

A close-up portrait of a man with short dark hair, smiling slightly. He is wearing a white collared shirt under a patterned sweater with blue, black, and white stripes. The background is a plain, light color.

Mark Peel

Yorkshire
Grit

The Life of

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Contents

Introduction	7
1. 'Young Illingworth'	15
2. A Harsh Apprenticeship	31
3. Champions at Last!	45
4. The Model Professional	57
5. Master Tactician	67
6. Captain of England	93
7. The Pinnacle	103
8. The Ashes Retained	122
9. 'Wise Old Fox'	140
10. Unhappy Homecoming	175
11. A View from the Box	200
12. Backseat Driver	207
13. One Man Band	230
14. 'I Want to Clear My Name'	247
15. 'My Island in the Sun'	254
16. Ray Illingworth	268
Acknowledgements	278
Bibliography	279
Index	284

Chapter 1

‘Young Illingworth’

IF THE Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, the winning of the Ashes, cricket’s equivalent of Waterloo, was often won on the playing fields of Pudsey, the west Yorkshire town with a great cricketing heritage. Situated on a hill between the two great industrial conurbations of Leeds and Bradford, Pudsey had grown prosperous in the 18th and 19th centuries through its manufacture of woollen cloth, a prosperity that had faded by the 1930s as the Great Depression began to bite.

It was here that Ray Illingworth was born on 8 June 1932, in Parkfield Close, in the shadow of St Lawrence Church, one of the few churches to give their name to a cricket club. He was the only child of Fred Illingworth, who ran a cabinet-making, joinery and furniture business, and Ida Wilson, a kindly housewife who took her maternal responsibilities very conscientiously. Both parents were pillars of the local Unitarian Church and were honest, down-to-earth types who worked hard, saved carefully and helped those in trouble. Devoted to their son, they ensured that he was well fed and smartly attired and impressed upon him the importance of such basic values as honesty, modesty, discipline and diligence.

In common with many northern towns at that time, when church and chapel held sway, Pudsey was a hive of communal activity with its Sunday Schools, church choirs, choral societies, brass bands, working men's clubs and cricket and football teams. From humble origins at the beginning of the 19th century, cricket in the town acquired a greater prominence when it came under the influence of the churches, manifest in its two eminent cricket clubs, Pudsey St Lawrence, formed in 1845, and Pudsey Britannia, formed in 1854. Between them they nurtured some of Yorkshire's finest: John Tunnicliffe, who represented the county between 1891 and 1907, formed a notable opening partnership with Jack Brown. Together they shared 19 stands exceeding 100 and in 1898 they established a record partnership of 554 against Derbyshire, a record subsequently broken by another Pudsey man, Herbert Sutcliffe, when he and Percy Holmes scored 555 for Yorkshire against Essex in 1932.

Major Booth (Major being his first name and not a military rank), the son of a prosperous Pudsey grocer, was a formidable all-rounder who first played for Yorkshire in 1908. In 1913/14 he made his England debut against South Africa and was on the cusp of greatness when tragedy struck. Leading his men from the West Yorkshire regiment at the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916, he was mortally wounded and died in the arms of Abe Waddington, later of Yorkshire and England, an experience that haunted Waddington for the rest of his life.

Herbert Sutcliffe was born in the village of Summerbridge, near Harrogate, but lived most of his life in Pudsey and played for both of its cricket clubs. War delayed his debut for Yorkshire till 1919, but he quickly established himself as a player of exceptional class and went on to form a prolific opening partnership for England

with Jack Hobbs. In a career which extended until 1939 and in which he scored over 50,000 runs, few moments gave him greater pleasure than the civic reception Pudsey accorded him in April 1925 on his return from his triumphant tour of Australia when the town brass band played ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes’.

Sutcliffe was to act as mentor to another Pudsey prodigy, Len Hutton, born in 1916, who first played for Pudsey St Lawrence aged 13. Making his debut for Yorkshire in 1934 and for England in 1937, Hutton achieved immortality the following year by scoring 364 against Australia at The Oval, the highest individual score in a Test until it was surpassed by the West Indian Gary Sobers in 1958. His achievement brought further renown to Pudsey and the town celebrated it with a peal of the church’s bells 364 times.

