
Opening Extract from...

A History of Cricket in 100 Objects

Written by Gavin Mortimer

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A HISTORY OF CRICKET IN 100 OBJECTS

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For Margot, when she comes of cricket age

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Introduction

We've done it! A history of cricket in 100 objects. If we had a helmet on we'd remove it, kiss the badge and then wipe our brow. Instead we'll raise our pen in recognition of reaching three figures because it's been no easy task. How can you chronicle in 100 objects a sport that has been played for more than 500 years? Initially we came up with a list of more than 200 objects before cutting as lavishly as Sachin Tendulkar until we were down to a ton of cricketing trivia.

No doubt some will question our object selection the way they might question Kevin Pietersen's shot selection as he lofts a catch to deep square leg on 97. But in selecting our century of objects (of which all had to be inanimate) we have endeavoured to chart how cricket spread from being the most English of pastimes to become a sporting obsession from Barbados to Brisbane to Bombay.

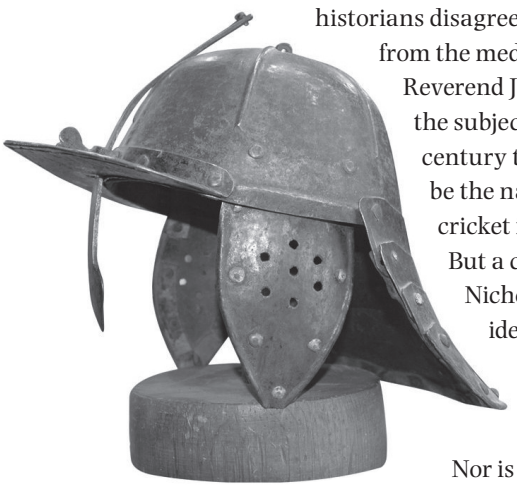
We have followed the changes in laws, tools, technology, attitudes and format, but we have also, we hope, shown that over the centuries one aspect of this great game has remained constant – the spirit in which cricket is played.

We accept that some will disagree with our final choice of objects, but then isn't questioning selectors' decisions one of cricket's core appeals? So, as we retire to the pavilion to enjoy a cheese-and-pickle sandwich and a nice cup of tea, we'll leave you to carry on the innings. Good luck, and watch out for the googlies.

Roundhead helmet

'Hundreds of pages have been written on the origin and early history of cricket,' explained A.G Steel, a former teammate of W.G. Grace's in the England side of the 1880s, and the Hon. Robert Henry Lyttelton in their tome on the game entitled *Cricket*. 'The Egyptian monuments and Holy Scriptures, the illuminated books of the Middle Ages, and the terra-cottas and vases of Greece have been studied, to no practical purpose, by historians of the game.'

And they wrote that in 1888! One hundred and twenty years later tens of thousands of trees have been felled in printing books which attempt to unravel the origins of cricket, but still the mystery remains.



One of the principal points on which cricket historians disagree is whether cricket is derived from the medieval game of club-ball. The Reverend James Pyecroft was sure on the subject, writing in the nineteenth century that 'club-ball we believe to be the name which usually stood for cricket in the thirteenth century'. But a contemporary of Pyecroft's, Nicholas Felix, pooh-poohed the idea, commenting that club-ball was a 'very ancient game and totally distinct from cricket'.

Nor is much credence given these

days to the idea that a young Edward II played a form of cricket, passed down to him by his grandfather, Henry III, King of England from 1216 to 1272.

Things become clearer towards Tudor times, all thanks to a fifty-nine-year-old gentleman called John Derrick. In 1598, the fortieth year of Elizabeth's reign, Derrick was embroiled in a legal dispute over a plot of land in Guildford. Called to testify in a Guildford court, Derrick explained that, as a local schoolboy, 'hee and diverse of his fellows did runne and play there at creckett and other plaies'.

So there we have it, cricket was definitely being played on village greens in the mid-sixteenth century. Perhaps Henry VIII was a fan, what with his reputation for maidens. By the early seventeenth century references to cricket were common. In 1611 'boyes played at crickett' with a 'cricket-staffe', while Maidstone in Kent was damned as a 'very profane town' in the 1630s on account of 'morris dancing, cudgel playing, stoolball, crickets, and many other sports openly and publickly on the Lord's Day'.

More to contend with than a few dozen peasants playing cricket on a Sunday

Such a sentiment reflected the increasing spread of Puritanism throughout England in the first half of the seventeenth century. As its joyless influence grew, so cricket lovers were persecuted for their passion; eight players in Sussex were fined for playing the game in 1637 and seven men of Kent were ordered to pay two shillings each after admitting they'd taken guard on the Sabbath.

