Praise for the book

'A powerful reminder of how far women's cricket has come. As someone who's seen it all, I know how vital it is to celebrate the pioneers who made today's opportunities possible. Raf does exactly that in this book.'

– Charlotte Edwards CBE

'This book shines a light on the incredible journey of women's cricket. A must-read for anyone who wants to understand where women's cricket has come from – and where it's going.'

– Ebony Rainford-Brent MBE

The Women in Whites

A History of Women's Cricket in England

RAF NICHOLSON

Contents

Chapter 1

1745–1926: Beginnings

Earliest days

In October 2013, a surprise request emerged from the Vatican: the Pope was on the hunt for cricket-playing nuns. Following the formation of a Vatican men's cricket club, they had decided that they should also form a women's XI, made up of senior women in the Catholic Church. Some found the idea surprising – but there was, in fact, a centuries-old precedent.

The earliest record of any women playing a sport resembling cricket dates back to 1344, from an illustration produced by Johann de Grise in the margins of *The Romance of Alexander*, a French text about the life of Alexander the Great. The illustration in question, which is located in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, appears to show a nun throwing a ball to a monk. The monk is grasping a club, while several other men and women wait behind the nun for the opportunity to 'field' the ball.

Was this 'cricket' as we know it? Not really. As a sport, cricket's precise origins remain unclear, but the key point is that women's involvement was almost certainly earlier and more extensive than is often assumed.

In July 1745, a year after the Laws of Cricket were codified for the first time, the first recorded women's match took place. The *Reading Mercury* described the occasion:

> The greatest cricket match that was played in this part of England was on Friday, the 26th of last month, on

> Gosden Common, near Guildford, between 11 maids of Bramley and 11 maids of Hambledon, all dressed in white. The Bramley maids had blue ribbons and the Hambledon maids red ribbons on their heads. The Bramley girls got 119 notches and the Hambledon girls 127. There was of bothe sexes the greatest number that ever was seen on such an occasion. The girls bowled, batted, ran and catches as well as most men could do in that game.

After this early triumph by Hambledon, inter-village women's matches occurred frequently throughout the late 18th century. We know this because they were regularly reported on by local newspapers.

As with men's village fixtures, these matches were played according to varying local rules, and often for prizes including plum cake or ale. They also attracted large crowds. A series of three matches played in Sussex in 1768 between Harting and Rogate was attended by more than 5,000 spectators. At a 'Married v Single' match at Mousley Hurst in Surrey in 1775, 'many London gentlemen were present and there were great bets descending'. On 11 July 1788, at a match between '11 Maids of Surrey and 11 Married Ladies of Surrey', a Miss S. Norcross was noted as scoring the first recorded century by a woman. Sadly, further details of Miss Norcross's life and her feat have largely been lost to history.

The first-ever women's county match took place on 2 and 3 October 1811 between Hampshire and Surrey. The British sportswriter Pierce Egan recounted the event in his *Book of Sports* (1832):

> In a field belonging to Mr Story, at the back of Newington Green, near Ball's Pond, Middlesex, on Wednesday, October 2 1811, this singular performance, between the Hampshire and the Surrey Heroines (22 females) commenced at 11 o'clock in the morning. It was made by two noblemen for 500

> guineas a side. The performers … were of all ages and sizes, from 14 to 60, the young Hampshire had the colour of true blue, which were pinned in their bonnets, in the shape of the Prince's plume. The Surrey were equally as smart – their colours were blue, surmounted with orange.

Hampshire eventually triumphed by 14 runs at three o'clock on the second day of the match. Afterwards, both teams progressed to the 'Angel' at Islington for the kind of 'handsome entertainment' that would still be appreciated by its modern-day clientele (it was a Wetherspoons until 2023, and it is now owned by the Urban Pubs & Bars group).

Across the entire 18th century, there is only one recorded example of a game of cricket involving upper-class ladies. This was a private match played in 1777 at the Oaks in Surrey, the home of the Countess of Derby. According to the *Morning Post*, the top scorer was a Miss Elizabeth Ann Burrell. Her batting performance was so striking that it apparently caused the Eighth Duke of Hamilton to instantly fall in love with her and propose marriage on the spot. Sadly, although perhaps predictably, it did not prove the basis for long-term happiness. The couple divorced in 1794 after a 16-year childless union that involved at least two instances of adultery on behalf of the duke.

