

SAMPLE EDITION

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SUMMER 2021

THE
Nightwatchman

THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

WISDEN



THE Nightwatchman

THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

Cricket's past has been enriched by great writing and Wisden is making sure its future will be too. *The Nightwatchman* is a quarterly collection of essays and long-form articles and is available in print and e-book formats.

Co-edited by Anjali Doshi and Tanya Aldred, with Matt Thacker as managing editor, *The Nightwatchman* features an array of authors from around the world, writing beautifully and at length about the game and its myriad offshoots. Contributors are given free rein over subject matter and length, escaping the pressures of next-day deadlines and the despair of cramming heart and soul into a few paragraphs.

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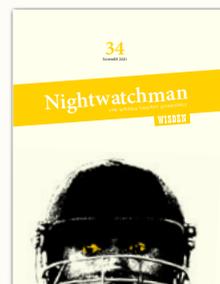
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A STRANGER IN PARADISE

Stephen Chalke recalls the most improbable tale of them all

Stokes and Leach at Headingley, Carlos Brathwaite's last-over sixes in the World T20 final – or the day back in 1969 when the touring West Indians travelled to Northern Ireland and were bowled out for 25. Oh the joy of such unlikely moments! How they enrich the folklore of the game!

Yet, for sheer crazy improbability, none of these can match what occurred on a Saturday in May 1955, in a routine county fixture at Grace Road, Leicester. The sparse morning crowd had grown to 4,000 by late afternoon, and what they witnessed must rank as the most extraordinary bowling spell in the long history of the first-class game.

Leicestershire versus Surrey. It was David versus Goliath. The cash-strapped Midland county, more often than not near the bottom of the Championship table, against a Surrey side in the fourth summer of an unparalleled seven-year reign as champions. The previous August, when Surrey had visited Grace Road, they had steamrollered their hosts in quick

time, the first in a run of 18 successive victories that remains even now the record in first-class cricket. They were the greatest county side of all time, and they were at the height of their powers.

May 1955. Another world. Television was in its infancy, with just one channel broadcasting for limited hours, and even that was a worry for the *Leicester Chronicle's* TV critic. "The real trouble with television," she wrote that Saturday, "is that there is too much of it, and it is catering for too large an audience." Yet perhaps it was not so different a world. The country was in the grip of an epidemic of polio, with hopes resting on a new vaccine. Amid the standard insults of a General Election, a Conservative MP was crudely capturing the headlines by likening his government to a vaccine against the crippling polio-like effects of socialism.

Offering relief from such worries, Tony Bennett was top of the hit parade with "Stranger in Paradise", a romantic ballad from the musical *Kismet*:

Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradise,

All lost in a wonderland, a stranger in paradise.

Saturday, 21 May 1955. It was a dull, overcast day, with a north-east wind blowing across the Grace Road field. Owned by the city's education authority, the ground was not one of county cricket's more popular venues. The exposed five-acre playing area was much too large, with several parts of the outfield rough from schoolboys' football, and the old Victorian pavilion with its ancient baths in the basement had splinters everywhere. According to Trevor Bailey, when the Essex team jokingly discussed suitable punishments for the most heinous cricket crimes, they reckoned one of the worst "would be to sentence the guilty party to playing all his cricket at Grace Road".

Through the 1950s, on and off the field, the threadbare Leicestershire club was in the hands of Charles Palmer, a former schoolmaster who had been recruited from Worcester to double up as both secretary and captain. "Why on earth are you going there?" the Worcestershire secretary asked him. "They've got no money, no side, no ground." But Palmer was feeling the claustrophobia of his schoolmaster's life, and he took up the challenge.

He had neither the physique nor the bearing of a top sportsman. A slightly-built, bespectacled man, with a soft voice and an engaging line in self-deprecating humour, he was once described by Trevor Bailey, rather unkindly, as "a natural for the role of

hen-pecked bank clerk in a farce". Yet those appearances deceived. He worked tirelessly throughout the year to keep the club from bankruptcy, he was always in charge on the field, and he contributed much-needed runs – some 10,000 in his first six summers – and, with his medium-pace bowling, some useful wickets.