But soon England had more pressing matters to contend with than a few dozen peasants playing cricket on a Sunday. In 1642 civil war erupted between the Royalist supporters of Charles I and Oliver Cromwell's Roundhead army, culminating in the execution of the king in 1649. Cromwell became Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland and, even

though he was rumoured to have played cricket in his youth, his government had no time for the game. 'Puritanism was tough on recreation and it is unsurprising that cricket was targeted,' wrote John Major, who, like Cromwell, represented the constituency of Huntingdon while a Member of Parliament. 'The austere piety of the Puritans' belief, and their determination to make people devout, was bound to be in conflict with the exuberant joy of a ball game.'

Consequently, many well-heeled Royalist sympathisers retired from London to their country seats in Kent and Sussex. Here they were exposed for the first time to cricket, taking up the game out of sheer boredom, and when they returned to the capital following the Restoration in 1660 they brought with them their new pastime.

Cromwell was dead, Charles II was king and England was no longer in thrall to the Puritans. Theatres and taverns reopened, gambling and prostitution thrived and cricket began to take hold among the great and the good of London. 'In a year or two it became the thing in London society to make matches and to form clubs,' wrote cricket historian Harry Altham. 'Thus was inaugurated that regime of feudal patronage which was to control the destinies of the game for the next century or more.'

And, as we shall see in our next chapter, one of the staunchest patrons of cricket in the eighteenth century was a man who was as much a playboy as Cromwell was a Puritan.

House of Hanover coat of arms

What, you may ask, is a German coat of arms doing in a history of cricket? Well, it's a curious tale but one that bears telling. Hanover was the royal dynasty that ended with the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 and which included, nearly two centuries earlier, Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales.

Freddie was many things, a fop and a philanderer among them, but he was also a lover of cricket, and without his royal patronage the sport wouldn't have gained such cachet among the English nobility of the eighteenth century.

Frederick was born in Hanover in 1707, the same year that in London the English capital stages its most illustrious cricket match to date, a clash between a London XI and a team of gentlemen from Croydon at Lamb's Conduit Fields in Holborn.

As we saw in our last chapter, cricket had been brought to the capital on the back of the Restoration, and in the half-century following the succession of Charles II the game took a firm hold in the south-east of England.

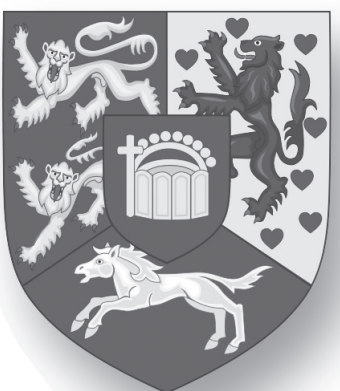
There was still bear-baiting, cock-fighting and bare-knuckled boxing, but cricket offered the more discerning Englishman something a little less bloody. Patrons began cropping up, wealthy enthusiasts who used their money to spread further the appeal of cricket. Edward Stead was a prominent one in Kent, forming his own XI in the 1720s and challenging teams from London and Surrey. In 1728

his side took on the Duke of Richmond's XI for a 'large sum of money', and a few months later Stead's men defeated a Sussex team sponsored by Sir William Gage.

Gambling was at the heart of these matches, which is why the aristocracy were so attracted. Richmond wasn't the only cricketing duke. There were Newcastle, Dorset and Bedford, the latter regularly staging matches at his sprawling estate at Woburn Park against sides that included an Earl of Sandwich XI.

But no earl or duke could match the passion of a prince for cricket. Quite why 'Poor Fred' developed such a love for the game is unknown. Originally he may have adopted the game as a means of proving his 'Englishness', conscious that a blue-blood from Hanover was always going to have a hard time winning over the locals. But Frederick clearly developed a genuine love for cricket and was a regular at Kennington and other grounds across the country from 1731 onwards.

It was said that after a match between Surrey and Middlesex in 1733 the prince was so impressed by the quality of cricket that he paid each player a guinea. Two years later he sponsored a Surrey XI against London in a match played at Moulsey Hurst, and then he began playing himself. The Duke of Marlborough's XI was defeated by the prince and his men in 1737, HRH winning a 'considerable sum' in the process.



Though Frederick had a venomous relationship with his father, George II, he was on better terms with his younger brother, Prince William, Duke of Cumberland, himself a cricket lover when he wasn't butchering Scots. The pair were present at the Artillery Ground in 1744 to see Kent play an All-England XI, a contest won eventually by Kent. It was hailed by the contemporary press

as 'the greatest cricket match ever known', and the poet James Love dipped his quill in ink to mark the occasion, beginning:

Hail, cricket! Glorious, manly, British Game!
First of all Sports! Be first alike in Fame!

