as it once was. I was in no way deterred by this, believing that this could be compensated for by the enormous fund of published records of the game, supplemented by the recollections of his contemporaries.

Ever since I developed an interest in first-class cricket in the mid-1950s, MJK Smith has been one of my favourite players. I later got to know Mike in 1973 when I joined his burgeoning squash club, Wootton Court, near Kenilworth. Mike doesn't remember me from Wootton Court, as the club had around 600 members and was the 'in place' to be in that area in the mid-1970s. I do remember, though, having extensive conversations with him about cricket, his elegant wife Diana serving behind the bar and me bowling to his then 12-year-old son Neil in the cricket net he had set up in the grounds. My wife and I had our wedding reception at Wootton Court in 1975, and Mike tells me that on one occasion Diana tripped on a badly fitted carpet and dropped the wedding cake, but happily that wasn't at our reception.

I stayed with Mike at his home in Warwickshire for a weekend in early 2022, where he was the perfect host. He has been widowed for some years, and his elder daughter Barbara and son Neil both live not far away and visit him regularly. Whilst there, he kindly gave me the contact details of several of his former Warwickshire team-mates – Alan Smith, who took over the captaincy from him in 1968; Bob Barber, who joined Warwickshire from Lancashire in 1963; David Brown, who now runs a horse-breeding stud in Worcestershire; and Dennis Amiss, John Jameson and Jim Stewart, who all live in Warwickshire. Over the next three months I was to visit them all and was always warmly received. I have also had telephone conversations with many of his Test colleagues and county opponents, and not one has had a bad word to say about him, although some considered him a bit too defensive as a captain in the field, with an over-reliance on seam. ‘To end a career without enemies in a divisive game like cricket is quite an achievement,’ says the cricket historian and author David Frith.¹

Mike had an outstanding career as a player at university and for Warwickshire, breaking records at Oxford including the unequalled feat of centuries in three successive Varsity matches and playing rugby for England in his final year. He was also elected president of Vincent’s, a club for outstanding sportsmen. He broke batting records as captain of Warwickshire in 1959, scoring 3,245 runs, the first time 3,000 had been exceeded since Len Hutton managed it in 1949. He was not quite so successful as a batsman at Test level, often being dismissed by pace early on, but, when set, he was capable of making a big score and always played for the team rather than for himself. His major contribution, though, was as a captain who had the complete loyalty and trust of his players, and he was also an outstanding and courageous short leg fielder.

1 Conversation with David Frith.

PREFACE

He was liked and respected by opponents probably better than any other English captain, and relations between opposing countries always ran smoothly when he was in charge.

He was democratic in his approach without being too easily influenced, competitive without being aggressive, utterly straightforward in all his dealings, and unfailingly cheerful and good-humoured, except perhaps when he knew he had received a bad decision or his authority was challenged. He treated everybody as equals, irrespective of rank or class, was modest to a fault, and never complained or made excuses for failure. Mike is a man who, in the words of Kipling's poem, could talk with crowds and keep his virtue and walk with kings without losing the common touch. He is truly one of the last Corinthians.

It has been a great pleasure and a privilege to undertake the task of writing about England's only living double international, and it is my sincere hope that this book will provide a lasting memento to a unique cricketer, whose like we shall not see again. I went with Mike to Edgbaston in early September 2022 to watch a county match and it was like being with royalty. He was greeted with warmth and respect by doorkeepers and committee members alike. An ageing doorman whispered to me as Mike was picking up the tickets, 'What a player and what a lovely man.'

CHAPTER 1

A Leicestershire Village Childhood

MICHAEL JOHN Knight Smith was born in Leicester on 30 June 1933 and grew up in Broughton Astley, a village in Leicestershire not far from Hinckley. His father Maurice was born in 1909 and grew up in the neighbouring village of Narborough. Mike's mother Muriel, née Bird, was born in 1906 in Broughton Astley, where the family lived thereafter. Muriel's father Tom was the village blacksmith, a trade that had been handed down through several generations of Birds from the beginning of the 18th century. Mike's maternal great-grandfather, also Tom, appears in the 1881 census as a blacksmith and publican, as does his great-great-grandfather John Bird in the 1851 census. Mike knew they had a smithy, but was unaware of the pub.

Although Mike's father was keen on sport and played for the village cricket team, his mother's side of the family boasts a more impressive sporting pedigree. His uncle Bill played football for Coventry City; Bill's daughter and Mike's cousin Di Batterham played hockey for England; and her twin brother David was a flying winger who scored 86 tries for Leicester Tigers in 13 seasons with them. Another cousin, Ken, who died young, was also a very talented local cricketer.

Mike's middle name of Knight derives from his paternal great-great-grandfather, Charles Knight, whose daughter Anne

Elizabeth Knight married Albert Smith in 1877. Their son Charles was given the Knight surname as a second Christian name, a not uncommon practice in the past. It has continued to be passed down.

Mike attended the then only primary school in Broughton Astley and showed a keen interest in sport from an early age. Apparently, he was given a train set at the age of nine but, according to his father, showed little interest in it, preferring to play football and cricket on the local recreation ground and practise his ball skills by endlessly bouncing a ball off the garden wall.⁴ It was during his school holidays that Mike coincidentally came into contact with Colin Cowdrey who, dispatched from India by his parents to boarding school in England, spent part of his holidays at his uncle's farm in Croft, a village close to Broughton Astley. These two schoolboys playing cricket together could hardly have imagined that one day they would become England cricket captains.

4 *MJK Smith: No Ordinary Man*, Douglas Miller.