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AUTUMN 2024

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.

Edited by Matt Thacker, *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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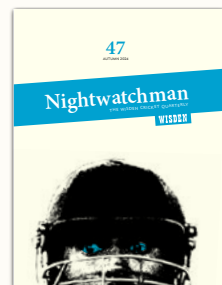
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ISSUE 47 – AUTUMN 2024

Matt Thacker introduces issue 47 of the *Nightwatchman*

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PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Mark Rice-Oxley comes back to cricket after a quarter of a century

I suspect I'm not alone in taking a long break from playing cricket. There was a 26-year gap between my last game as a young man and my first as an old one. Work, travel, family – none were conducive to a sport that can take all day. And all summer if you let it. But as the family got older and my son started playing for a club, I thought I'd give it another go.

It was strange. The game I rejoined was essentially the same, only different in subtle ways, like going back to your primary school to find the rooms are smaller, the coat pegs lower and the head teacher not nearly as menacing.

Bats, back-lifts, bags, banter, boundary markers – all updated for the modern era. And that was by no means everything. I started making a list – and now that I have got to 11, a full team of changes, I think it's time to let it loose upon the world.

1. Chat

In the late 20th century, cricket was a rather quiet game, peaceful enough so you could hear the ice cream vans tinkle and wood pigeons coo nearby. Not any more. Now the game chunters along to a constant commentary by the fielding side designed to unsettle the batters, a sort of sledging-lite that makes you want to throw your wicket away, just to make it stop.

Not all of it is as witty as the Barmy Army. "He's here for a good time, not a long time... more misses than Henry VIII... it's all binary, fellers." (I've used male pronouns throughout here as I'm just not sure this noise is a feature of the female game).

The bowler is often subjected to a bewildering range of different advice from teammates in between deliveries. Bowl faster, straighter, wider, shorter, fuller, but at the same time, don't go



changing anything. Often a fielder will bellow the same thing twice, for absolutely no reason. “Good for us, lads, good for us, lads... you and me, Fitzy, you and me Fitzy... your man here Mylo, your man here Mylo.”

This “chat” continues even when the batting side is starting to do well. A nicely judged single might be met with, “doesn’t like facing you, J-dog, keen to get off strike.” A mighty six that disappears out of the ground: “Don’t mind that guys, hitting up in the air, catch is coming next, lads.” A filthy wide might elicit nonsense like, “no problems, Compo, use the extra ball now. Extra ball is good for us.”

Sometimes, it feels like you’re playing with subtitles..

2. The kitbag

It’s remarkable to think now that 40 years ago, many players would not possess their own batting equipment and would rely on the faithful club kitbag. This was usually a huge, battered leather holdall with a solid clump of ancient materials inside: rust-buckle pads, mismatched gloves with green rubber spikes on the fingers, dull bats, a single, promiscuous box protector and an odd number of bails.

But its days were numbered even then. No one wants to share a box, or even an odd pair of gloves that someone else has already used in the course of scoring a laboured 29. Now of course everyone has their own kit and their own bag. I sometimes wonder where all those old leather cases went to.

3. Teas

Food has improved beyond measure in the UK in the past 40 years, but teas have certainly got worse.

Often they don’t even involve tea.

4. Jumpers

Is the dear old cable-knit going the way of the kitbag? In my youth I was never without one. Cricket in the 80s was usually a cold affair. Now I have a short-sleeved polyester thing, but rarely use it. In the UK at least, our summer sport has become a much warmer game. I swear the climate must be changing or something.

5. Coaching

It’s just vastly better, even at the most modest levels of performance. No one ever gave the younger me advice on how to bowl outswing, or keep still as a batter, or practise slip catching, or think about game strategy or opponent weaknesses. I’ve had more coaching in my 50s than I had in my teens.

I asked Tom Ellen, another recent returnee to cricket, about this. Tom manages a team in which his son plays, and says that coaches even get kids to field differently nowadays.

“The long barrier is something for dinosaurs,” Tom says. “The way it’s coached, and therefore the way that people try to field, is much more about getting the ball in quickly. I’m not sure whether that means fielding is better, but it’s different.”

6. Attacking

Long before Bazball, the club game was becoming more aggressive. I’m not saying batters don’t bother with defence any more but it does seem to be a secondary skill these days whereas a couple of generations ago, it was the first thing a young cricketer was taught. Forward defence. Backward defence. Don’t get out.

Nowadays, the emphasis is on hitting the ball hard. I wonder if this makes the game a lot more fun. As an eight year old, I once scored 10 in 20 overs. No one wants to see that.

