

**A HISTORY OF
CRICKET
IN 100 OBJECTS**

GAVIN MORTIMER



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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.'

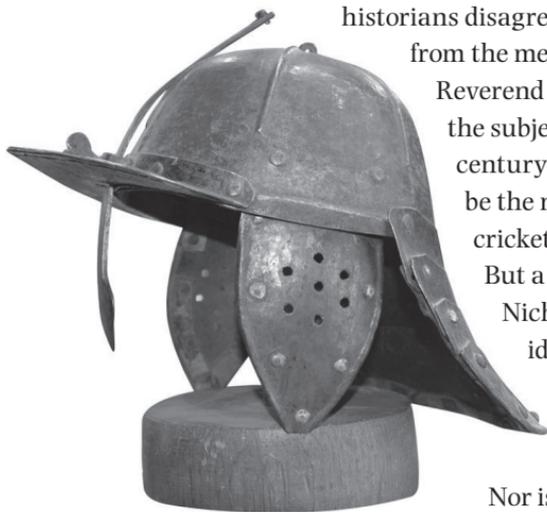
And they wrote that in 1888! One hundred and twenty years later tens of thousands of trees have been felled in printing books which attempt to unravel the origins of cricket, but still the mystery remains.

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 Pycroft 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 Pycroft's, Nicholas Felix, pooh-pooched 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 publicly 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