Another witness to the 1777 match in Surrey was John Frederick Sackville, Third Duke of Dorset. He later wrote:

> What is human life but a game of cricket? and if so, why should not the ladies play it as well as we? … Methinks I hear some little macaroni youth, some trifling apology for the figure of a man, exclaiming with the greatest vehemence. How can the ladies hurt their delicate hands, and even bring them to blisters with holding a nasty filthy bat? How can their sweet delicate fingers bear the jarrings attending the catching of a dirty ball?

> Mind not, my dear ladies, the impertinent interrogatories of silly cox-combs, or the dreadful apprehensions of demi-men. Let your sex go on and assert their right to every pursuit that does not debase the mind. Go on, and attach yourselves to the athletic, and by that convince your neighbours the French that you despise their washes, their paint and their pompoms, and that you are now determined to convince all Europe how worthy you are of being considered the wives of plain, generous, and native Englishmen!!

The duke had a bit of a vested interest here. As well as being a patron of cricket, he also became Ambassador to France in 1784, keen to spread the sport on the other side of the Channel. He was evidently rather frustrated that the French – wives and husbands alike – did not take to cricket in the way he had hoped.

Unfortunately, not all men would prove to be as supportive of female participation in cricket as the duke.

'A game not fit for ladies'

Between 1838, the year in which two teams of Hampshire haymakers played a match at East Meon, and 1864, when we find the earliest reference to a women's club, there are no reports of women playing cricket. This might seem extraordinary at a time when men's cricket was expanding vastly under the guardianship of MCC. But the conservative Victorian gentlemen who led this expansion tended to have rather retrograde views of women.

Here's Alan Roderick Haig-Brown, of Charterhouse and Cambridge, later a major in the British Army, writing in 1902 – three years after he was appointed Assistant Master at Lancing College:

> Cricket is a game absolutely unsuited to the fair sex, owing to the number of purely masculine qualities

> which are essential to the good cricketer … If I were asked to state what exercises judiciously combined were most likely to correct all common physical weaknesses and to establish and preserve a healthily graceful body I should declare in favour of horse-riding, running, jumping, dancing, skipping, fencing, croquet, archery, swimming … and at the same time I should advise the avoidance of long bicycle rides, hockey, cricket, and any other exercise which the fair exponent finds herself unable to perform with ease and elegance.
>
> If we wish to find graceful women we shall have to look for them among those who do not indulge in athletics, but who rather follow in the footsteps of their great-grandmothers, and are unswerving in their allegiance to dancing and equestrianism and such time-honoured pastimes.

Haig-Brown met a sticky end in France in 1918 and would no doubt have been turning in his grave a century later when a 14-year-old girl made her debut for the Lancing College 1st XI – a certain Alice Capsey.

Unfortunately, many physicians shared Haig-Brown's views about suitable pastimes for women. One letter in the famous medical journal *The Lancet*, published in 1890, argued that 'the violent impact of a hard cricket-ball on the mammary gland' could lead to 'malignancy' – or, as a tabloid newspaper might headline the story today, 'Women Playing Cricket Causes Cancer'. 'Surely, Sir, there is no need for ladies to indulge in this eminently virile game,' the author concluded. 'We have tennis and other games, which, compared with cricket, are harmless; cannot the ladies be persuaded to content themselves with these?'

What so many of these early critiques of women's cricket seemed to boil down to was a secret fear on behalf of men that women might threaten their supposed superiority on the cricket field. There is no better example of this than that

of 'The Doctor' himself. In 1899, W. G. Grace haughtily declared: 'Cricket is not a game for women, and although the fair sex occasionally join in a picnic game, they are not constitutionally adapted for the sport.'

