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SPRING 2024

THE
Nightwatchman

THE WISDEN CRICKET QUARTERLY

WISDEN



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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.

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ISSUE 45 - SPRING 2024

Vaneisa Baksh tells the stories of the Worrell, Walcott and Weeks junior

John Stone recalls Sid Barnes

Taha Hashim addresses the question of identity

Ben Duncan-Duggal talk to members of a historic club still going strong

Ben Bloom tells the remarkable story of the Yorkshireman in Rwanda

Paul Dexter on When Cricket made the Movies

Nouvik Saha on what touring the Indian subcontinent used to be like

Vishnu Kumar provides an enlightening history of the short-form game

Cris Andrews investigates why a legend underperformed in England

Rakesh Pathak mourns the loss of the skills of Blythe and Bedi

Billy Crawford on how cricket helps him cope with autism

Giles Wilcock sheds light on the tale of a larger-than-life one-Test wonder

Steve Menary says betting might be coming to a village green near you

James Thellusson is The Refusenik

Patrick Ferriday on the ups and downs of cricket publishing

Matt Appleby is granted an audience with England's cricketing sage

Richard Willmet is reminded of the glory of the five-day game

CS Chiwanza on Dean Elgar, an old cricketer who has left the crease

Rob Stephen dives head-first into a complex issue

Paul Edwards travels into the unknown





VICTORIA AND AGNES – A LOVE STORY

Paul Edwards travels into the unknown

*Lord's and the Oval truly mean
Zenith of hard-won fame,
But it was just a village green
Mothered and made the game.*

GD Martineau – *The Village Pitch*

I thought it was a daft idea and I nearly told Chris Waters as much. Early last October the cricket correspondent of the *Yorkshire Post* rang to say that he'd been contacted by Bernard Ginns, the paper's former business editor, who'd asked if Chris knew anyone that might be interested in writing something about Burton Agnes CC, a village club in the East Riding of Yorkshire. The attraction, heaven help us, was that Queen Victoria was once staying overnight at nearby Burton Agnes Hall and, as her carriages drove down Woldgate on a perfect summer afternoon, she ordered the royal entourage to stop. She looked

back at the Wolds and the sight of Burton Agnes playing cricket against unnamed opponents. "This is my England," she said.

I didn't want to go. For one thing, I'd just finished covering the county season, a six-month stint that had been interrupted by a major operation. The idea of concluding my long-term convalescence in the flat on which I paid the mortgage was appealing. For another, village cricket is one of cricket writing's biggest clichés. There are only so many tear-arse blacksmiths, big-hitting farmers and bespectacled spinners that the genre can take. All the same, I agreed with Chris that Bernard should contact me and I'd think about it.

Bernard's email was full of an enthusiasm I would come to recognise in other Burton Agnes folk. Did I think a feature was possible? Either way, it



would be excellent if I could attend the end-of-season dinner and awards evening. Craig White, the club's president, was going to be there, along with Ryan Sidebottom. Full disclosure: it didn't harm that they agreed to put me up for a couple of nights but nor did it clinch matters. I was gradually warming to the notion of visiting a cricket club I didn't know in a part of England I'd last visited in 2005. I checked train times...

• • •

"Do you mean the 'Royal' Burton Agnes CC?" asks Dave Jackson. We are sitting outside the club's pavilion on a relatively benign Thursday afternoon in early November. Eighty or so yards away, a groundsman is marking out the lines of a football pitch. Behind us on the left is a bowling green but Burton Agnes also hosts archery and used to welcome a clay-pigeon shoot. Around an hour previously, Dave had picked me up from Beverley station and now the club's manager is politely correcting my first question, although his query is delivered with self-deprecating humour.

"I have the privilege of being the manager of the cricket team and have been now for 22 years," continues Dave. "It's everything that village life used to be in a quiet corner of England we're trying to hang on to. They had seven players when I started and I was asked because they knew I was an enthusiast. It's just one of those institutions that's worth nurturing and enriching and preserving in any way we can. We're a Thursday evening cricket team that plays in a distinctive style. The emphasis is on having a good time with some chums and sharing a good

game of cricket. But for goodness sake, keep it relaxed and keep it enjoyable."

