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# And God Created Cricket

Simon Hughes

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Extract

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# What This is All About

*Cricket is baseball on valium*. Robin Williams, 1974.

There is a *lot* of literature on English cricket's history. There is so much, in fact, that as you scan the groaning shelves of the MCC Library at Lord's, looking at the anthologies and leather-bound manuals and cut-and-paste autobiographies chronicling how 'we somehow managed to get them out for 165 in 52.3 overs', you wonder what on earth persuaded you to want to add to it. I only have one explanation. That after a forty-year association with the game, I realize I actually know three eighths of two sixths of naff all about it. It's about time I found out a bit more. This is my 'journey' of discovery (permission to barf granted).

Don't expect a comprehensive account of every historical development and key match and notable patron as cricket evolves from a primitive seventeenth-century hitabout to a sophisticated – but still bewildering – business: one that can command billion-dollar rights from TV channels yet simultaneously remain a byword for manners and fair play. No. I want to retain an ounce of sanity and finish this book before I die and anyway an assortment of scholars and archivists and ex-prime ministers have already done the chronology job far better than I ever could.

What I'm doing here is imagining cricket as a sort of human settlement, and identifying the defining moments and people that transformed it from a collection of rustic dwellings to a throbbing

metropolis. Well, a buzzing city anyway. I'll chat to old timers in the pubs and linger down a few back alleys to get under the skin and find the soul of the place and how it reflects society. It's what you might call 'selective excavation': and, as with any archaeological dig, there's an element of luck in what you find. Just as long as you get your hands dirty . . .

# ONE

## Stop Press: The French Invented Cricket!

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was *creag*. At least that was the word in the 1300 wardrobe accounts of Edward I referring to a ball game which may or may not have been an early version of cricket. Also there was *cryce* or *cric*, which was an Anglo-Saxon term for a stick or staff, and the Normans introduced the word *criquet* (a stick-and-ball game) into the English language after the Conquest. In the sixteenth century, immigrants from Flanders living in southern England are described playing *creckette* by the poet John Skelton. This morphed into *Crickett* (1598) in a coroner's account of schoolboy games in Guildford. All this sounds plausible to explain the origin of the word 'cricket'.

The game itself evolved from a variety of folk hitabouts played in villages on both sides of the Channel, each with its own local idiosyncrasies. The Almighty decreed that at some point one variety of this primitive cricket would usurp the others: *shock horror!* It could well have been the type the Frogs developed north of Paris. So we conclude that Brigitte Bardot's ancestors created cricket. As Norman French vocabulary also included *wiket* (a small gate) and *beil* (a crosspiece), it must be true. No one knows for sure, of course, because no one wrote it down. It's not really that surprising. In those Tudor times there were rather too many Armadas and plagues and beheadings going on for anyone to be overly concerned with silly ball games.

The early versions of cricket were undoubtedly confined to the forests and downlands of south-east England – particularly in west Sussex and the Weald of Kent (the first known match was at Coxheath near Maidstone in 1646). It was largely a game played by village peasants messing about with a ball near the stump of a tree (hence the target became known as the 'stumps'). On more open pastures shepherds used a 'wicket gate' – a small hurdle through which the sheep passed. The 'bat' vaguely resembled a hockey stick and the ball started off as a round piece of wood till seventeenth-century cobblers began stitching a leather cover round cork stuffing.

The bowling vaguely resembled Trevor Chappell's famous delivery in 1981 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground – namely under-arm and skimmed along the ground. Perhaps in retrospect we underestimated Chappell, and he was really doffing his cap to cricket's early history rather than stopping New Zealand hit a six off the last ball to win a one-day international. Then again, knowing the Chappell family's bloody-mindedness and the Australians' intense rivalry with New Zealand, perhaps not.

'Club ball' seems to have been the generic title for this rural activity, with markedly reduced quantities of booze and worthless raffle prizes than you'd get at the modern equivalent. Initially it was seen as a sort of juvenile pastime, and regarded as a shade dis-reputable. In the early seventeenth century, a number of parishioners were fined for playing it in a churchyard near Goodwood on a Sunday, though it didn't help that the ball was often hit through the stained glass windows and the odd fielder hid behind a gravestone, rather contravening the so called 'spirit' of the game. More of that mythical concept later.

In fact, under Oliver Cromwell's leadership (1649–58) England became a rather joyless place ruled by Christian fascists determined to section anybody who was enjoying themselves. Music and gambling were banned, theatres closed, and penalties imposed on anyone found indulging in sporting endeavours, to satisfy the Puritans' religious zeal. So for a short time, God suspended cricket.