It is fortunate that his mother Martha did not live to hear him speak those words; she could have exposed them for the feeble fallacy they were. Who was it, after all, who had taught W. G. (not to mention his brothers) to play the sport at which he made his name? Martha is said to have been a formidable cricketer herself, who could throw a cricket ball 70 yards. One story goes that in 1866, as a 17-year-old W. G. slunk off the pitch having been dismissed in single figures, his mother began publicly reprimanding him: 'Willie, Willie, haven't I told you over and over again how to play that ball?' Perhaps his dislike of female involvement in cricket stemmed from that very episode.

More boisterous than rounders? Cricket for schoolgirls and students

If women were excluded from MCC and other clubs, where might they access cricket? The education system provided a solution. From the mid-19th century, as part of the 'first wave' of feminism in England, a generation of pioneering women fought hard to prove that girls should have the same educational opportunities as their brothers, founding schools like Cheltenham Ladies' College (1853), St Leonards in St Andrews, Scotland (1877), Roedean in Brighton (1885), and opening women's colleges in Oxford and Cambridge. Because girls' schools and university colleges were run by women for women, they were able to promote cricket in spite of loud male opposition.

The earliest reference I found to girls' cricket at school is from 1857 at St Mary's Hall in Brighton, which had been founded in 1836 by the Reverend Henry Elliott for the 'daughters of poor clergy'. Fortunately, Reverend Elliott was rather more progressive in his views than some of his male compatriots. One former pupil at St Mary's Hall recalled

her schooldays in a letter to *The Times* in 1929: 'We had, by the kindness of the Rev. H. V. Elliott, the use of a good playground, where we enjoyed cricket and other athletic games, to which I am sure we owe much of our health, vigour, and energy. We were as enthusiastic about them, I think, as if we had been boys.'

On occasion, attempts to introduce cricket were stamped down upon by conservative teachers or headmistresses. The Royal School in Bath, founded in 1864, initially had rounders as its main school game. When a group of girls went to headmistress Emmeline Kingdon to ask permission to form a cricket club, she replied: 'I think not. Rounders is quite boisterous enough for young ladies.'

But others saw the potential of cricket to develop skills that would serve their pupils well in their future lives. Many agreed with Frances Dove, who founded Wycombe Abbey School in 1896, that cricket was 'a splendid field for the development of powers of organisation, of good temper under trying circumstances, courage and determination to play up and do your best even in a losing game, rapidity of thought and action, judgement and self-reliance, and, above all things, unselfishness'.

For girls who had previously had to make do with embroidery and gentle callisthenics, cricket offered nothing less than a revolution in physical freedom. Novelist Helen Mathers, recalling her schooldays at the Chantry School, Frome, described this feeling of liberation:

> 'Cricket!' says a loud clear voice … in 30 seconds the room is cleared and we are all upstairs, pulling off ribbons, gowns, crinolines, all our feminine belongings, and putting on knickerbockers and blouses! … I feel as light as a feather, and equal to Jack at running, vaulting or jumping … [cricket] has emancipated us from the slavish thraldom of our petticoats, and enabled us to stretch our limbs and use them.

Cricket was taken seriously. Many schools employed male professionals to coach their girls, while others pressed male members of staff into service. At St Anne's School in Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire, the school chaplain became the de facto cricket coach, and the school doctor umpired in all school matches.

Inter-school matches soon became a regular occurrence, and some were imbued with the ferocious rivalry of Eton v Harrow. A chronicler for the Redland High School for Girls, where cricket was introduced in 1880, reported in 1893 that the school's match against Clifton High School was the 'event of the season', largely because the Clifton side included Bessie Grace, the daughter of W. G. Apparently the good doctor did not mind his offspring playing, despite his general views on women's cricket.

Olive Willis, who founded Downe House School in 1907, recalled that in the school's early days some girls were 'debarred from [cricket] because some of their men-folk laughed at girls' cricket, and nothing kills as quickly as ridicule'. But most fathers came round in the end – as evidenced by the annual father-daughter matches that took place at many girls' schools. The fathers would use a specially narrowed bat, bat left-handed, bowl underarm, or adopt some other suitable handicap. (Sadly, it does not seem that W. G. ever participated.) School magazines show how seriously these matches were taken by the girls. In 1933, the *Cheltenham Ladies' College Magazine* proudly recorded that the School's First XI had for the first time beaten the fathers 'on equal terms'.