I wondered how many other clubs number relaxation and enjoyment among their priorities. Probably far more than I assumed, for within an hour of arriving in Burton Agnes I was recalling the village clubs where I had spent some of the happiest afternoons of my life: North Cerney in Gloucestershire, for whom I had played with quite spectacular incompetence in the early 1980s; Hinton Charterhouse in Somerset, for whom Scyld Berry is the all-time leading wicket-taker; Filleigh in Devon, which boasts one of the prettiest grounds in the country - Harvey Bainbridge, the bassist with Hawkwind, used to turn out for them. My professional commitments no longer allow me to cover such clubs and I welcomed the reconnection. My cricketing life before I entered a press-box tumbled out. I thought of RC Robertson-Glasgow's words in his autobiography *46 Not Out*:

"Sometimes I look back at reports of games in which I took part, and I have thought: 'And are these arid periphrases, these formal droolings, these desiccated shibboleths really supposed to represent what was done and how it was done? What has become of that earthy striving, that comic, tragic thing which was our game of cricket?'"

The line-marker came within a few yards of the pavilion and we exchanged pleasantries. I asked Dave why cricketers joined Burton Agnes.

"Reputation," he replied delphically. "There may be other teams who are a

little bit more serious in their approach to cricket but we normally get a couple of people each year who ask if there's room for them to join and that's normally because of what they've heard about the club. We have a lot of fun. In every game we award a bottle of port for an outstanding moment in batting, bowling or sheer stupidity. Twice this summer, someone won a bottle for failing to take a catch and crashing through a hedge."

All of which is not to say that the results do not matter to the Agnes Men. The club's only team plays in the top division of the Bridlington and District Evening Cricket League (B&DECL) and has finished runners-up in each of the last three seasons, a fact which still rankles. The season consists of 14 T20 matches and a sprinkling of knockouts. The league remains very local although one game is played at distant Wetwang, which is a dozen miles from Burton Agnes. Some players turn out for other clubs on a Saturday and a couple were in the Folkton and Flixton side that won the National Village Knockout six years ago. Yet playing for Burton Agnes still matters very much to them. Perhaps it is difficult to find a club that understands the line between caring about the result of a cricket match and yet not caring too much; tougher still to carry that knowledge onto the field. But spectators cherish such things. I recalled Malcolm Guite's Poet's Corner column in the *Church Times* after he had come across a game at Linton in Cambridgeshire:

"There is something very satisfying about village cricket; for there you see a great sport returning to its

humble origins. To witness a game in which there are more players than spectators is to be reminded what play itself is: a thing done delightfully for its own sake, with no thought of pleasing crowds, selling tickets or, heaven forbid, promoting products... Reflecting on my pleasure in the whole scene, I realised that it was not simply the pleasure of an isolated moment but something richer and more cumulative: an amalgam of memory and attention."

Dave Jackson is central to all this at Burton Agnes. A successful businessman, he has the air of someone with a perpetual to-do list. More significantly for the cricket club, he funds a number of events and covers some costs. "I suppose I've put a bit of money into the club," he admitted. "It's an easy thing to do. We put some cash into relaying the square and rebuilding the bowls pavilion. Our business sponsors the annual dinner and prize-giving. There used to be four divisions in the B&DECL - which shows how village cricket has declined. But that's all the more reason to put a bit of extra effort in to make Burton Agnes interesting and a fun team to play for. The dinner is another embellishment."

That generosity is never taken for granted by the villagers and it extends beyond money. Early on Friday afternoon Dave took me to see Flamborough Head and we visited Sewerby CC, whose ground is perched almost on the cliff edge. We continued our conversation about village cricket. All too predictably, I thought of Alan Ross and told Dave about the matches played at Clayton, the Sussex village where Ross lived for 25 years, and

the behaviour of Daisy, his much-beloved bearded collie. "Sometimes there would be sheep and cowpats in the outfield," Ross writes in *Coastwise Lights*, "and Daisy, when I was batting, used to insist on taking up a position at square leg, from which she declined to be moved." Dave is tickled by this story and is certain he knows someone whose pooch could be trained to behave similarly. Other team-managers, I reflect silently, would sign players. This one plans to recruit an obedient dog.