Hutton survived a debilitating injury to his arm in war-time to remain England’s most prominent batsman for another decade, and in 1952 he became his country’s first professional captain. Unbeaten in six rubbers during his three years in charge, he regained the Ashes in 1953 and retained them in Australia in 1954/55, the prelude to his retirement and a well-merited knighthood.

Pudsey was also the birthplace of other notable Yorkshire cricketers: Harry Halliday, who played either side of the Second World War, Billy Sutcliffe, who captained the club in the mid-1950s, and Richard Hutton, who emulated his famous father by playing for Yorkshire and England. When Illingworth made his debut for Yorkshire in 1951, he was one of four Pudsey-born players in the side.

In 1935 the Illingworths moved to the textile village of Farsley, three miles from Pudsey, where Fred’s business was located, living at 7 Bryan Street in rented accommodation. Ray Illingworth later wrote that living and growing up in a row of terraced houses was

‘not nearly as bad as some sociologists would have us believe’. ‘At least it wasn’t during my childhood. There was a natural community spirit – we all knew each other intimately.’

During the 1930s, Fred’s cabinet business was earning him a steady income, but the onset of war in 1939 compelled him to close it and go into munitions. Illingworth recalled him dropping a shell on his foot in an armaments factory at neighbouring Rodley and having to have the boot cut away from a broken toe. He also recalled the air-raid sirens sounding which rattled the windows of their home, given its proximity to the police station where the sirens were based, and the lights going out, but, despite this and the food shortages, life proceeded more or less as before.

When peace was restored in 1945, Fred found it difficult to re-establish his business, largely because of the shortage of timber, but he was versatile enough to turn his hand to other skills.

Content living in this self-contained community, Illingworth went to the city as little as possible because he was a terrible traveller. He recalled returning from a day in Leeds with his parents and having to get off the bus two miles from home because of travel sickness. He did, however, enjoy his trips to Bradford for the Christmas pantomime and the annual seaside holiday to Bridlington. There they stayed at Mrs Tate’s lodging house, drove the dodgem cars at the funfair, played cricket on the beach and went for long walks up to Flamborough Head. Although money was tight, it wasn’t a major inconvenience for Illingworth because he and his friends made their own fun. He wrote, ‘My childhood was happy and comfortable and secure and I did not feel the need to ask for anything more than I had. At the pictures our imaginations were fed on the swashbuckling exploits of Errol Flynn and Tyrone Power, and then we went home and translated

them into our own terms. We moved into our own world and lived our private fantasies. They were simple and harmless, giving us hours of pleasure and causing no one any disquiet or offence.'

His only scrape occurred when the local bobby caught him and his friends sledging down one of the main roads and took them off to the police station, where they remained until they were collected by their worried parents.

In a tight-knit community where everyone knew everybody else, there was never any shortage of takers for a game of football and cricket. They played in the street, in the fields or on any piece of unkempt ground, preparing their own wickets. On one occasion, a herd of cows strayed on to their pitch and they had to spend part of their precious pocket money getting it level again. Such was their commitment that on occasions Illingworth and his friends walked three miles to Calverley Park, taking with them a large roller and mower. There they cut and rolled the pitch and had a full-scale match with Fred Illingworth acting as the umpire. Later, during the war, when all the fields were ploughed up, Farsley Cricket Club had access to a horse and he could draw the cutters across the square, enabling Illingworth and his friends, including some evacuees, to play there.

Fred Illingworth had been a useful cricketer in the Pudsey Sunday School League, the competition that gave Herbert Sutcliffe his introduction to cricket, and it was he who gave his son his love of the game and his first bat at the age of three, which became his prized possession. Together with his friends, Illingworth played whenever the opportunity presented itself. Foremost among them was Donald Jones, a highly gifted sportsman and near-neighbour with whom he was almost inseparable; Billy Hudson, who introduced him to billiards and

golf; and Eric Hargate. All of them went on to play for Farsley and although they later drifted apart Illingworth wrote that ‘the golden days of childhood are hallowed memories and all those associated with them remain important figures in one’s life. Donald Jones and Eric Hargate and Billy Hudson were part of growing up, to me; they are part of my life, a part which I remember with warmth and affection.’