## That's Not Cricket! . . . It is Now

The Restoration (1660) and the reign of Charles II liberated England from this absurd repression. In any case, there's nothing like official restrictions on an activity to encourage its proliferation, and impromptu cricket matches that had continued on farmland and common through the first half of the seventeenth century, each with its own local rules, now became more organized. It was a bit like those Sunday morning kickabouts in the park that start off with a couple of fathers messing about with their kids and finish up as half an hour each way with team strips and a dad shouting, 'It's 4–2 for fuck's sake, that went in-off the rucksack!' Clubs began to be formed, some matches attracted a small crowd and pub landlords organized games on adjacent ground knowing they would draw punters. In that way cricket was the predecessor of the karaoke night.

At the time the game was a sort of cross between hockey and baseball with a curved bat and the wicket a foot high and two feet wide, so modern bowlers like Glenn McGrath and Curtly Ambrose would have been useless, bouncing every delivery way over the top. In the gap between the two upright stumps (which had a horizontal stick laid across them) was a hole. To complete a run (then known as a 'notch' because it was recorded by an incision on the scorer's stick – the origin of the phrase 'notched up'), the batsman had to 'pop' his bat into this hole before the fielder got the ball in it. An outbreak of battered fingers resulted in the more sensible requirement of them having to touch a stick held by the umpire to register a run instead. Eventually that was replaced by a line cut in the turf, still to this day referred to as the 'popping' crease.

Matches were often eleven-a-side, but sometimes five-a-side or single wicket. The season was short – from April to late June – structured round the farming community's calendar and their harvesting commitments. Members of the aristocracy who had been forced to their country seats by Cromwell's insurgency were intrigued to discover their labourers indulging in this quaint sport and they took it further afield, introducing it to London and beyond, bringing their servants and farmhands – the original players – with

them. By 1700 there were regular matches on Clapham Common, and clubs all over London and the south-east and as far west as Gloucestershire. Gambling on games was rife and some were played for high stakes. Gaggles of men gathered near the pitch (there were no official boundaries) exchanging wagers. Stakes of 100 or 200 guineas (£210) were common.

Charles Lennox, the 2nd Duke of Richmond, who lived at Goodwood, was an enthusiastic early patron, kitting out his players in cricket's first-ever coloured strip (green waistcoats, breeches and yellow caps) and subsidizing the village team at nearby Slindon, at the time one of the best in England. Captained by England's first serious run-machine, Richard Newland, they were defeated only once in forty-three games in 1741. Lennox owed his interest to his father, the first Duke, who organized a game against the 'Arundel men' in 1702.

The only record of this match is the bar bill. The Duke, it was reported, 'spent 1s 6d on brandy during the game'. It is not known if this was to settle his own nerves or to incapacitate the opposition with alcohol as Ian Botham notoriously did to many opponents at his legendary all-night barbeques more than two and a half centuries later. If it was the latter it worked. The Arundel men were comfortably defeated. They would have had a chilly journey home too, as the match was played in mid-December.

It was at one of the 2nd Duke of Richmond's matches against Mr Alan Brodrick of Surrey in 1727 that some 'Articles of Agreement' were drawn up, laying down the rules for play. These were effectively the game's first set of laws. At that point the pitch was 23 yards long, the teams were twelve-a-side and the team 'owners' were permitted to contest decisions with the umpires.

These first laws were interpreted loosely for a while until officially laid down by the London Club in 1744. They were printed round the border of a white handkerchief (an original is on display in the Lord's museum) and are not unlike those 'Ins and Outs of cricket' tea towels designed to amuse/baffle American tourists: (e.g. 'Each man that's in the side that's in goes out, and when he's out he comes in, and the next man goes in until he's out . . .' etc.)

These 1744 'handkerchief laws' begin: 'The pitching of ye first wicket is to be determined by ye cast of a piece of Money', and mention for the first time the concept of 'fair and unfair play', which the umpires were now sole arbiters of. They specify dimensions of the ball, stumps and pitch (22 yards long, the equivalent of a 'chain', which was a unit of land measurement standardized at 66 feet by a Mr Gunter in the previous century). There was at that point no restriction on the width of the bat.

Certainly batsmen had it all their own way in those early days (it was ever thus). The bowling was still exclusively underarm, and pretty tame, the wicket was low and looked like a croquet hoop, and you couldn't be out leg before wicket. At least these first laws penalize the 'striker' if 'he runs out of his Ground to hinder a Catch'. Before that it was not unknown for a batsman to literally assault a fielder as he was attempting to take the ball. Acknowledging that, it is astonishing how cricket inherited its 'gentlemanly' image.