What of universities? Women's cricket clubs were formed at Royal Holloway College in 1890, at Girton College, Cambridge in 1893, at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London (now the University of Westminster) in 1894, at the Ladies' College in Bedford Square (part of the University of London) in 1912, and at the University of Manchester in 1914. The pioneering engineer and physicist Hertha Ayrton, who studied at Girton in the 1870s, was disparaging of her fellow students' early attempts at cricket. In one letter, she wrote:

'You have no idea how funny they look; they run shockingly with their heads a mile in front of them … I suppose they will improve in time but at present they send me into fits of laughter.' The appointment of a professional coach at Girton in 1907 no doubt improved matters.

Students at the Oxford women's colleges were not so lucky. Oxford students could play hockey, tennis and lacrosse or go cycling – but when, in 1904, Somerville scholars petitioned their hall council 'that they might to be allowed to play cricket', their request was turned down on the grounds of the sport being too 'masculine'. Women in the town formed a club in 1885 and were given official permission by the university to play in the Parks, but no Oxford women's colleges fielded teams prior to 1934.

The new women's Physical Training (PT) Colleges founded in the two decades between 1885 and 1905 were also early adopters of cricket. The first of these, Dartford College, was opened in 1885 by Swedish gymnastics teacher Martina Bergman-Österberg; she employed a professional coach – a Mr Ballard – to teach cricket. Twelve years later, the women's suffrage campaigner Rhoda Anstey founded her own PT College in Birmingham and organised matches for her students against the nearby Bournville team (made up of Cadbury's female employees). Initially, Anstey students bowled underarm only. A report in the 1922 *College Magazine* amusingly relates that: 'Some of us found great difficulty in changing to overarm bowling and the people who played on the nearby Tennis Courts during a bowling practice did so at their own risk.'

With colleges at Chelsea (founded 1898), IM Marsh (1900) and Bedford (1903) also established at the turn of the century, a generation of specialist female PE teachers emerged, equipped to teach cricket and serve as sporting role models for their young pupils. Women's Cricket Association founder Marjorie Pollard, educated at Peterborough County School in the 1910s, wrote that 'our young games mistress fresh from Dartford PTC was our inspiration, model and joy'.

Without the chance to play cricket at school, many early England cricketers might never have picked up a bat or ball. Betty Archdale, who would become the first captain of England in 1934, attended St Leonards School between 1920 and 1925. Archdale's biographer, Deirdre MacPherson, discovered that: 'Younger girls admitted to being scared when Betty started bowling and swiping at balls because they came at such speed.' Molly Hide, who succeeded Archdale as England captain in 1937, learned her cricket at Wycombe Abbey. 'At Wycombe the Powers That Be were firm believers in a breath of fresh air between breakfast and prayers, and I have vivid memories of half-hour bowling practices on dewy mornings when the ball made a spiral of water as it travelled along the ground,' Hide later recalled. When the Women's Cricket Association visited in 1930 to play a match against the school, Hide took 7-22 with her off breaks, clean bowling four of their most senior players and contributing to the school's eight-run win.

Women like Martina Bergman-Österberg also indirectly caused a revolution in women's cricket clothing. Up until the late 19th century, women were attempting to bat, bowl and field in long skirts and high-necked, tight blouses. Try running for a bus while dressed in a floor-length evening gown – not to mention a very tightly laced corset – and you'll feel something of their pain.

Legend has it that women's long skirts were actually responsible for cricket's transition to roundarm bowling. The sister of Kent cricketer John Willes, Christina, apparently used a high-handed action while bowling at him in their garden to avoid entanglement in her clothing. John Willes became the first cricketer to bowl a roundarm delivery at Lord's, in 1822, playing for Kent against MCC. (He was no-balled for doing so, but the technique was made lawful six years later.)