Perhaps cricket’s symbiotic relationship with statistics is partly responsible for this change. Digital scoring means you can keep tabs on previously elusive metrics like strike rates. Kids seem to focus on this far more than they do on traditional stats. Me, I’m still happy with a nice little 7 not out to boost my batting average.

7. The high five and the fist bump

When you got a wicket in the 80s, celebrations were usually fairly muted. Someone might pat you on the shoulder or shake hands, or make a crude joke about the departing batter. Often the fielding side wouldn’t even bother to throng together in the middle.

Now it is more complex. The bowler - and catcher - must high-five everyone in the team, a tricky operation involving lots of clumsy flapping and inevitably one or two total air shots. It actually takes quite a lot of concentration, more than it did to bowl the wicket ball. And don’t underestimate the deflating feeling of getting this operation wrong: a fumbled high-five somehow takes the gloss off the fact that you just bowled the ball of the century to get a small child out.

The batting side’s version of the high five is the fist-bump. Every single boundary must be accompanied by this well-worn act of mid-pitch celebration. Everyone does it now, but it’s a bit like pulling crackers at Christmas: some people are vigorous, others rather limp. One young player

is so violent that I breathe a sigh of relief when he gets out. Another guy I played with insisted on a more enigmatic ritual of fist bump, mutual bat tap and man hugs for all major and minor milestones. We looked like Morris dancers who’d lost their way.

8. Bats

In the 1980s, bats were rubbish, needing knocking in for hours (with a cricket ball inside a long sock) and oiling regularly with a product (linseed oil) that seemed to have no other purpose. When you hit the ball (or at least, when I hit it) there was no satisfying ping but a splintering echo, like a wooden leg kicking an anvil.

People were not so strong either in the years before gyms and workouts and personal trainers. I have no data to back this up, only memories of stick-thin lads throwing everything at half volleys only to see the ball move slowly across the grass like a safety shot in snooker.

These days of course, superior bats have totally changed the game - even at junior level. The first thing I noticed on returning to cricket was how hard the ball was hit at me. Most weeks I have bruises in slightly odd places.

9. The all-run ‘3’

Is the exhausting three - 60 yards or so of madcap dashing back and forth - going to slowly disappear from the game? Because of modern bats (see above) and outfielders that are often parched, balls tend to go all the way to the boundary. Because of savvier fields, there is usually a sweeper out there to stop you at 2.

Sometimes I wonder what is the highest score ever made by a batter

who scored only in 3s. Has anyone ever got to 50 in this way?

10. Inclusivity

As a white man, I need to be careful here. Clearly there is a way to go before cricket can claim to be an equal opportunities sport. The professional game has been found sorely lacking in recent years. But at club level it is surely so much better than it was. In the 80s and 90s, the cricket I played was relentlessly white and male. Girls hardly featured at all. I almost never encountered players from Asian backgrounds. Nowadays, it's rare to come across a side without cricketers from minority groups.

I asked Dipesh Morjaria – another 50-something who returned to the game after a long break – for his thoughts. He said that when he was young “I always felt that cricket was fairly closed – a game that was difficult to break in to.

“Clubs could be intimidating places, particularly if you weren't middle class and white,” he said. “There's a big change now, encouraging diversity, growing the sport, being inclusive. That's probably the biggest things that has changed in cricket.

“That, and I now wear a helmet.”

Which brings us to...

11. Helmets

One of the biggest changes. Back then, virtually no one wore them. I do remember being afraid a few times – particularly when facing a pro

quick from Barbados who for some inexplicable reason ended up playing in the same match as me. I liked my face, and didn't want to lose it.

During my wilderness years, helmets became almost obligatory and wearing one took a lot of getting used to when I returned to the game. To start with the ball seems to hide behind the blind spots created by the grille. Predictably, my first helmeted innings ended in a myopic duck.

After a while, instinct takes over. Still, many players of my generation don't bother.

12th man: The cost

We're all familiar with the cost-of-living crisis, but what about the cost-of-cricket crisis? A decent bat costs as much as £500 today. That is the equivalent of almost £200 in the mid-1980s – when I bought a new V12 for about £60. Shirts, boots, training tops, pads, gloves, whites, T20 pyjama strip... the barrier to entry is high, particularly for a parent of several enthusiastic youngsters who grow out of their kit every year.

No wonder cricket still has a reputation as a game for the middle classes.

The last thing that has changed about the cricket I play is me. I love this new game, thrilling, risky but full of mutual support – love it so much more than I did as a teenager. Back then, I would sometimes be secretly pleased if a game was rained off. Now I'm distraught. At 54, you never quite know how many games you have left.

...