That Saturday there was a certain inevitability about the first two sessions of play. Leicestershire, after a bright opening stand of 68, succumbed to the all-conquering Surrey spinners, Laker and Lock, and were all out for 114. At tea Surrey had reached 42 for 1, with Peter May, the best batsman in the country, on 28 not out and looking ominously set for a big score. Already Leicestershire's two finger spinners were in action, the left-arm Vic Munden and the right-arm Vic Jackson, but they were not getting the help from the pitch that their counterparts had done.

During the tea break the spinners pointed out that they were bowling at the wrong ends. "Fine, I'll alter you round," Palmer replied cheerfully but, as the club's secretary, he had plenty to attend to during the interval, and it went out of his mind till he was leading his team back onto the field. "Oh heck," he suddenly thought, "I've got to get someone to bowl one over."

The easiest thing was to do it himself – except that his back had been playing up and his doctor had given him instructions not to bowl, not even in the nets. However, he had tried a couple of tentative overs in the first match of the season and had come to no harm. "Oh well," he thought, "one over won't hurt me."



He marked his run-up from the Pavilion End as Peter May walked past him. "Look, be a good chap," Palmer said, summoning up all his charm. "Don't hit me for six fours. Keep it friendly."

Then it happened. With his second ball he tried an off-cutter, delivered from wide of the crease, and, to everybody's astonishment, it went through May's defence and hit the wicket. "I suppose I'd better have another over," he told his team cheerfully.

Off the fourth ball of his second over Bernie Constable mistimed his shot, skying a catch, and he had a second wicket. This brought Micky Stewart to the crease, a young man with a point to prove. After coming into the Surrey team the previous season and having great success, he was smarting that he had started the summer in the second XI. "I said to Jim Laker: 'If I'm not in the side by the time this season ends, then I'm away.' I felt a bit emotional." Now, with Ken Barrington selected to play for MCC at Lord's, he had his chance to make clear the mistake Surrey were making. He took guard for his first delivery from the unthreatening Palmer – "his pace was no faster than the quicker ball of a spinner" – and the ball, landing on the pitch's last damp patch, kept low, went under his bat and hit the stumps.

"The pitch was dry," Leicestershire's Terry Spencer said, "except for this dinner plate of a patch right on Charles's length." It was too full for the quicker bowlers and too straight for the spinners, but Palmer was a bowler of great accuracy and he hit it repeatedly. In his fifth over he bowled David Fletcher, the Surrey opener who

had been watching bemused from the non-striker's end, and in his sixth he bowled Ronnie Pratt. Six overs, five wickets and not a run scored off him.

"He just treated it as a joke," Spencer recalled. "After each wicket he would say: 'I suppose I'd better have another over now.'"

Andrew and Tim Palmer, his two young sons, were at the game. "The first wicket was met with bright applause," Andrew, then eight years old, recalls. "But as each wicket fell the cheers seemed to morph into sounds more like the 'O/é' shouts at a bullfight."

On and on it went. Two wickets in his eighth over – *O/é* – then one in his 11th, all bowled. And, with the fielders leaping and diving with a fierceness untypical in those days, he completed his 12th over with figures of eight wickets for no runs and Surrey had subsided to 67 for 9.

More than 40 years after the Leicestershire game, a week before he died, I met Bernie Constable, the only one of the eight Surrey batsmen not to be bowled, and he still shuddered at the memory of it. "There may have been a wet patch," he said, "but it was terrible batting. Charles Palmer was just a dobber."

Others have bowled longer spells of maidens, notably the slow left-armed "Bapu" Nadkarni who, in a Test against England at Madras in 1964, went 131 balls without conceding a run – but that was because half the England team were lying sick in bed. Brian Bolus and Ken Barrington were trying to stay at the wicket till some of them

made it to the ground. And Nadkarni did not take a wicket.

Charles Palmer had taken eight wickets for no runs, and in *Wisden's* table of "Extraordinary Analyses" his figures were set to take pride of place among those with eight wickets, overtaking Jim Laker's 8 for 2 in the 1950 Test trial at Bradford. Some in the crowd and in the pavilion, aware of the record, hoped he would take himself off, but Palmer himself had no such thought.