Whether or not this fabled tale is true – and it has generally been dismissed by most serious historians as fanciful – the fact that women were still playing in long skirts by the turn of the century was a hindrance to the development of serious women's cricket. So were numerous other items of 'respectable' clothing. Lady Milner, a member of the White Heather Club, wrote

that during cricket matches she had often witnessed 'a lady holding her hat on with one hand, striving to catch a ball with the other, and succeeding in doing neither'.

At Dartford, corsets were banned, and a new item of clothing was specifically developed to provide ease of movement when playing sports like cricket: the tunic. This was adopted initially by the other PT Colleges and then, gradually, by both schools and universities. In time, the newly formed WCA would adopt the tunic as its first official uniform. It was another small step along the slow road to female liberation.

Early women's club cricket

The first report of a women's cricket club, as opposed to a village, school or university team, is found in 1864. On 23 July, the *Aldershot Military Gazette* reported that the Farnham Female Cricket Club were 'open to play a match … at Host Williams' Forest Oak Inn, Holt Pound at any time'.

Women's cricket seems to have undergone something of a revival in the period between the 1860s and the end of the First World War, if references to women's clubs in local newspapers are anything to go by. Between 1880 and 1918, at least 175 women's clubs or teams are mentioned as operating in England, including 25 in Yorkshire, 18 in Lancashire, 13 in Lincolnshire, 12 in Sussex, 11 in Buckinghamshire, ten in Derbyshire and seven in Hampshire. The fact that in 1897 Mr Alfred Reader, the owner of a cricket ball works in Kent, was asked by the department store Gamages to produce a special blue ball 'suitable for ladies' suggests that there must have been significant demand for such an item.

Unfortunately, there is scant information about most of these early clubs. We know a little more about one of them, the White Heather Club, because its scorebook has survived to tell the tale. According to this, White Heather was founded 'by eight ladies, Hon. M. Brassey, Hon. B. Brassey, Lady Milner, Lady Idina Nevill, Lady Henry Nevill, Hon. M. Lawrence, Miss Chandos Pole, and Miss Street'. Previously thought to be the oldest women's club founded anywhere in the world, the

White Heather's first match took place at Nun Appleton in Yorkshire in August 1888. They won by four wickets.

From eight members initially, the club grew to 50 members in 1891, all of independent means and gentle birth. That included Lucy Ridsdale (later Lucy Baldwin, wife of British prime minister Stanley Baldwin), as well as Marie Brassey, who would go on to become the Vicereine of India. In January 1889, one of the founder members, Lady Idina Nevill, married the Honourable Thomas Brassey and her seven bridesmaids were all club members, wearing club ties and carrying bouquets of white heather.

The club's uniform reflected their preoccupation with respectability. They wore white flannel skirts, white shirts, white sailor hats and a special club tie. However, there is also evidence that they took their cricket extremely seriously. Lady Milner, one club member, recalled that on one occasion they had found themselves a player short ahead of a match:

> We had to hunt about in highways and byways, trying to collect something in the female shape to come to our rescue, and make up our number. We suddenly heard a rumour that the butcher's daughter in the village had once handled a bat. We immediately rushed to her and implored her help; she very good-naturedly abandoned her chops for cricket, and so well did she use the fine pair of arms which Nature had endowed her, wielding the willow with the same energy and success with which she had hitherto handled the cleaver, that she proved a most valuable addition to our side, and a real help in times of need.

White Heather's scorebook (which is now at Lord's) shows that they played regular matches against girls' schools and boys' prep schools, as well as travelling the country to fulfil fixtures against women's XIs. Their activities, though, also drew their fair share of controversy. 'What endless discussion and variety of opinion this subject has evoked!' Lady Milner wrote in 1892.

'It has drawn down on our own sex the most adverse criticism and scornful jeers; but then, on the other hand, we have been nobly and ably defended by those most competent to judge. Every day we find prejudice yielding to common sense, cricket for ladies becoming more and more popular; and now those who at one time hid their light under a bushel, and played in secret, have suddenly awakened to find themselves famous.'