EXTRACTS

There had been nothing quite like it before. The train carrying Australia's cricketers chugged into Victoria Station at 10pm on April 18. Throngs packed the platform and lined the streets outside. Police had to hold them back. Conservative estimates of the crowd size put it at 30,000; the more liberal count nudged it to 50,000.

The tourists, *en route* from Dover where they had arrived after leaving their boat at Naples and travelling through continental Europe, had been besieged by young autograph hunters. They were warned what to expect on reaching Herne Hill but were still astonished at their greeting. 'I don't think that ever in the annals of cricket either in Australia or here a team has been given such a welcome as we were given today,' said Sydney Smith, Australia's seasoned manager, who had seen everything. At Victoria small boys armed with autograph books mingled with excited Australian sailors. 'On with the Kangaroos, on with the Wallabies, on with the diggers,' the servicemen kept yelling. And the Englishmen present, who vastly outnumbered them, simply laughed uproariously.

STEPHEN BRENKLEY

...

There is a scene in the movie *The Incredibles* where the villain, Syndrome, trying to avenge himself upon Mr Incredible for ignoring him as a star-struck youth, threatens to use a contraption he created to make everyone a superhero. Because, he said, “when everyone is super, no one will be.”

I recalled this line while watching batsmen pummel six after six in an IPL game a few months ago. It hardly matters which game because there's almost always a flood of sixes. They are now hit every 13 or so deliveries, an unheard-of rate until now. When the IPL began in 2008, 622 sixes were hit in 59 games. In 2009 the number fell to 506, an average of 8.57 per game. The 2024 season saw that average jump to over 17, when 1,260 were struck from 74 games.

GARFIELD ROBINSON

...

But who registers the bowling-machine batter's intent? Pure bat to ball, bat to ball is all he's in for, happy after to share a half (on him) with his trusted loader, otherwise deep in a summer dream, four after four.

ROBERT SELBY

• • •

The concept of deliberately and openly cultivating non-sexual companionship jars with many. Perhaps it harks back to early playground insecurity when the constant possibility of rejection created a troubling vulnerability. The TV comedy *The Inbetweeners* brilliantly skewered the issue with its main characters, a group of crude, awkward teenagers, constantly ridiculing each other for going to extra effort to make new acquaintances. "Oooohh, fwiends!" they would coo to each other in a condescending voice when one of the group spoke about an outsider. Belittling derision is often the way young men exert control over each other.

RICHARD CLARKE

• • •

Am I alone in my despair? Surely not. There must be West Indian fans who spend their days poring over the bowling figures of Marshall, Holding and Garner. There must be Sri Lankan supporters who remember in vivid technicolour the tons notched by Sangakkara, Jayawardene and Jayasuriya. Zimbabweans must yearn for the days of Streak and Flower. Even Pakistanis and New Zealanders must close their eyes on occasion and wistfully recount exploits of yesteryear, knowing in their hearts that the world they once knew no longer exists.

DANIEL GALLAN

• • •

Dafabet has a UK licence so is not breaking any rules and simply taking advantage of livestreaming of English county cricket. The company has also used other innovative new ways of attracting bettors in India - known as surrogate advertising - including setting up "news" websites. Websites, such as Dafanews, feature news content while also acting as a gateway for betting.

STEVE MENARY

• • •

Dolly's vivid, if errant, memory of a doodlebug falling and setting the hedge round the ground in flames did, however, encourage me to play with time myself and insert into my theatrical script the crash-landing of a German aircraft on a nearby farm that actually took place three weeks later.

JOHN DREW

• • •

Worrell was a man bearing a mighty yoke because the captaincy role was heavy with symbolism. The Caribbean had been changing fast, shedding its colonial past, and many of those who campaigned for West Indian independence, spoke of the congruency between a Black captain of the region's cricket team and self-government. The very recent memory of a white West Indian skipper was a clanging example of the iniquities that were being left behind. Worrell knew the weight of responsibility would press down on him in these next few months, leading his team to a white country that loved cricket but retained a national suspicion of foreigners. He could have no idea that he was soon to lead his side into one of the most exciting series in cricket's history.

SIMON LISTER

• • •

In a remote district of Bihar state in India, a mother sells her jewellery to let her son buy bats for his first-class debut. Riding on his mother's prayers and his own rich talent, the son breaks a world record with one of those bats. In the first innings against Mizoram on February 18, 2022 in Kolkata, Bihar's middle order batter Sakibul Gani piles up a monumental 341 in the Ranji Trophy to erase the existing record by a mile. In the process he becomes the first ever batter in 100-plus years of first-class cricket history to score a triple century on debut.

