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## THE CHEESEMAN PAPERS - PART I

### THE “PRE-HISTORY” YEARS OF CRICKET IN ENGLAND (In times prior to the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century)

“History begins, and can only begin, with some kind of written record.”

- Major Roland Bowen,
- Cricket historian, 1970.

Most Cricket historians have tended to perpetuate a popular myth that organised Cricket, as we know it today, had its birthplace in the latter half of the 17th Century at Broad Halfpenny Down, Hambledon, a village little more than twelve miles north of Portsmouth. This is because no published account of an earlier origin elsewhere has been found to exist. This was because until the arrival of John Nyren, it never occurred to followers of the game that it might be either interesting or instructive to commit such particulars to paper as an authentic record of events that were taking place.

Indeed, Hambledon became illustrious for this very specific reason as being the “cradle of English Cricket”. Although it was certainly not the first venue where Cricket was played, it was the first to inspire the literary eloquence (of Nyren). It was the cricketers of Hambledon whose techniques and personalities first drew attention of those with pretensions of literary style. Nyren was so moved by love and affection for what he had witnessed on Broad Halfpenny Down, that deliberately or not, he preserved in writing the distinctive features of his heroes’ performances for posterity. The conclusion to be drawn from this

sublime accident, is that there has developed a curious symbiotic relationship between cricket and the writing of good English. Not only does Cricket, more than any other game inspire the urge to literary expression, it is almost as though the game would not exist at all until written about.

The Hambledon Club had a clear London origin in that a majority of its founders were former pupils of Westminster School (just as later they were to be influential in the early Marylebone Club also). No one has been able to explain exactly why a rather out-of-the-way Hampshire village should have become the centre for some London gentlemen to get together themselves and to gather in some of the finest players of the game that have ever been collected together in one club. They were not all Hampshire men of course, many coming from Surrey, Sussex and even further distances.

Before Nyren’s written testimony, all that went before has to be regarded as pre-history, no matter what other evidence might be adduced. This does not mean that it is not possible to make reconstruction of what was going on before history began, since much can be added to written records themselves of occurrences said to have taken place at some earlier points in time. But any such prior happenings, although perhaps complementary to the written records which survive, can only be considered as matters of speculation and for us to see and determine what they amount to. There are a great many of these

and some of them overlap into the historical period, even eventually becoming part of written records themselves.

There have been several challenges to Hambledon’s claim of being the “cradle of Cricket”, perhaps the most notable being that of F.S. Ashley-Cooper, a contributor to “Surrey Cricket: its History and Associations” who, in 1902, revealed: “As records are in existence, however, which prove that organised elevens of Surrey, Middlesex and Kent played many matches prior to the formation of the Hambledon Club, it is difficult to see what claims the latter has to be considered the birthplace of the game, or even the locality in which the game was first brought to some degree of perfection.”

However, whether one supports Hambledon’s claim as being the origin of organised Cricket in England or not, few might argue contrary to the opinion that the game became both uplifted and made pre-eminent there by the anecdotal memoirs of John Nyren and his contemporaries at the “Bat and Ball” Inn on Broadhalfpenny Down.

Indeed, English literature of the seventeenth century provides the historian with no other discernible information regarding the game. It is surprising that not one of the great essayists of that period penned a paper on the subject and not even Samuel Pepys, in that entertaining diary of his, “The Spectator”, makes any reference to it. One would dearly like to know what opinion Samuel would have expressed on the subject, had he witnessed a cricket match.

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However, there are apocryphal accounts of primitive Cricket being played throughout the world from time immemorial. Horace Hutchinson, one of the earliest self-appointed historians even suggested that the game began when, first, a monkey, instead of catching a coconut thrown at him by A.N. Other of his anthropoid fraternity, hit it away from him with a stick which, by chance he had been holding in his hand. The less imaginative reader might well dismiss this description as a flight of fancy but to a greater or lesser extent, this fascination for control over moving objects is probably common to all mammals but none more so than by the most superior of them all, man himself, whose attraction for a moving missile, targeted at a specific object to register a hit (on his prey) is probably primitive man's original basis for survival.