Out of the commonplace,

Into the rare somewhere in space,

A stranger in paradise.

And who should be facing him as he started his 13th over but Jim Laker himself? "Jim was well aware of his record," Micky Stewart says. According to Palmer in the *Daily Mirror*: "He looked at me. 'Charlie, I'm going to do you,' he said. And he did, all off the edge."

Laker's first shot, a drive, took the inside edge, went between his pads and the leg stump and ran away to fine leg for a two. Then he miscued a shot that lobbed in the air, bisecting two fielders in the covers, and they ran another two. In the next over he hit a three before being bowled by Terry Spencer.

Leicestershire had dismissed the mighty Surrey for 77, and the team formed a guard of honour as their captain – a "dobber" with a bad back, supposedly coming on for just one over – strolled off with figures of 14 overs, 12 maidens, eight wickets for seven runs. The most extraordinary

bowling spell in the history of first-class cricket. The story goes that he put his head around the Surrey dressing-room door and said: "Gentlemen, I do beg your pardon."

At close of play, when the local reporter pushed into the pavilion, he found the place swarming with excited cricketers and their supporters, all buzzing with the fairy-tale spell of their captain/secretary. "Everybody seemed to be talking furiously except Charles himself. He was quietly occupied, practical as ever, opening bottles for the celebrants."

"All I remember," he said in later life, "was that I learnt how much whisky I could drink. Very quickly, too, I think."

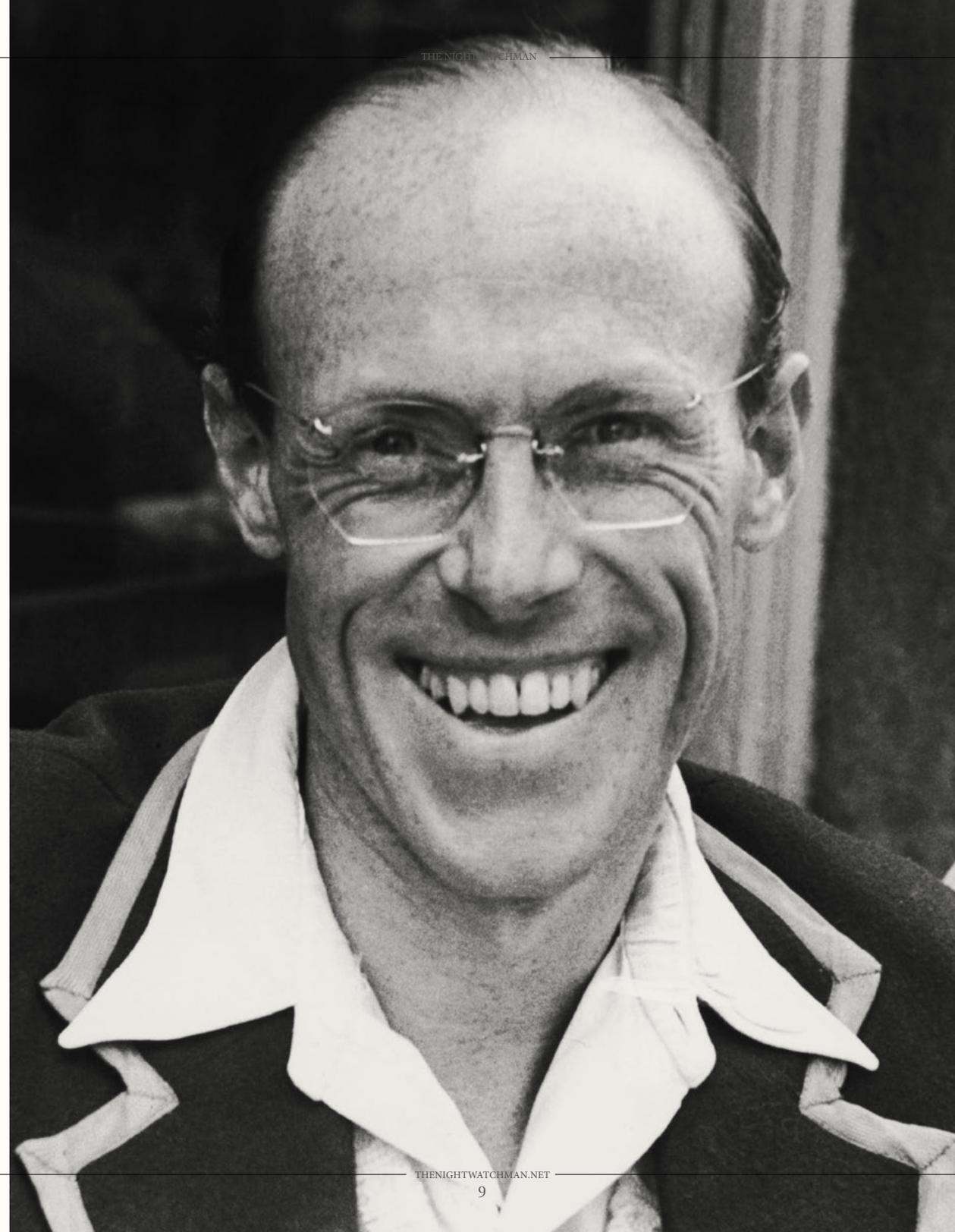
In the second innings, with Surrey winning by seven wickets, he gave himself another 13 overs. This time, with the damp patch gone and the Surrey batsmen treating him with great caution, he did not take a wicket – though he conceded only one run, scored by Bernie Constable off his 71st ball.