During the latter part of the war, when Hutton was playing in the Bradford League, Illingworth cycled to all the grounds to follow his idol and study his technique. ‘Len was an inspiration for any starry-eyed cricket lad. To see him play on a turning wicket was an education in itself. The ball never seemed to turn when he was batting. He was always in such a sound position to play his strokes.’

At Frances Street Elementary School, Illingworth monopolised the batting in the school playground where stumps were chalked on the wall of the building, so much so that one of the masters, Teddy Shepherd, bowled him leg breaks and googlies in the hope of getting the others a bat.

With his aptitude for maths, geography and woodwork and his general all-round ability, Illingworth quite enjoyed studying, but, displaying a mind of his own, unusual for someone of his age, he declined the opportunity of going to grammar school because the greater amount of homework would curtail his opportunities for sport.

He continued to perform creditably at Wesley Street School and at a time when discipline was very strict – the headmaster Mr Ingham and his colleague Mr Sutcliffe wielded six-foot canes – he remained on the right side of the law. The two exceptions to this rule were the time he was asked to pick up a new cane from a

basket shop and sawed it in half so it broke when it was first used; then, on 3 July 1946, when he and his friend David Swallow, later an award-winning journalist, played truant to watch Yorkshire face the Indians at Bradford, the first time they’d been to a first-class game.

Rising early to ensure they were at the front of the queue, they were photographed by the local newspaper, which appeared in the next day’s edition, and was seen by their headmaster. Fortunately for them, Mr Ingham had a sneaking regard for their nerve – they had gone to see Hutton, after all, who made 183 – and let them off with a mild rebuke. In general, he was a successful pupil, coming second out of 20 in class during his final year, excelling in school sports and winning praise from the headmaster for his care with the National Savings money contributed by the children.

Although Wesley Street lacked facilities of their own, they were able to play their home games of cricket at Farsley Cricket Club. Appointed captain at the age of 14, Illingworth dominated the organised competition between the local schools, averaging 100 with the bat and taking 30 wickets at 2.4. In a challenge match against Wyther Park School, Leeds – both schools led their respective section of the school league – he took 5-11 and scored 52 out of 64 to win by ten wickets.

Wesley Street’s use of the Farsley cricket ground reinforced Illingworth’s links with the club. Prior to this, he had practised at Pudsey St Lawrence, but when they refused to select him for their second XI on grounds of his youth, he joined Farsley in 1946, and was immediately placed in their third team.

Noting the enthusiasm of many youngsters at Farsley, one of their first XI, Eddie Hargrave, persuaded the committee to form an under-16 side and enter the Bradford Junior League. They

duly marked their entry the following year by easily winning the trophy – Illingworth picking up the batting award – and they demonstrated their prowess by beating the league’s best XI by five wickets. Hargrave, who managed the side, promised them a bag of chips each if they beat local rivals Bowling Old Lane and after the match he was talking to his opposite number when Illingworth approached him and said, ‘Come on, we are all in the chip shop.’ He wanted his reward.

Spending every spare minute down at the club, Illingworth joined in the Tuesday and Thursday evening ritual of rolling the pitch in preparation for the weekend game, during which he learned much about the capricious nature of pitches, knowledge that proved invaluable throughout his career. He also discussed the intricacies of the game with club veterans such as Donald Waterhouse, who took over 1,000 wickets in the Bradford League, and Harry Bailes. ‘Raymond was always a mature lad,’ wrote Hargrave, ‘but he’d listen to advice and was never the least big-headed.’ In August 1946 he made an inauspicious debut for Farsley second XI by failing to score and his progress was unspectacular the following year, because he still lacked the physical strength to get the ball away, but in 1948 he took a big step forward with his promotion to the first XI, which played in the second division of the Bradford League.