By virtue of her benevolent bounty, Nature has supplied homo sapiens with an endless variety of missiles, of targets and the means of striking them. She has also provided that what man must do in controlling the further outcome of the missile, either thrown or by contact with stick, staff or club (whether crooked or straight) for his continued survival, his offspring should attempt for fun. That, in essence, is the genesis of Cricket. The game, albeit in an immature form, certainly existed in England in the middle ages and various early historians confirm that it was a popular pastime of monks and that Edward III attempted to suppress it on account that it interfered in popularity with his personal preference for archery. His

successor, Edward IV, tried to clamp down on it even further by making any cricketer liable to two year's imprisonment, a heavy fine and his instruments to be burnt.

In researching the more specific origins and evolution of the "best of all team games", the late Harry S. Altham, former Secretary and President of M.C.C., also traced evidence, beyond argument, of references that the game of Cricket, with bat (staff or stick) and ball seemed to have started (in England) on the edge of the Weald as early as time of the Plantagenets inheriting the throne had been (circa 1300 A.D.). Even more references are given in Altham's book: "A History of Cricket" (1926) for it being played at the time of the Tudors of the 16th. Century, amongst all sections of the John Derrick, a resident of Guildford in 1598 said that he had played Cricket on a certain plot of land in the town when he was a boy. As he was fifty-nine when he said this, this puts the date of his playing into the 1550s. This does not necessarily mean that at that time Cricket was only a game for boys but rather he was simply stating what the use of this land had been when he was a boy.

A statement that a ground at nearby East Horsley had been sown with grass for Cricket in 1636 is not borne out by the actual facts. It would appear that the ground had been rough, ploughed up and sown with grass, no doubt for grazing.

While thus lying fallow, Cricket was played on it from time to time. No more on this can be said and it is likely that it would have been another century or even more before a cricket ground as such was specifically

made. Thomas Lord's at St. John's Wood might even have been among the first.

The earliest form of target (wicket) which the bowler of the Weald attacked was, as likely as not, a true tree "stump", but his successors, the shepherds, of Broad Halfpenny and similar downlands found something better in the little hurdle gate of two uprights and a slip-rail which formed the entry into their sheep pens. The dislodgment of this slip-rail or "bail", when either upright was struck, precluded all argument and so, over evolving time, the "wicket", as it was called, became a universal description, though by natural convention, the uprights were still called "stumps".

That Cricket had become no longer just a game for boys, nor, at best, the yeomen of the Weald, is proved by a "Bill of Presentment" dated 1622, against six parishioners of Boxgrove, near Chichester, for playing Cricket in the churchyard on a Sunday "after sufficient warning had been given to the contrary". (At least until the early seventeenth century, churchyards were not as we know them today as being places of burial encumbered by tombstones but were short grassy enclosures both flat and large enough to permit under-arm bowling and all manner of other competing forms of leisure activity, some of them needing many players, in which the local community would indulge. Sunday was the only free day for much of the population and with Church services over, folk moved to and played in the churchyard). So, by this time, incidental references to Cricket tended to have associated with it such patterns

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of anti-social behaviour as violence and drinking. Certainly, it was no longer the prerogative of the very young for its recreation. It had now evolved into a sport with national appeal, enjoying in ever increasing measure the patronage of the most affluent members of Society.

On 22nd February, 1679, was born one William Bedle. He is the first man known to us who achieved great prominence in the game, for, it was said of him when he died on June 3rd. 1768. 'aged near 90', that he was 'formerly accounted the most expert player of Cricket in England'. These words mean that he was indeed very great; that there were means then available of judging comparative prowess and that his fame lasted at least a generation after he last played. At this time, newspapers were only rudimentary; there were no magazines, and no radio commentaries so it must have been very late in his playing career that it became at all usual to refer to Cricket, though not yet to mention individuals. If it tells us nothing else at all, it tells us how very deeply dug-in Cricket must have become in the national psyche.

However, within a few years, the game became popular enough to get increasing Press coverage, usually in the form of advertisements of intended matches placed by inn-keepers. These notices included details of the prizes to be played for and the composition of the teams that would be playing. In the "Post Boy" of March 28-30, 1700, we come across the following example : " these are to inform gentlemen, or others, who delight in cricket playing, that a

match at Cricket, of ten gentlemen on each side, will be play'd on Clapham Common, near Fox-Hall (now Vauxhall), on Easter Monday next, for £10 a head each game, (five being defign'd) and £20 the odd one".