As this suggests, country-house cricket was becoming remarkably commonplace by this time. The first-ever county match involving Oxfordshire was a country-house affair, taking place on 20 August 1889 against Hampshire at Walhampton Park in the New Forest (the house of art collector John Postle Heseltine). Jackson's *Oxford Journal* tells us that 'the novelty of a game between two lady elevens caused a numerous company of spectators to assemble and the match was watched with great interest. The cricket was of an excellent character, the fielding at times being very smart, whilst the ball was returned neatly and with precision.' Heseltine's daughter Sylvia took five wickets in Oxfordshire's second innings, assisting Hampshire in a ten-wicket victory.

Aside from the White Heather Club, other country-house sides included the Dragonflies (Derbyshire), Severn Valley (South Wales), St Quintin's Ladies (London) and Clifton Ladies (Bristol). Bessie Grace, W. G.'s daughter, was one of Clifton's regular players. One letter published in *Women's Cricket* magazine in 1937 includes the memories of a Mrs Hilda Kelt regarding 'Cricket in the 1890s', who recounts her days playing for the Clifton Ladies club. She wrote:

> 'White Heather' was considered the best club … The best ground I ever played on was at Sedbury Park, S. Wales, and belonged to Col. Sir Percy Marling. I made my highest score there. Two ladies' teams provided the entertainment for a large garden party; the day was hot and perfect for cricket; the garden was most beautiful and we were told that the ground was used sometimes for men's county cricket, so what

> more could we want? … The jolliest matches I ever had were those at Piercefield Park [Monmouthshire] … How well I remember the huge pyramids of strawberries and the tempting lunch spread out on the grass under a huge tree near the cricket ground.

A newspaper report from June 1914 describes the St Quintin's Club as 'one of the best elevens' in the country, thanks to the 'deadly deliveries' bowled by star player Miss Brash.

Notably, it was also a woman from the St Quintin's Club who made the first attempt to establish English women's cricket on a more formal footing, by means of a central governing body. This was Mary Hankinson, a cricketer, hockey player and graduate of Bergman-Österberg's College at Dartford. In 1902, she wrote the following letter to *Hockey Field* magazine:

> Madam,
> As the majority of women cricketers are also hockey players, and as The Hockey Field is largely circulated among the latter, may I use your paper as a medium to bring the question of forming a women's cricket association to their notice?
>
> I have heard it rumoured that Sussex, Surrey and Somerset intend to form county teams this season, and Middlesex, I hope, will not be left behind. Would it not be wise, before this is done, to form a central association, which would draw up the necessary rules and regulations?
>
> The matter was discussed at a meeting of the St Quintin's Cricket Club on 3 March, and I was deputed to bring it before the notice of cricketers by means of a letter to The Hockey Field.
>
> I shall be glad if all clubs or individuals interested in the formation of such an association will communicate with me at the address below, offering any suggestions as to fixing a preliminary meeting, or proposals as to rules, etc.

Unfortunately, the proposal came to nothing. One reply printed in the next issue of *Hockey Field* felt it might be 'premature to take this step before the county clubs to be associated are actually in existence', and others evidently agreed.

Mary Hankinson would go on to lead the Gymnastic Teachers' Suffrage Society, co-found the Fabian Women's Group, and become a founding member of the All England Women's Netball Association; but a national association for women's cricket would have to wait – for now.

Lucy Baldwin (née Ridsdale), 19 June 1869–17 June 1945

Lucy Baldwin was born Lucy Ridsdale in Bayswater, London, in June 1869, the oldest daughter of Edward Lucas Jenks and Esther Lucy Ridsdale. She grew up in the village of Rottingdean in Sussex with her sister and three brothers, which was where she first encountered cricket – becoming a regular at the Rottingdean club, and turning out for their ladies' side as a batter and a 'demmon fit bowler'. In 1890, at the age of 21, she joined the White Heather Club; she would become one of their most long-standing members.

It was through cricket that she met her husband, the future British prime minister Stanley Baldwin. He was a fellow cricket lover and watched Lucy play at Rottingdean thanks to his aunt, who lived in the village. They married at Lucy's family home on 12 September 1892 and went on to have seven children. She later confided to Australian captain Herbie Collins, who she met during the 1926 Ashes tour, that Stanley had transformed her play: 'I was frightfully nervous when I went in. But when I became engaged to Mr Baldwin I lost all my nervousness, and it was the year that I was married that I made my best batting average, 62 runs for the season.'