The Bradford League, formed in 1903, was one of the oldest and fiercest in the world with its galaxy of top-flight cricketers and hard-nosed ethos. During the First World War it had played host to such names as Sydney Barnes, Jack Hobbs, Herbert Sutcliffe and Wilfred Rhodes and thereafter it was the arena in which the likes of Len Hutton, Jim Laker and Bob Appleyard cut their teeth. With its proud traditions, local rivalries and large, partisan crowds,

the cricket wasn't for the faint-hearted and those who survived this tough baptism were invariably men of steel.

Because of injuries, Illingworth was thrust into the Farsley first XI in May 1948 in the Whitsun derby against Pudsey St Lawrence, who ranked among the top sides in the Bradford League. In beautiful weather and in front of a large crowd of over 2,000 in deckchairs, both sides struggled with a bumpy wicket which caused a couple of injuries, but none of this deterred Illingworth. Displaying that sound temperament which so characterised his career, he impressed with both bat and ball, helping his side to a draw. The *Pudsey and Stanningley News* cricket correspondent wrote, 'Feature of the game was the performance of 15-year-old Raymond Illingworth, of 7 Bryan Street, on his debut with the senior side. He first took a hand with the bowling, when Pudsey were digging themselves in and finished with the best average on the Farsley side with 3-14 in six overs. But it was not all – young Illingworth then went on to further delight with a well-played innings that received wide commendation.' Realising a new talent in their midst, captain Harry Bailes said to him, 'Don't you go and ask to go back to the second team' – a reference to Donald Jones's request after he'd lost form. 'Don't worry,' replied Illingworth. 'There's no way I'm going to want to go back.'

As part of Farsley's youth policy, Illingworth was given every chance to establish himself, often by opening or batting at number three. After scoring 43 against Bankfoot, the local paper wrote, 'It was the promising youngster who stood firm while wickets fell around him.' This was the high point of his season, along with captaining Farsley under-16s to another triumph. When they made it three Championships in a row in 1949, Illingworth was presented with a special trophy.

In 1948 Yorkshire had invited him to the nets at Headingley where he came under the supervision of head coach Arthur Mitchell, known as ‘Ticker’, and his assistant Bill Bowes, both mainstays of the great Yorkshire side of the 1930s. Mitchell, a dour middle-order batsman who played six times for England, was as tough as granite and treated a net practice like a Test match. A figure of austere integrity who abhorred flamboyance both on and off the field, he unnerved many of his proteges with his acerbic tongue and reluctance to praise, designed partly to test their temperaments, but those who could withstand his jibes appreciated a coach of rare pedigree. Illingworth called Mitchell the most honest person he’d ever encountered and his perfectionist temperament reinforced his own conviction that the game should never be played frivolously. ‘I don’t know who this youngster is but he will play for Yorkshire,’ remarked England spinner Johnny Wardle after bowling to Illingworth in the nets, and Mitchell himself remarked that if Illingworth didn’t represent the county he deserved to be sacked.

In August of that year Illingworth was chosen to tour the south of England with the Yorkshire Cricket Federation, which comprised the best under-18s in the county. The team contained such names as fast bowler Fred Trueman and all-rounder Brian Close, both of whom were to become good friends of Illingworth. The ebullient Trueman led the singing as the coach headed south and drew great cheers when he dangled Illingworth out of the window to be travel sick. He and Close were the leading personalities, providing much of the entertainment and consorting with the local girls whenever the opportunity presented itself.

They also provided the fireworks on the field, not least in the game against Sussex Colts, when Close scored a century and

Trueman took four wickets. ‘It was no contest,’ recalled Jim Parks, the Sussex and England wicketkeeper, who played in that game. ‘They were such a good side and all had played league cricket in Yorkshire. Compared to us they were hardened pros.’