Permission to play on the common had to be obtained from the Lords of the Manor or their bailiff, one Henry Morris, otherwise the players were liable to prosecution.

The above reference of ten gentlemen on each side is an interesting anomaly, since one of the peculiarities of Cricket from its earliest days is its numbering system, all based on eleven or sub-divisions or multiples of eleven, first brought to notice by P.F. Thomas in "Old English Cricket", a collection of five pamphlets issued between 1923 and 1929. There is no apparent reason why this number should play such a prominent part, to such an extent that when we talk of an "eleven", we are at once known to be talking about a cricket team (although this number has also since been borrowed by both soccer and hockey and no doubt other games). A possible reason seems to be that there must have been a numbering system in and about the area where cricket arose, itself based on eleven. It is noteworthy, therefore, that in an area of northern France, there was just such a numbering system which went beyond anything yet known in England, in that it recognised eleven inches as a foot and further sub-divided the inch itself into eleven parts known as 'lignes'.

It is further interesting to note that the first certain reference to Cricket anywhere is precisely in north-eastern France, near St.

Omer, in 1498. If the eleven-based system here was found to be in the area where Cricket arose, as indeed it was, and if that area was also unlikely to have been disturbed by invasions from anywhere, it follows that any connection between the numerologies common to south-east England and northern France must have existed at least before Normans came on the scene.

In the columns of Chamberlayne's "Present state of England" (1707), Cricket is included with such amusements as "cudgels", "bear-baiting" and "throwing at cocks" as a form of recreation of "the citizens and peasants". If the remarks of this chronicler are true, cricket must have leaped into favour suddenly, for by 1725, it had ceased to be merely a pastime for boys (or an amusement of the lower classes) as the game now numbered many gentlemen of wealth, position and title among its notaries. This development must be attributed to the patronage bestowed upon it by Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales. At an early age, he became passionately devoted to the game which is remarkable since he was but a poor performer himself. (The first time he ever played was in Kensington Gardens on September 8th, 1735). The amount of good he did for Cricket cannot be over estimated. He was the head and right arm of Surrey Cricket, particularly, and it is to him that we owe the introduction of County matches. Not only did he support the game in most liberal fashion, in the majority of cases the Surrey elevens were invariably selected by him !

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Indeed, he both lived and died – literally – because of Cricket. He expired, suddenly, on March 20th, 1751, as a result of an internal abscess that had long been forming in his side in consequence of an impact from a cricket ball whilst he was engaged in playing the game on the lawn of his residence, Cliefden House, in Buckinghamshire. Death did not take place, however, until several months after the accident, when a collection of matter burst and instantly suffocated him.

Now into the mid 17th. century, the contemporary Press carried announcements of “Great Cricket Matches” played in Sussex (for fifty guineas) and at Chatham, the home venue of an XI of the West of Kent, with the first ever recorded inter-county match between Surrey and Kent being played at Dartford on 29th. June, 1709. Mitcham, with the single exception of Hambledon, was now the most famous village in the world as far as Cricket was concerned. Its Club was very strong in those far off days and boasted of so many good players as to be able to throw down the gauntlet to London. (Indeed, when Surrey played England at Lord’s in 1810, five players in the County side were Mitcham men.) It was in the 1720s that Kennington Common, first became famous as a cricketing centre, some of the contending sides representing, London, Kent, Surrey and Mitcham. Unfortunately, the enthusiasts of those far distant days did not consider the scores worthy of preservation and on that account the performances of several unknown heroes will forever remain unrecorded. (It is something of a remarkable co-

incidence that Mitcham features so prominently both in the game’s annals confirming it to be one of the first places where organised Cricket was played but also, some two and a half centuries later, as will be seen anon, it was most certainly the village of residence (59, St. Georges Road) of Tom Smith, the Founder of the Association of Cricket Umpires and of his chosen venue, “The King’s Head, for its inaugural meeting).