The following day, back at The Oval, the Surrey players studied the horses for that afternoon's Derby. Constable knew about racing, but for once he took no notice of form, spotting the name of the jockey riding a horse called Phil Drake. "Palmer!" he exclaimed in his high-pitched voice. "That's got to be the winner." It was only its third outing, and several horses had shorter odds – but, when they huddled round the pavilion radio after bowling out Lancashire, it was Phil Drake, ridden by Freddie Palmer, that came home in first place.

Charles Palmer, asked by Brian Chapman of the *Daily Mirror* if it was his proudest moment in cricket, replied "not on your life", recalling a day seven years earlier at Worcester when he faced the Australian Keith Miller bowling at his fastest. He hit him for a four and, knowing the next delivery would be a bouncer, "I was ready for it and carted him for six. Boy, was that a thrill!"

...

The ball that had taken eight wickets, mounted with the bowling figures engraved on a silver band, sat for many years on the Palmer mantelpiece. It was a source of pride to his boys who, more than 65 years later, still love to drop the unlikely tale into conversation. But to their father it was only ever a source of amusement, not so much a "rare somewhere in space" as "a fluke and a freak".





EXTRACTS

And so there it was, a gun still smoking 150 years after it was fired. Nigel could prove, beyond any doubt, a link between the diary and the *Almanack*. What might that make the diary worth? He doubled down, spending almost four years transcribing, finding new connections, other possibilities. The *Almanack's* strange lists of battles seemed to be of those that featured Elwes's ancestors. The cricket scorecards were laid out the same way in both the diary and the *Almanack*. When the *Almanack* fulfilled its promise and began to feature match reports, they read in the same florid, almost sardonic style that Elwes used for his. And had *Wisden* included his list of Classics winners as a nod to Elwes's love of horse racing and his father's history with the Derby? Incrementally, without his really noticing, the diary came to dominate Nigel's life.

He gave up on the idea of selling it. Once he realised its connection to *Wisden* he began keeping it in the bank vault in Hemel Hempstead, where it was wrapped in a couple of plastic bags inside a locked box. He put up a website called *Wisden's Secret* that detailed his findings. He began sitting in the road outside Lord's in a patio chair next to a sign that read: "WHAT IS WISDEN'S BIG SECRET? THE 1ST EDITION OF WISDEN 1864 IS PROVABLY NOT!? ALL WISDEN'S OWN WORK. WISDEN'S EDITOR CAN CONFIRM THAT THIS IS TRUE." One day, unbeknown to Nigel, *Wisden's* co-editor Hugh Chevallier walked past him and took a photo of Nigel and the sign.