By now, though, my fondness for Burton Agnes was growing. That morning I had shared a pot of coffee with Albert Boynton, the club's oldest player, who made his debut against Flamborough in 1966 and celebrated his 70th birthday this year. Albie looks after the square, plays when he's needed, umpires when he's not and last season won a bottle of port for being hit on the head when batting against South Dalton. As soon as the maize has been harvested in the field adjoining the cricket ground, Albie goes in search of the cricket balls that have been whacked over the hedge during the season. Last summer, he found half a dozen.

"I've lived in Burton Agnes all my life and worked on the estate which is now owned by the Cunliffe-Listers," he says. "I still do a few days for them if they're short. The cricket club's changed a lot. When I started all the villages had a team and there were games almost every day. In one summer we played 22 games in 21 days because we played two knockouts on one Sunday. We used to play on the lower side of the village and all you had was a square in the middle of a field where cows grazed. The Brid Cricket League fell

through, as did the Independent Cricket League, and we've just ended up with the evening league.

"You need to find the balance between victory and enjoyment. When we play out at South Dalton there's just a happy atmosphere about the whole occasion but there's no quarter in the games against Brandesburton or Drifffield. I keep thinking I'll have to pack up one day but I'll keep doing it as long as I love it as much as I do now."

Albie's attachment to Burton Agnes and its cricketers was plain that evening when he, like almost all other players, went up to receive an award at the annual dinner. Ryan Sidebottom had opted to work at the World Cup, so his place was taken by club captain Rob Norman, who donned wig, headband, Yorkshire retro shirt and left-arm over the wicket attitude for an impersonation that reduced Craig White to helpless laughter. Such behaviour was perfectly attuned to the mood of the evening. As far as I could see, no one had really dressed up for the occasion and people sat where they wanted. There was none of the suited and booted formality that often kills cricket club dinners and encourages younger players to stay away. There were no speeches but almost every award was accompanied by an anecdote before "Ryan" gazed admiringly at the recipients. "They're quite messy do's sometimes, those dinners," mused Jazz Fisher, who owns Salt, the excellent fish restaurant in Bridlington where Dave had taken a group of us for supper the previous evening. But really there was no mess; there were just a lot of happy faces and a collective enthusiasm to celebrate the game

that had brought them together. This, I thought to myself, was the occasion I nearly missed.

Dave drove me back to Beverley on Saturday morning. Apparently the celebrations following the dinner had carried on in the farmhouses and garages cum bars around the village. Some of us, on the other hand, had not even managed the chimes at midnight. Yet as my train sped back to Liverpool I reflected that I had been blessed with an insight into a part of the English game it was all too easy to neglect. No one had talked about the Ashes, the IPL or even the County

Championship come to that. One imagines they want both England and Yorkshire to prosper but they can do little to bring that about. What the Agnes Men can do is offer visiting team a pizza and a pint at Carnaby's Manor Court Hotel, where the dinner was held. By doing so they ensure that the simple pleasure derived from playing a sport is shared with most of their opponents. "Everyone looks forward to every game," said Fred Langton, who has played for the club for around eight years. "I don't know a single member of the team I'm not friends with." Robertson-Glasgow would have loved it.

• • •



EXTRACTS

But life does not offer only sweetness and light. Just as each of them carried their burdens, so too, like the Midas touch, there had been pain lurking beneath the golden surfaces.

There is a story to be told about the children of these international icons. It is a common one for those living within the reflected glare of celebrity. The lives of Lana Worrell, Michael Walcott and David Murray were afflicted and lifted by their famous parents. The legacy of stardom cast a shadow over the lives of these three.

VANEISA BAKSH

• • •

A man of unusual contrasts, Barnes endured frequent dark periods punctuated by a love of playing practical jokes. A couple of years earlier, during the 1946 Ashes Test at Brisbane, Barnes had somehow located a huge block of ice which he dropped onto the roof of the England dressing room. There was a rapid evacuation as bewildered Englishmen anticipated an imminent roof collapse. During the 1948 tour Barnes enjoyed regular banter with the bespectacled English umpire Alex Skelding regarding the reliability or otherwise of the latter's eyesight. The umpire had controversially given Barnes out LBW in the Australians' match against Leicestershire. It was all taken in good part by Skelding, who gave as good as he got in the exchanges. Indeed, following his retirement, Skelding nominated Barnes as the player who had given him most fun during his long career in the white coat. In a later match against Surrey, a dog had run onto the pitch only to be collared by Barnes who handed it to Skelding saying, "Here's your guide dog Alex, now all you need is a white stick."