The first match of which the full score has survived appears to have been between Kent and All-England on the Artillery Ground, Finsbury Square, London, on 18th. June, 1744, when the Kent Scorer recorded all individual scores, recorded all extras and identified the names of bowlers, stumpers and those who held catches. Most scorers over the next 30 years continued the practise of notching up the total on sticks. Before Lord’s existed, this ground was the ‘Mecca’ of Cricket. It had been presented to the Hon. Artillery Company in 1638 and it was during the lifetime of Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales, that the ground became famous as a cricketing resort, with the majority of the great matches contested there promoted by his Royal Highness.

For many years, most of the great matches continued to be played for stakes, often as much as one thousand guineas a side. Bookmakers could be seen regularly at Lord’s calling out the odds opposite the pavilion, and occasional sharp practice among the players was inevitable. The combination of high stakes and the intake of liquor frequently sparked-off dispute and disorder. Where so much money hung on the result – so much more in

relative terms than even the “sponsorship” rewards of today (when one considers what the present equivalent of a ‘thousand guineas’ would be) the pressures on umpires (who in many cases were in the employ of their patrons, as hired gamekeepers, bailiffs or gardeners) are obvious enough.

The social stresses often made impartiality difficult for them. Obviously, umpires were indispensable for laying down the Law even at this early stage of the game’s development but this also meant that they stood the risk of being responsible for every expensive decision. With most people gambling on the result, each and every decision was expensive for someone. Thus “gentlemen” umpires were frequently appointed to the ‘big’ matches, largely because they were thought to be less vulnerable to financial manipulation. In “less important” matches, when contention arose, competing sides were prone to walk-off or sit down in protest with monotonous regularity.

Although it would be a further 47 years before the first universal Code of Laws was promulgated, it was recognised that the results of at least important matches should be determined by “Articles of Agreement” of what was “right and proper” and made in harmony in advance of play between the protagonists, as was the examples of two matches arranged in 1727 between elevens selected by the Duke of Richmond and Mr. Broderick of Peper Harow. These articles were in no sense Laws. Rather were they in the nature of ‘instructions to umpires and team managers amplifying

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and explaining certain points', for example, that the pitch was to be **23 yards** long (although, the arrival of the Code of 1774 expressly revised it down to be 22 yards). Another fascinating feature of this Code is that it made it mandatory for a run not to be scored if a batsman was caught whilst running.

A later refinement saw the establishment of an honourable Code of Ethics to govern the game and there is good reason, too, for thinking that an oral version would have existed long before the first edition of the printed Laws of Cricket became manifest. Indeed, the "first edition", of 1744, had been compiled by Noblemen and Gentlemen of the "London Cricket Club" who played on the Artillery ground previously mentioned.

Even though this first attempt to govern the game by a generally accepted Code saw an improvement in the conduct of the game, it did not provide consistent answers to contentious questions. Umpires, however appointed, were just as likely to cause as to settle a dispute. Where local regulations varied from club to club or from village to village, or where complicated conditions of the Law had yet to be worked out, or had been recently revised, or even where the existing Law might have been considered locally unpopular, umpires' decisions could hardly avoid being potential sources of trouble.

Village umpires, particularly standing in the odd game now and again, might risk losing work, custom or friendship with the people they offended. Thus, there was no such thing as an

"independent" umpire. Early umpires were obvious targets for bribes. Indeed, some advertisements openly stated that "a hat would be given to the umpire on the winning side." Nevertheless, a blatantly corrupt official, or an obviously incompetent one, had little future in the game. Apart from the expectations of their patrons and players for something resembling a fair game, there was always the crowd of spectators who were not backward in demonstrating what they thought of really bad officials.

The 1774, (first) Code provided for a two stump wicket with a single bail of dimensions 22 x 6 inches; the toss decided both the pitching of wickets (and a good captain would know well enough how to opt to use a pitch to suit his own bowlers) and the choice of innings. The particular law at that time read: "The party which goes from home (i.e. the visiting side) shall have the choice of the innings and the pitching of the wickets, which shall be pitched within 30 yards of a centre fixed by the adversaries. When the parties meet at a third place, the bowlers shall toss up for the pitching of the first wicket and the choice of going in." In consequence, it was found that the side successful in the toss generally won the match, provided that is, one team was not immeasurably the superior of the other.