These cricketing aristocrats were the first sporting entrepreneurs, laying on cricket matches mainly for gambling purposes. The main reason for the 'laws' was to limit the possibility of match fixing, all the more tempting with large stakes being wagered. That didn't always curtail it though. The scorers had a habit of 'losing' the notch stick after very close matches and umpires called 'time' suspiciously early in the 1731 match between the Duke of Richmond's team and a Mr Chambers' XI, with the Chambers side only requiring a few to win. This was one of the first instances of something being 'just not cricket', which is a strange paradox. The game had only been going two minutes and so far hadn't even reached base camp on the moral high ground.

County cricket had been established in 1709 when a 'Kentish' side took on London, and Kent also played matches against Surrey and Sussex. Usually this 'county' team was actually just a club or a peer's invitation XI masquerading as something more substantial to attract a crowd. The 'Kent' side for instance was frequently just an assemblage of players from the strong Dartford and Sevenoaks clubs and the local peer's sons. This only serves to illustrate that the concept of 'county' cricket was contrived from the start. And now,

like London's South Circular Road, we are stuck with it (or on it) and incessant tinkering only emphasizes what a terrible idea it was in the first place.

As Sir Derek Birley points out in his comprehensive *A Social History of English Cricket*, the bizarre workings of the hereditary peerage system are magnified through the early days of county cricket. So the Duke of Richmond was bankrolling the Sussex team, while the Duke of Dorset lived in Sevenoaks and sponsored Kent for whom his son, the Earl of Middlesex, also played. Then there was the Duke of Devonshire's fabulous ground at, of all places, Chatsworth House in deepest Derbyshire. Confused? You should be. (In fact the latter was apparently due to a simple spelling mistake which wasn't corrected until it was too late. 'Apologies, my lord, there's been an error, and you have signed for the land rights to 1,500 acres in Derbyshyre.' 'Dash it, Spudkins! Oh well, the Duchess prefers hills to those blasted moors anyway.')

Surrey's early prominence owed much to the legacy of Frederick, Prince of Wales, who, just to complicate matters further, was three quarters German (his father King George II was 100 per cent Kraut). Cricket was the perfect vehicle for him to transmogrify himself into a true-blue Englishman, and he promoted many matches and often captained the county, though the newspapers drew a polite veil over his performances. He died relatively young after being hit by a ball in the field. (OK, he actually died from an abscess resulting from the injury.) Significantly there have been very few Schmidts, Kleins or Schwarzes who have shone at cricket in the intervening 300 years.

Possibly baffled by the nomenclature, writers were slow to cotton on to the cricket craze, and the first proper account of a game wasn't until 1744, for a match between Kent and All England. Kent, the first unofficial county champions, won it by 1 wicket, the match being decided when a fielder, Thomas Waymark, dropped a simple catch. A young poet, James Dance, relayed the incident thus:

> The erring ball amazing to be told!
> Slipped thro his outstretched hand and mocked his hold.

At least he was spared eighteen slow-mo replays from seven different angles and having a turnip superimposed on his head in the *Sun*.

The London Club was the dominant force, and its home, the Artillery Ground, was cricket's Mecca. It still exists, wedged between Sir Fred Goodwin's piggy bank and the Whitbread Brewery, just off City Road in the Square Mile. Along with Hong Kong Cricket Club, it must be the most expensive location for a sports ground anywhere in the world. Consulting my property-expert friend Alastair reveals that you could create four office buildings on the site with a net useable area of 2.765m sq ft (allowing for lifts, stairs and toilets etc., according to Alastair – property developers are a bit anal about these things – see appendix 1). At current rates that would give the site a value of about £1.2 billion. It's going to take quite a few £12.50 players' match fees (lunch and tea) to recoup that.

By the 1730s the Artillery Ground was the main venue for commercial matches in London; it was there where the 1744 revision of the game's laws took place and it was one of the first grounds to have a boundary rope (before that batsmen had to run for everything, so the most productive shots were obviously those that ended up in thorn bushes or stuck high up in trees). An individual score of 40 was regarded as 'top notch'.

Though the aristocracy promoted and gambled extensively on matches in London, the best players were of quite diverse origins: the aforementioned Waymark was a groom, others were tailors and shoemakers and gardeners, some strappingly strong. One Surrey farmhand hit a ball clean out of the Artillery Ground, a distance of at least 100 yards. It was the only way to register a six. Women's matches were also staged at the ground, often between Sussex villages, and, if the mothers' races at school sports days are anything to go by, they were taken very seriously.