JOHN STONE

• • •

"Where are you from?" asks the stranger engaging in small-talk formalities. My answer usually begins with a disclaimer: "This'll take a bit of time and, no, I don't mean to be pretentious - but it's complicated."

TAHA HASHIM

• • •

We were actually the first black cricket team in England to have our own ground. We played in the Northern District Cricket League - which we won seven years in a row - but for a long time we tried to get into a better league, the Sheffield District League. We got turned down on many occasions.

The first time they said we hadn't played on our ground long enough. The next time they said there were no vacancies. But what they were really saying was no, we don't want Sheffield Caribbean in our league. One year, we applied to join division six. They were one team short. And they still didn't include us.

BEN DUNCAN-DUGGAL

• • •

A year later, Booth undertook another fundraising challenge by recreating Andrew Flintoff's one-day international career in a gruelling 12 hours at the same cricket club. It was, he recalls, "dramatically harder": 3,821 balls faced, enough deliveries bowled (it took him 733) to hit the stumps 169 times, and 47 catches taken from balls fired out of the bowling machine.

BEN BLOOM

• • •

On Straight Back News, Boycott laments, 'eeeh lads, eets not creekeet'. But Pearl and Dean plug the juice and the whole world swallows. Box Offices are smashed everywhere, Bazball becomes a global brand. Wisden wins 'word of the year' and takes the Pulitzer Prize.

PAUL DEXTER

• • •

Laker's memoirs also give a distinct shape to the idea of India as a wilderness of menacing animals, environment, and people. Once, as he ran in to bowl, he noticed an enormous rat running across the field. As he stopped, distracted, a kite hawk nosedived, pounced, and swiftly carried the rat away in its talons. The incident astonished Laker so much that he lost his bowling rhythm for some time. Going to India for a cricket tour, until the 1950s at least, was nothing short of an expedition in which cricket was played between hunts and tours.

NOUVIK SAHA

• • •

The idea of a match starting and finishing on the same day attracted the attention of many within Kerala state and outside, and the number of applications to take part increased. Soon the organising committee decided to make it an invitation-based tournament. They adopted a two-tier system, the first phase involving local teams playing 30-over matches with the top two qualifying for the next phase, where "the big fishes" appeared, and games were of 50 over. The whole tournament took a fortnight.

VISHNU KUMAR

• • •

It's too simplistic to say Walters didn't like bowler-friendly English conditions. He scored his highest Test score, 250, at Christchurch in swinging and seaming conditions with Richard Hadlee (albeit not the final polished diamond) in the New Zealand side. Walters also scored hundreds in four matches in England.

There was clearly something more to one of cricket's great anomalies, so to find out, I tracked down some of Walters' team-mates from those four Ashes tours and got a few words from Doug himself, on his way to a golf tournament in Perth, aged 77.

CRIS ANDREWS

• • •

Re-visiting this picture has made me wonder if one of the cricketing arts that we have lost is that of really fighting the cricket ball? Perhaps to revive it we need a reality TV show hosted by Sarah Glenn and Daniel Vettori, where they teach a bunch of soap actors and failed politicians how to bowl an arm-ball or get batters stumped by beating them through the air?

RAKESH PATHAK

• • •

I write this having a bad autistic day. Sometimes on a bad day my body and mind feel so drained I am unable to do anything, and even getting up off the sofa seems too difficult. I never know for certain when one of these days will come, although there are specific events that will almost always bring it on, such as going to a new place, unexpected socialising, or a particularly challenging week at work. As you can imagine, the propensity of these bad days makes it hard for me to hold down a regular job although, as an experienced teacher, I certainly try.

BILLY CRAWFORD

• • •

Charles Absolom's nickname was "Bos" although no-one could quite agree how he acquired it. He was also the "Cambridge Navy", possibly owing to his eccentric dress sense. But even as his old friends looked back in fond remembrance, a question nagged away. Whatever had happened to old Charlie? Hadn't he vanished suddenly in 1879? Didn't he die in an accident on a steamship in 1889? And hadn't he been working as a purser? Why on earth was an old Cambridge Blue doing such a demeaning job?