JON HOTTEN

• • •

The Sourav Ganguly who makes his way through this English summer will be instantly recognisable: former India captain, MCC member, he of the cover drive unfurled straight off the silk route, mischievous smile and urbane manner. He will be at Southampton for the first-ever World Test Championship final between India and New Zealand and is due to be present for parts of the Test series against England which follows.

But since Ganguly was last in England – as a disarming, playful commentator during the 2019 World Cup – another layer has been added onto his colourful life story, this one not quite gossamer and champagne.

SHARDA UGRA

• • •

In March, towards the end of the most successful season in New Zealand's long and not always glorious history, a summer that saw them rise to the top of the Test and one-day international rankings, the place to find Ross Taylor was in the commentary box.

It was not a seamless transition. Taylor is yet to pick up the rhythms and nuances of television commentary and, like so many who enter the box without broadcast training, his asides were uttered mostly for the benefit of his calling colleagues rather than the viewer.

He's got a razor-sharp intellect for the game, however, particularly when talking about the craft required to churn out runs. There was enough insight there to suggest that, if this is the post-playing career path he chooses to follow, there will be work for him.

The question is whether that will be sooner than anticipated.

DYLAN CLEAVER

• • •

And my legs, short and surprised, are running on thirty years of unburnt fire to the boundary, to the ground if necessary (it's nearly always necessary), and I didn't know I could move that fast, or feel that fearless

CRESSIDA MCDERMOTT

• • •

Perhaps we are all pursued by a single personal question, different for every individual and asked over and over again: one that can never be properly answered, one that goes back to the way we have chosen to live our lives. Mine is this: what do sport and nature have in common?

I suppose it makes sense. My first book was *Phil Edmonds: A Singular Man*; my most recent *The History of the World in 100 Animals*. When I was chief sportswriter of *The Times* I also wrote two weekly columns on wildlife. I once saw a peregrine falcon at Lord's.

I have tried several different answers over the years. The most obvious has been: "Nothing. That's whole point." But more recently I have come up with something more beguiling.

Magic.

SIMON BARNES

• • •

Once upon time when the world was still very young, God looked down from his celestial mountaintop and saw that Adam and Eve were far from happy. Adam was hunched under a coconut tree pulling thoughtlessly at the leaves on a fallen branch while Eve sat beside an apple tree plucking aimlessly at the black curls that fell behind her ears. The only sound on this sweltering day in Eden came from the insects in the long grass and the perroquets high in the trees above.

“Why?” boomed God, in Godlike fashion. “Why are you so bloody miserable? I have given you paradise.”

BARNEY SPENDER

• • •

In the spring of 1933 Hampstead Cricket Club was embarrassed by a series of mysterious robberies. An unidentified thief stole a gold watch and several “considerable sums of money” from the dressing-room at the club’s ground, off Lymington Road in northwest London. The club called the police and – giving prompt attention to a petty theft at a minor cricket club – Scotland Yard sent one of its best young investigators. Detective Claud Baker, at 28, was building a reputation for solving the type of peculiar crimes that might happen only in a leafy English suburb during the time-locked vacuum of the interwar years. Baker arrived in Hampstead with a local police constable named Taylor and a suitably quaint plan. In a plot straight out of a cosy Sunday night TV drama, Detective Baker and PC Taylor went undercover as cricketers to catch the Hampstead thief.

PAUL BROWN

• • •

Around two o’clock the players arrived and entered a tent to change from their “fashionable” clothing. Their cricket outfit was quite effective, although it was designed more for style than for sport; the sleeves, for example, were quite restrictive. The skirt was short by Victorian standards, although it came considerably below the knee and was weighted to avoid any accidental indiscretions. There were two teams, the Reds and the Blues; the players’ clothes were marked with trimmings in the appropriate colour and topped off with a sash. Almost all the bowling was overarm, and the game was certainly competitive and not the exhibition that many might have been expecting. Those cricketers not on the field sat on benches watching keenly. The average age of the players was around 19, making most of them minors by the law of the time, and some were noticeably younger.