As tending to show how universally these conditions were approved, it may be mentioned that when New York played Eleven of London at New York on Monday, April 29th, 1751 – possibly the first "International" Match to be recorded? – it was remarked that "the game was

played according to the London method". (New York won by 87 runs. Batting first, New York scored 81 and 86; Eleven of London, 43 and 37.) 1753 saw the first reference to the ball by its colour when a poem describing a match staged at Sevenoaks Vine described "the crimson ball". It is thought that this colour probably had its origin from an intensification of the natural hue of the leather colour itself. What is interesting is that the most perfect colour possible was adopted since red is at the opposite end of the spectrum from green and it is a matter of optical fact impossible for the human eye to focus these two colours simultaneously (although the illusion often exists that one is doing so).

Frequent mention was made in the Press of this time of the betting at the beginning of a match and when half over. There was a time when betting was as prevalent on Cricket grounds as it is today on race-courses. Before official Codes of Laws were first introduced, no reference was made to betting and in consequence many disputes occurred and when the first revision was made in 1774, M.C.C. considered it necessary to lay down the Law on this point – not that the early matches on Lord's ground were entirely free from contestation and malpractice. It was probably the fact that large sums were lost and won over the game that now prevented Cricket being classed as an innocent amusement.

An earlier, longer, revision had been made in 1755, and were published in pamphlet form by the governing authorities of that time" in response to an initiative proposed by Noblemen

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associated with the “Star and Garter” Tavern in Pall Mall. A number of these members were later to form the White Conduit Club in Islington, the forerunner of the more famous M.C.C. Extracts of this revised Code of Laws still prove of interest, if only because some of the basic principles stated at that time remain recognisably effective today. The descriptive “Olde Englishe” language of the 1750s is also still recognisable as to its original intent and, hopefully, its format provides some amusement to the 21st Century reader :

### **“1. Laws for ye bowler**

*If he delivers ye ball with his hinder foot over ye bowling crease, ye umpire shall call “No Ball” though she be struck or ye player is bowled out, which he shall do without being asked and no person shall have any right to ask him.*

### **2. Laws for ye Umpires**

*To allow 2 minutes for each man to come in when one is out and 10 minutes between each hand.*

*To mark ye ball that it may not be changed.*

*They are sole judges of all outs and ins, of all Fair and Unfair play or frivolous delays, of all hurts whether real or pretended, and are discretionally to allow what time they think proper before ye game goes on again. In case of a real hurt to a Striker they are to allow another to come in and ye persons hurt to come in again.*

*But are not to allow a fresh man to play on either side on any account.*

*They are the sole judges of all hindrances, crossing ye players in running and standing unfair to strike and in case of hindrance may order a notch to be scored.*

*They are not to order any man out unless appealed to by any one of ye players.*

*These Laws are to ye umpires jointly. Each umpire is ye sole judge of all nips and catches, ins and outs, good or bad runs at his own wicket and his determination shall be absolute and he shall not be changed for another umpire without ye consent of both sides. When ye four balls are bowled he is to call “Over”. These Laws are separately. When both Umpires shall call “Play” 3 times, tis at ye peril of giving ye game from them that refuse to play.*

and

**3.** *When ye ball has been in hand by one of ye keepers or stoppers and ye player has been at home he may go where he pleases till ye next ball is bowled.*

*If either of ye strikers is cross'd in his running ground designedly, which design must be determined by ye umpires, ye umpires may order that notch to be scored.”*

By 1816, the toss decided the choice of first innings and the umpires were now left to decide where the stumps were to be pitched; either batsmen were allowed to “hinder a catch” in their running ground (presumably between wicket and wicket) by interposing their body, and the striker would be awarded a run in any event of a fielder “crossing him in his running”. At this time, four balls constituted an “over” (and continued to do so until 1889 when the “four” became “five” and again “six” in 1900, with an “eight” ball over permitted in 1922 for matches played in Australia.

*(Author’s note : At this point, the current narrative has effectively ended an account of the “Pre-History” years of Cricket and with mention of*

*the establishment of M.C.C. as the future “guardian of the Laws” the game now moves forward to a new era of organisation, the early days of which are to be featured in the next issue of the ESCUSA Newsletter.)*

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