Stanley entered the House of Commons in 1908, and in a turbulent period in British politics eventually served three times as prime minister between 1923 and 1937. Meanwhile, his wife relished the opportunity for a public role. She became a major campaigner for improved maternity care, having herself suffered a stillbirth in 1894. In the 1920s, pregnant women were as likely to die in childbirth as soldiers had been during the First World War, leading Lucy Baldwin to proclaim at one campaign meeting: 'Do you realise that our women daily, hourly, are "going over the top"?'

In 1928, she became vice-chair of the National Birthday Trust Fund, which aimed to tackle maternal mortality. The following year, she helped to found the Anaesthetics Appeal Fund in an effort to ensure that women from all social classes could access pain relief, regardless of their ability to pay for it. She was not afraid to use her cricketing connections to her advantage. In 1929, she persuaded millionaire businessman Sir Julien Cahn, president of Nottinghamshire County Cricket Club, to donate the funding for a fully equipped, modern maternity hospital in Stourport, Worcestershire. It was named the Lucy Baldwin Maternity Hospital in her honour, and a plaque was erected over the main entrance, reading: '*What she wanted most in the world. Presented to her by Julien Cahn Esq.*'

Lucy remained involved in cricket all her life. During Britain's General Strike in 1926, she hosted a meeting of the White Heather Club at 10 Downing Street; and in 1930, she sent congratulations to Marjorie Pollard on the first edition of *Women's Cricket* magazine. 'The crack of the bat against the ball amid the humming and buzzing of summer sounds is still to me a note of pure joy,' she wrote. During Australia's 1937 tour of England, she entertained the tourists to tea at 10 Downing Street, and she was later made an honorary member of the Women's Cricket Association.

She died of a heart attack in 1945 at Astley Hall, Worcestershire.

The Original English Lady Cricketers

It was not long before the growing popularity of women's cricket caught the eye of those keen to make a quick buck. In 1890, French-American entrepreneur Mr Edward Michel decided to form a professional women's side who would tour England, with the aim of attracting big crowds and filling his own pockets. He christened this group of women – the first-ever professional female cricketers anywhere in the world – the 'Original English Lady Cricketers'.

The initial intention appears to have been for the Lady Cricketers to play matches against existing women's clubs, but – wary of an invitation to play against a side of 'professionals' in what smacked of a publicity stunt – none of the invited clubs were prepared to accept. Instead, recruitment was expanded and 22 women were selected to play in 'Reds v Blues' exhibition matches at English county grounds. The sides wore white blouses with red or blue collars, red or blue caps, and long skirts that were weighted at the hem – presumably to avoid any risk of (shock, horror) bare legs being exposed.

Players were recruited through adverts in the national press, coached by male professionals, provided with free bats, and paid salaries of ten shillings per week (more than many working men of the time), plus bonuses if their team won. One Lady Cricketer, Mary Willett, later remembered her experience:

> A friend showed her an ad in the press and they both decided to apply. She had played the game as a youngster and was very good at fielding; [she] was accepted but her friend rejected. She signed on and was instructed to attend practices one day a week indoors on matting in a hall at Wandsworth, or outdoors on a cricket pitch at Balham. She was coached by George

> and Alec Hearne of Kent, and Maurice Read and Fred Bowley of Worcestershire.
>
> Mr Matthews forbade members of the team to use their real names, so Miss Willett, who was born in Beckenham, decided to call herself 'Miss Beckenham' … Her parents did not react unfavourably to their daughter becoming a professional cricketer. Her father was interested and was reassured by the fact that a 'matron' accompanied the teams wherever they went. When they played at the Crystal Palace he actually brought along a party of 22 people to watch.