While Trueman and Close made their debuts for Yorkshire the following summer, Illingworth began to turn heads at a lower level, especially in the Priestley Cup, the knockout competition of the Bradford League. Having scored 41 not out against Bankfoot to help Farsley win their second-round tie, he came of age in the third round against Pudsey St Lawrence. In a game played over successive midweek evenings, and in front of capacity crowds at Farsley, Illingworth hit an undefeated 148 out of his side’s total of 394. It was the highest individual score in the competition for eight years and the photo of Illingworth celebrating his innings in front of the scoreboard occupies pride of place in the Farsley clubhouse to this day. ‘Young Illingworth, the phrase has been on the lips of all local cricket enthusiasts this week,’ gushed the *Pudsey and Stanningley News*, as it profiled his career to date. The *Bradford Observer* called his innings ‘a wonderful display’ and the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* correspondent wrote, ‘For a mere boy who has graduated through Farsley school and junior cricket ... his batting was an extraordinary combination of endurance and skill and richly deserved the £21 collection to which his “political” friends contributed after close of play.’ (He spent the money on kitting himself out with cricket gear.)

Farsley won by 100 runs and easily beat Lightcliffe in the semi-final to play Yeadon in the final at Bradford’s Park Avenue ground. Needing only 20 runs to beat the former Nottinghamshire batsman Walter Keeton’s record of runs scored in the Priestley Cup in one season, Illingworth was out for 1 as Farsley lost by five wickets.

Before the final, Illingworth had made his debut for the Yorkshire Colts (the second XI) against Northumberland and although achieving little in this game and two subsequent ones that season, he later recounted the thrill of getting paid. 'I felt I was a millionaire getting two of those big white fivers. I hadn't earned anything like that working with my dad so it seemed a lot of money to me.'

Up to the age of 17, Illingworth had wavered between a career in cricket or football. After leaving school, he played wing-half for Farsley Celtic but mainly with Pudsey Athletic, a talented side on a level with Ashley Road, Leeds United's junior side. He was invited to trials with Huddersfield Town, Bradford City and Aston Villa – their scout said he was the best two-footed player he'd seen – but he was dissuaded from pursuing a footballing career by Norman Jackson, a member of the Pudsey Athletic committee, and a Pudsey St Lawrence cricketer. He told him to stick to cricket, a line reinforced by Illingworth's father. He fretted about the risk of injury and reminded him that there was less money in football in those days compared to cricket. Accepting their advice, Illingworth contented himself with playing a high standard during National Service, when every RAF station had four or five professionals and for charity matches thereafter. 'Dickie' Bird, his Yorkshire team-mate, recalls him playing left-half for a Yorkshire XI against a Showbusiness XI at Oxford Stadium, Bradford, and performing admirably. He continued to follow the game closely – his idol being Tom Finney, the great Preston North End and England player – and he became good friends with Leeds United's manager, Don Revie, and their centre-half, Jack Charlton.

Illingworth continued to make progress in 1950, hitting 76 against Durham and 69 against Northumberland for the second

XI, and scoring more freely in the Bradford League. According to the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, 'A pleasant feature of the Farsley and Keighley encounter was the excellent innings played by their 18-year-old Yorkshire colt Raymond Illingworth. Batting exactly two hours, his fine effort contained 11 fours and his score of 80 runs was the highest obtained in League Cricket since he was promoted to the Farsley first team in 1948.'

He also matured as a medium-pacer who occasionally resorted to spin. When playing for Wesley Street against Wyther Park School in 1946, he suddenly sent down a slower one which turned a fair bit, prompting the opposing umpire to say, 'If you can bowl off breaks like that, lad, don't waste your time on seamers.'

Increasingly inclined to follow that advice in the nets at Farsley, his promise was noted by club professional Jackie Firth, who was soon to leave Yorkshire to become Leicestershire's wicketkeeper. On 2 September 1950, Farsley had been dismissed for 58 on a rain-affected wicket by Saltaire and with their left-arm spinner out of sorts they appeared to be heading for defeat. Recalling his off breaks at practice, Firth told Illingworth to get on and bowl his spinners. His suggestion was taken up by the captain and Illingworth duly obliged with 5-5 in his side's three-run victory. His success, and 5-13 against Lightcliffe the following weekend, proved defining moments in a year in which Yorkshire coach Bill Bowes, concerned that Illingworth lacked the necessary pace to meet the club's needs as a seamer, changed him into an off-spinner.