After the game ended, the women appeared at the local theatre for a 7.30 show. For a modest admission fee, the audience saw displays of fencing, gymnastics and cycling. There were musical recitals and a dance routine, all performed in attire more typical of music hall than those seen in the afternoon; one writer grumbled prudishly about the women wearing tights. The evening ended with fireworks.

GILES WILCOCK

• • •

Back in 1987, at an infamous recital of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra at the Helsingin Musiikkitalo to celebrate 70 years of Finnish independence, maverick conductor Paavo Äijälä, with no little ostentation, instructed his world-class clarinetist Tuuli Tynkkynen to play cello on Sibelius’s *Finlandia*, refusing to continue with the performance until Tynkkynen had obliged. The audience’s tittering apprehension soon gave way to confusion – was this avant-garde brilliance, and they were simply unaware, or perhaps an oblique “statement” of some kind? – before the yen for harmonic and melodic order saw a thick discomfort settle over the room. Tynkkynen was humiliated, and never played with an orchestra again.

None of which happened, for the simple reason that specialists in elite fields of human endeavour are almost never professionally required to perform tasks for which they are palpably ill-equipped. Certainly not in sport. Except in cricket, that is. At least, for certain players.

SCOTT OLIVER

• • •

It starts with a whisper. A couple of mentions online. You begin to recognise the name, but nobody has actually seen them. Numbers paint the picture.

Then the first sighting at some niche age-group tournament, perhaps a mention in the local press. Rainy YouTube footage. Next, a domestic debut and the nationals are on it. The whisper has become an echo.

Age-grade recognition follows, and it's not only "in the knows" who are shouting now. Yells for full international honours fill the air. Now everyone is aware. It's that rare beast – the prodigy.

DAVID WINDRAM

• • •

A hundred years ago this June, English cricket was in crisis. Its best team had just been beaten 5-0 in Australia – a feat that an England side would take another 86 years to emulate – and had lost the first two Tests humiliatingly when the teams regathered in England. They would go on to lose the third Test for good measure. Eight in a row: the worst run of defeats in Ashes history.

STEPHEN BATES

• • •

Vivian Woodward – first XI player for Spencer Cricket and Lawn Tennis Club for some 15 seasons before the First World War, skipper for five years – was someone who brought unsurpassable judgment to any situation and who gave up a huge mount of time to promote the club. A cricketer good enough to play for the Essex second XI and also for representative south-London teams, Woodward won the Spencer tennis championships too.

But these were not even close to his finest sporting achievements.

STEVE KERSLEY

• • •

So there I was at the beginning of November 2020, sitting in Auckland's Spark Arena anticipating the Covid-delayed concert by local musical legend Dave Dobbyn, shortly to become Sir Dave Dobbyn and already "world famous in New Zealand".

I was particularly enjoying the effervescent opening act, Milly Tabak and the Miltones. Fronting the band, Milly hadn't talked much to the audience other than to acknowledge the band's delight at sharing the bill with a luminary such as Dobbyn. Now though, she did pause, to offer a lengthy introduction to her next song.

It had been inspired, she explained, by her two great-aunts. They were both nurses; one was a spinster, a chain-smoker, and something of a character. The other was a lesbian who had undergone conversion therapy, and had also been a bowler for New Zealand in the 1950s.

TREVOR AUGER

• • •

We were offered one such insight earlier this year by Surrey and England Test opener Rory Burns. In the early hours of the morning which followed a catastrophic Test display by England's men, Burns – who was part of the squad but not the playing XI – took to Twitter for the first time in more than six months. He did so to express his unhappiness at one tweet in particular: from Alex Hartley, the former England Women spinner now carving a promising career as a broadcaster.

Hartley, in line with thousands of others, had sought to make light of England's two-day capitulation against India in Ahmedabad. Rather than dwell too seriously on the batting collapse, she suggested that it was "nice of the England boys to get this Test match finished just before England Women play tonight". Four clapping emojis followed, as well as a link to watch England Women against New Zealand on BT Sport. A programme that Hartley was, in fact, presenting.

ISABELLE WESTBURY

• • •

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