The mystery only deepened when rumours emerged that his missing years had been spent wandering the Rocky Mountains in heart-broken solitude, living among Native Americans. If Absolom's actual story was less romantic, it was equally unexpected and inexplicable.

GILES WILCOCK

• • •

Saturday afternoon. You're playing in the lower reaches of the local league and have a little flutter with your team-mates on who will make the most runs or take the most wickets. Maybe you know some of the opposition and you bet with them on the end result. After the game, you settle up down the pub in cash, maybe a bank transfer, maybe a pint or two.

Not an uncommon scenario, but what if you could do all that online? It may sound ludicrous, but those lower reaches of the amateur pyramid are being primed for online betting without anyone seemingly realising.

STEVE MENARY

• • •

I will not walk.
I am not out.
Ignore the fact
My off stump's out.

JAMES THELLUSSON

• • •

A one thousand-copy print run seemed a reasonable estimate. Two months after publishing, I wished I'd done four hundred. I soon found that reviews in nationals were impossible bar a tiny name check in the Guardian and Independent, and even the cricket magazines weren't a gimme. But I did get TMS producer Adam Mountford interested and I was invited to Birmingham for the lunchtime interview in which Jonathan Agnew gently pushed questions across the table and zoned in on any mention of SF Barnes. Outside, the rain poured down, play was abandoned for the day and I was promised that the interview would be aired the following day. It was, and my stock level at wholesalers Gardners (55 per cent discount) immediately went down by 40 copies, which only left me ruminating on how many I'd have sold with a normal audience. It took time, but after four years I'd sold the lot and made a modest profit. Direct sales were the key – only the postage to deduct from the sale price.

PATRICK FERRIDAY

• • •

What resulted is a “memoir of the mind” and fundamental to that is Brearley's battle between intellectualism and sport that led to him eschewing lecturing to use his brain for reasoning on the cricket field. He writes: “Like chess, it calls for planning, calculation of probabilities and intuition.”

On stage he talks of the balance between mind and body and snobberies that can come from each direction, from “mere hearties who throw buns in restaurants and so-called intellectuals, who can be scornful. I was torn between the two. Should I spend a lot of my life playing with a bit of leather and a bit of willow?”

MATT APPLEBY

• • •

Some public places naturally lack the sort of bustle and distraction required to cover up the deficiencies in my parenting. The shrieky chaos of soft play or the crush of public transport present few problems, designed as they are to produce some kind of conformity in those trapped within.

By contrast, the confessional hush of a second-hand bookshop – perhaps my ideal environment – is much more of a challenge. At the precise moment that I want ten quiet minutes to assess the offering and tut at the prices, my boys will respectively decide to explore in the only ways they know how. Jamie (two) will pull volumes from the shelves while Toby (eight) dashes around the stacks. Sam (10), the group's shop steward, will noisily rummage for old Beano annuals, uncomfortably close to the only other customer. Those hopeful of a quiet browse and a bit of a think are disappointed.

RICHARD WILLMETT

• • •

Pierre Joubert jumped off his feet the moment Dean Elgar's bat made contact with the ball. He knew the same way he had known two days before during the first day of South Africa's first Test against India at Supersport Park in Centurion.

“As I watched him walk out of my office, I had a feeling that he was going to score big,” said Joubert, the Titans' commercial manager and ex-captain. The Titans had given Elgar a suite to accommodate his friends and family for his final Test at his home ground and a grateful Elgar had promised Joubert that he was going to put on a show for his guests.

CS CHIWANZA

• • •

When should a team declare? Multiple factors may be at play: weather, state of the pitch, how rested the bowlers are, the broader context of the series or maybe a head-to-head record to take into consideration and, amongst other things, how keen you are to win, draw, or not lose. The declaration shines a light on the issue of what it truly means to win and lose in sport: the question of when a team declares – a decision which can draw so much scrutiny – embodies not just a team's approach to that game but also to sport and life more broadly.

ROB STEPHEN

• • •

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