QAISER MOHAMMAD ALI

• • •

The summer of 1968 started with a bang but soon became a damp squib. Manchester celebrated as City won the First Division title and United beat Benfica 4-1, the first English side to win the European Cup. The Kray twins were arrested for murder, and tragedy struck as both Martin Luther King and Robert F Kennedy were shot and killed. Politician Enoch Powell made his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech, racist scaremongering about immigration and the proposed Race Relations Act, which was going to make it illegal to refuse housing, employment, or public services to a person on the grounds of colour. War raged in Vietnam, and in England, the rain came down like a bastard.

CRIS ANDREWS

• • •

Aged only 28 when appointed, Walcott had plenty of physical and intellectual energy to offer the job, and he put it to good use in his new environment. After an exhaustive tour of the plantations he began to oversee the building of new grounds on some estates and to supervise improvements on others – while also embarking on a rationalisation programme to amalgamate the profusion of local teams. Once these improvements had been set in motion, he was able to turn his attention more fully to the coaching and talent-spotting side of his job.

What he discovered in British Guiana was that the sugar belt was a hotbed of talented, if raw, cricketers. Much of the gold that Walcott found was contained in a rich seam at the Port Mourant estate in Berbice, where it transpired that four cricketers of huge promise – Rohan Kanhai, Basil Butcher, Joe Solomon and Ivan Madray – all lived.

PETER MASON

• • •

As a kid, when there was no one to play with, I'd use plant pots for fielders. I'd throw a ball against the wall in the back yard at home and use my wrists to hit the spaces between them. In my scorebook my batting order's always Greenidge-Haynes-Richards-Lara-Gomes-Lloyd and it's always a Test match against England. Playing against a golf ball, an orange, a tennis ball on the street, it's always about excitement. I'm learning the thrill of scoring runs, right out of the garage.

When it comes to the big stuff, and those pots become people, I have a mental picture of the field in my head. I know where every guy is. I can calculate when that ball is delivered, what I need to do with it. I don't need to be technically correct; I just need to find a gap.

BRIAN LARA

• • •

This discrepancy, with men's success on the one hand and women being denied their rights, should shame the international cricket community. Instead, it continues to equivocate and ignore the problem – a working group set up following the Taliban's return to power was due to be scrapped, only to be resurrected following objections from Australia and England.

THOMAS LAW

• • •

I walk over the boundary and sneak past a section of collapsed fencing. There's piles of litter and plenty of graffiti – although sadly none of it relates to cricket. Saplings sprout through the roof of the cavernous main building. I see piles of rusted cogs and wheels. Twisted railings and gantries. Hundreds of broken windows. Moss, ferns and brambles encroaching everywhere. Far above on the very top floor, an extractor fan, clinging to the last shards of a shattered pane of glass, spins merrily along in the breeze.

The closure of the mill would have finished off most clubs, but throw in two arson attacks and an episode when the mill's new owner denied them access to the ground, leading to the forfeiture of two matches, and it's amazing Sion Mills still exists.

JAMES BUTLER

• • •

As England named their team for the Test – a line-up which included Jonathan Agnew, who was picked for a second successive appearance after making his debut in the final match of the West Indies' series at the Oval – there appeared to be little to fear.

“We probably turned up, thinking that it would be a good way to end a difficult summer,” says Richard Ellison, who had also been handed a first cap at The Oval. “Although playing for England then was nothing like now. You would turn up, meet your team-mates and then wonder if you would ever be picked again.

RICHARD EDWARDS

• • •

My memory of Multan? A bucket-hat howling in the darkness.

He tried steal my seat in the taxi. Clad in shorts, flip-flops and a gaudy shirt as if for a music festival. Stranded in a dirt carpark, far from anywhere. He started screaming.

Two years on, I'm haunted by that British stranger in a bucket-hat. Thousands such cricket followers will descend on Pakistan again this October. In a country that hasn't seen a *Lonely Planet* for decades, where tourism is a novelty, it promises to be an unstable carnival.

BENJAMIN GOLBY

• • •

The cricket played by Sussex in the 1930s is almost beyond living memory. Only centenarians who watched the game as children would be capable of offering an eye-witness account of it. Yet if that complicates matters for the historian, it also emboldens the imagination. For here the cricketers are, bursting out of my black frames in a glorious variety of blazers and sweaters, their caps at a range of angles, and with scorers or even the occasional umpire added to the back row, seemingly at random. In the 1932 photograph, Maurice Tate is holding his pipe; in 1934, the captain, Alan Melville, is sporting black Oxford shoes while his colleagues are wearing the old-style boots that protected the ankle while inhibiting athletic movement. How did they play, one wonders? What was it like to be them?

PAUL EDWARDS

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