By the mid-eighteenth century cricket's roots were thick, deep and growing, thanks to its aristocratic patrons. From Sussex to Kent to East Anglia, clubs were being founded, such as the one in Norwich, which advertised in the *Norwich Mercury* for 'lovers of cricket' to join.

When Dr Johnson published *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755 he defined cricket as 'a sport of which the contenders drive a ball with sticks in opposition to each other'. He would have known, having played the game while studying at Oxford in 1729.

By then, however, the Prince of Wales was dead. It was said he was injured by the ball during a game of cricket at his Buckinghamshire home in 1749. Two years later, while dancing at Leicester House, he collapsed and died from a burst abscess on the lung, some in the medical profession attributing the abscess to the blow from the cricket ball.

Killed by a cricket ball – it's the way the prince would have wished to go.

Cricket bat

As we've just seen, Dr Johnson in his dictionary described cricket as a game played 'with sticks'. When cricket laid down its first set of laws in 1744 the bat was not a priority. Any shape, size and style was permitted, though most gentlemen used a long bat which was curved at the bottom, a hybrid of a hockey stick and a golf club.

'A big proportion of the weight was in the curve,' wrote H.J. Henley in a 1937 essay for a book celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Marylebone Cricket Club, 'planned to block or scoop away the primitive bowling in vogue, which was of the fast underhand variety, the type known in later years as "sneaks", "grubs"', "grounders" and "daisy cutters".'

The man credited with making the first significant alteration to the shape of the bat was John Small, described by a contemporary as 'a remarkably well-made and well-knit man, of honest expression and as active as a hare'. His 1773 bat had square shoulders from handle to blade, not the wine-bottle shoulders of previous designs. At around the same time (historians disagree on the exact date) Thomas 'Shock' White of Reigate took guard in a

game against Hambledon, armed with what Henley described as a 'monstrosity wider than the wicket'. Nonetheless there was nothing in the laws of the game to punish White's innovative impertinence, not until the laws were amended in 1774 to restrict the width of the bat to 4½ inches. Subsequently its maximum length was set at 38 inches.

Though the width and the length haven't changed in nearly 250 years, the weight and the shape have altered drastically. Up until the mid-nineteenth century bats were made all in one piece until, in 1853, handles with two strips of whalebone inside the cane were introduced. This absorbed the shock of leather on willow and handles made from India rubber helped batsmen grip the bat better.

The biggest change in shape was in the early twentieth century. Where once bats had been the same thickness from splice to base, 'gradually they were given a bulge in the part where the ball is met by a correctly executed stroke'. In writing these words in 1937 H.J. Henley expressed his doubt that the extra weight made much of a difference. 'The great players of the [eighteen] eighties made drives which carried as far as those of present-day cricketers, but men who have had practical experience of both the "thin" blade and the "fat" say that the latter puts more force into a purely defensive stroke.'

In 1853 handles with strips of whalebone inside the cane were introduced

For W.G. Grace balance was the overriding factor in choosing a bat. 'I play with a bat weighing 2lb 5oz, which, I think, is heavy enough for anybody,' he wrote in 1899. 'But a few ounces make very little difference if the bat is really well balanced.'

Grace also mentioned the other dimensions he looked for in his bats. 'The ordinary and best length is 34½ inches, the blade 22 and the handle 12½,' he advised. 'Some cricketers prefer thick handles and others like thin ones, this point must be determined by the size and length of the hand.'

Grace's advice was followed by the next great of the game, Don Bradman, whose bat weighed 2 pounds 4 ounces, but one of the Don's Australian teammates, Bill Ponsford, became famous in the 1920s for his 'Big Bertha' bat, a mighty club of some 2 pounds 9 ounces.

That's the average weight of an international player's bat in the twenty-first century, though the power-hitting required for Twenty20 has led some batsmen to take a 3-pound bat to the wicket. Despite various attempts to tamper with the composition from the traditional white willow – which won out over red willow in the nineteenth century because it is softer – cricket bats remain essentially the same as they did in Grace's time.

Bat manufacturers can go on as much as they want about 'enlarged sweet spots', 'low impact areas' and 'perimeter weighting', but what it comes down to is how the piece of willow feels in the batsman's hands. 'I am repeatedly asked whose bats are the best, and what maker's I play with,' a famous cricketer said in the past. 'My answer is I play with any good bat I can get hold of, never minding who is the maker, as long as the bat is not too heavy and is well balanced, and suits me to handle.'

The cricketer's name? W.G. Grace.