In October 1950 Illingworth was called up for National Service in the RAF and was posted to Cheltenham. By good fortune the posting officer, who came from Dishforth, Yorkshire, was a fanatical cricketer and he recommended Illingworth for a posting to the RAF station there, some 30 miles from Bradford. On his

return, he suffered an acute attack of pneumonia and only the fervent determination of his family saved him from an operation that would have destroyed his ribcage.

Told not to apply for a specific trade which would have sent him on a course but stick to general duties, he was appointed in charge of sports stores and managed to complete his stint of service without performing guard duty. He also managed to play a lot of football for the station and cricket for the RAF and Combined Services, which he much enjoyed. Representing the former against the Army at Lord's, along with Jim Parks, Fred Titmus and Alan Moss, all future England team-mates, he bagged a pair, the only one in his career, falling to Close in the second innings, and took 4-58 in a draw very much in the Army's favour.

A chanceless 133 for the Yorkshire Colts against Nottinghamshire impressed all those who saw it and, weeks later, he was due to play for Combined Services against Warwickshire, when he was summoned to Headingley to make his first-team debut. Yorkshire were playing Hampshire and the circumstances couldn't have been more challenging when he walked to the wicket at 40/4 to join his captain, Norman Yardley. Undaunted by the threat posed by opening bowler Vic Cannings – who'd taken all four wickets – and the cluster of close fielders, he negotiated the attack with aplomb, his rock-solid defence giving way to a series of stylish cover drives which bore a resemblance to his idol Hutton. 'When I started playing cricket, I just hit everything through the covers,' Illingworth later recollected. 'That was just from watching Len, the best there's been as far as I'm concerned.'

He was fortunate to have the encouragement of his captain at the other end, although one leg-side swat which nearly went for six called for a word of caution. While the large crowd went

into raptures, Yardley came down the pitch and said, 'Keep 'em on the floor, lad!' When he was finally out to Cannings for 56, Illingworth had added 148 with Yardley, who remained unbeaten on 183 in Yorkshire's total of 378/7 declared, a total that set them up for a ten-wicket victory.

His success left him totally grounded. The local reporter found him casually throwing a ball about with friends on arriving at the Farsley ground to interview him, and when asked to describe his debut, Illingworth called it his lucky date. He didn't know why he'd been given precedence over Close, by then an England player, and confirming his wish to be a professional cricketer, he said he would make a much better cricketer than cabinet-maker.

Although National Service restricted Illingworth's appearances in 1952, he was primarily available for Farsley. He began in scintillating form making 162 not out against Saltaire, hitting 23 off one eight-ball over, and 81 against Brighouse. He followed up with 5-25 against Bowling Old Lane and 84 against Lidget Green and he continued to score prodigiously in a year in which he averaged 64.92 in the league. In the return game against Lidget Green, he survived a hostile spell from Bill Copson, the former Derbyshire and England bowler, who took a hat-trick, before he and Gordon Barker, later of Essex, added 141 for the fourth wicket to earn them an honourable draw. Then, in the final game of the season, he took 6-70 and scored 91 not out in Farsley's ten-wicket victory against Windhill, which secured them promotion to the first division of the Bradford League.

He enjoyed playing for the Combined Services under Squadron Leader Alan Shirreff, representing them against the Indians at Gillingham. Despite being one of four future England players in the team – Trueman had recently made his Test debut – they lost

by nine wickets, but he made useful runs in the RAF's win over the Royal Navy and took 5-32 in the draw against the Army. He also gained his first three wickets in the County Championship against Gloucestershire at Bristol, his victims including Jack Crapp, a former England player, and Arthur Milton, a future one.

At the end of his National Service, Illingworth returned to the joinery business with something less than enthusiasm. Eddie Hargrave recalled father and son coming to his house to polish a suite of furniture and Ray spending most of the time staring out of the window. Yet for all that, it was a job and his father would always give him time off to play cricket as he strove hard to make it with Yorkshire. Later he was to write, 'Frankly I couldn't have managed at that time without the help I received from my parents, who did so much in many ways, to further my ambition as a cricketer.'