The Lady Cricketers eventually played over 60 matches during 1890, each attracting over 2,000 spectators. The first, played at the Police Recreation Ground in Liverpool on Easter Monday 1890, was attended by 15,000 people. Spectators were charged 6d to attend, and a further 6d to watch the evening entertainment that always followed the matches, which included boxing and 'performing weasels'.

While the ostensible purpose of the venture was to 'dispel the common prejudice that ladies were incapable of playing [cricket]', it seems likely that crowds were partly attracted by the novelty factor. A promised follow-up tour to Australia never took place, apparently due to objections on behalf of parents at the prospect of their daughters disappearing to Australia for months on end (many of the Lady Cricketers were young women). Meanwhile in England, spectator numbers plummeted after the first season, and the whole scheme collapsed midway through 1891.

Some have questioned whether the Original English Lady Cricketers were victims of commercial exploitation. In 1892, one of the players actually sued the organisers to recover arrears of wages. She won her case, the jury ordering a payment of £11 15s plus costs. Their activities certainly did not do a huge amount to advance the cause of women's cricket. The Worcester Police banned a proposed match in their city on the grounds of 'decency', while W. G. Grace's assertion that the

participants were 'neither ladies nor cricketers' suggests that the respectability of the sport came into question as a result. But as Giles Wilcock proposed in his excellent book on the Lady Cricketers, we might also consider them pioneers: the first women to ever reap some financial reward from playing cricket.

The impact of the First World War

Much like its male counterpart, women's club cricket largely ceased during the First World War. Members of the White Heather Club served as nurses and drivers both at home and in Boulogne, Macedonia and Salonica, and Miss Buxton was even awarded the Mons Medal for her work as a Voluntary Aid Detachment organiser.

However, Britain's entry into the conflict in August 1914 also opened up cricketing opportunities to new groups of women. By 1918, one million British women were working in munitions factories. This encouraged many businesses to provide increased recreational opportunities for their female employees as a vital morale boost. Some companies, like Cadbury's, Boots and Rowntree's, had already formed women's cricket teams in the decade before 1914, but they expanded their provision during wartime. Cadbury's doubled the number of women's cricket teams at Bournville between 1914 and 1919. Others seized on the idea for the first time. Glass manufacturers Pilkington, for example, opened their first cricket ground for women in 1915, thanks to increased numbers of wartime female employees, while aircraft manufacturer Boulton & Paul formed its first women's cricket team in 1917. A photo in the *Daily Mirror* from May 1918 contains the caption: 'Women war workers, having done brilliantly at football, open their cricket season. The wicket-keeper arms for the fray in a match between Woolland's and Harrod's.'

There are also examples of women's cricket being used as a way of supporting the war effort. Photographs survive of nurses playing sport alongside wounded soldiers, presumably to assist in their rehabilitation. Some of the girls' public schools and

women's colleges – including Roedean, Newnham and Girton – organised matches against convalescing servicemen. Eccleshill Cricket Club in Bradford organised women's cricket matches for charity 'with a view to helping the wounded soldiers', while two Baildon and Tong Park Ladies' teams played each other in September 1917 to raise money for Baildon's Soldiers' and Sailors' Comforts Fund. In May 1918, a 'lady players' section was formed at Scarborough Cricket Club, coached by former Yorkshire wicketkeeper David Hunter.

Whether the conflict had a permanent impact on the women's cricketing landscape is harder to assess. On the one hand, women's involvement in sport during wartime demonstrated that far from having an ill effect, exercise could, in fact, have the opposite effect for workers. 'The war has taught us that, in the matter of strength and endurance, there is little to choose between the sexes,' wrote Harold Saunders in the *Daily Express* in December 1918. Some men watched women playing cricket for the first time and were encouraged to change their views. 'The matches I have seen during the last few weeks have opened my eyes,' wrote one reporter for the *Yorkshire Evening Post* in August 1919. 'It is quite a possibility that in the near future we shall see "mixed cricket" in some of our Council matches.'

On the other hand, many women were forced out of employment at the end of the war, as men returned from the front to reclaim their jobs. As a result, some of the new growth in women's workplace cricket abruptly ended. The need for a central governing body to advocate for and organise women's cricket seemed, in many ways, to be more urgent than ever.