Still, it remained mainly a game for the common, sometimes unsavoury, man. There was an incident when a magistrate complained about 'swarms of loose and disorderly people' who assembled to play cricket in the fields around London. These I suppose were the gaggles of youths you now find being a nuisance hanging about round McDonald's.

Somewhere in the early 1750s, probably coinciding with the formation of the Jockey Club, the dosh-wielding bourgeoisie turned their attentions to horse racing and cricket in the capital slightly lost its allure for a while. The people who picked up the primitive bat and ball and ran with them to new levels of sophistication and renown were the men of Hambledon.

## A Small World

We are now at 1759, the year Great Britain was voted world's MVP (Most Valuable Player). They wouldn't have imagined then that there was to be only one other time in the whole Millennium (World Cup 1966). Still, two major trophies in 1,000 years for an island the size of Oregon ain't so bad! Actually, that's bending the truth a bit. Britain had been declared 'Most Powerful Country' after its successes in the Seven Years War and there was a new optimism in England as George III became king. (He was in fact the grandson of George II, but inherited the throne because of the part-German heir Frederick's tragic encounter with a cricket ball. At least the new king, born in Britain, was likely to be a better fielder.)

Robert Clive was on every chat show going after his military successes in India and science was all the rage as a result of Sir Isaac Newton's earlier discoveries about gravity ($F = F^2 = G \times m_1 \times m_2/r^2$ in case you'd forgotten, which is an incredible thing to dream up after being hit on the head by an apple). And it was now, thanks mainly to a village in Hampshire, that cricket evolved new dimensions of skills and strategies. It was a good deal more than Dr Samuel Johnson's 1755 definition of cricket as 'a sport at which contenders drive a ball with sticks or bats in opposition to each other'.

One popular image of eighteenth-century Hambledon is of a chocolate-box-perfect cricket ground in a bucolic tree-lined valley, with men in whites and top hats – smug in the knowledge that they had initiated the game – clapping visiting batsmen to the manicured wicket as their female escorts looked on winsomely (they hadn't yet been lured inside to make the tea). In fact, as with most sentimentally

infused beliefs, such as the assertion that if England found the right football manager they'd win the World Cup again, it's a myth.

Broadhalfpenny Down is actually a bleak, windswept field on a hill two miles from the village of Hambledon, the pitch and outfield were rough as befitted a sheep paddock, the men wore waistcoats and breeches that had gone blue-grey from filthy laundry water and the (very) close fielders, sometimes wigged but unhelmeted of course, stared gimlet-eyed at the new batsman (must have been quite disconcerting if a sudden gust blew the wig off). And, as has now been realized, none could claim to have invented cricket. It had filtered across into Hampshire from its origins in Kent and Sussex at least a hundred years before.

What Hambledon does deserve recognition for is giving the game new shape and style. Records are sketchy, but there is some evidence that the Hambledon club was a going concern well before the 1760s. However, it was only after this point that it really gained any prominence. The motivating force was Richard Nyren, nephew of Slindon's batting ace, Richard Newland, who captained the side and converted the rundown pub The Hut into the reputable Bat and Ball inn.

Nyren senior started a 'gentlemen's' social club at the inn, and they funded the team, recruiting the notable players from around the region. In old records Hambledon is often miswritten as 'Hampshire' and it wasn't far from the truth. At first the players were largely from within a ten-mile radius, but as the club's prominence grew they travelled from north, south and east of the county, and from west Sussex too, to be regulars at Broadhalfpenny Down. Bowling became more artful, instead of just the straightforward skim along the (bumpy) ground, with spin and trajectory. As has always been the way, batsmen countered such innovations with new techniques of their own.

John Small, from Empshott, a few miles north of Petersfield, pioneered the 'straight' bat method of play, working out that you had more chance of making contact with a bouncing ball if you kept the blade vertical rather than horizontal. This was in about 1765. He would be amazed to know that this still takes an age to dawn on

schoolkids, village players, wholehearted clubmen, even international tailenders. In fact, virtually anyone who has ever played the sport. Apart from Geoff Boycott, who realized it aged 4½ months and has been reminding everyone ever since.

The fact is, though, it really would be a boring old game if everyone adhered to these percentage principles and no one ever attempted a good hearty swipe across the line, only to miss and see their stumps splattered everywhere. It adds to everyone's enjoyment, particularly those in earshot of the dressing room while the coach is giving the culprit a rollicking.

Small was, however, a phenomenon who once, when playing for Hambledon against 'England', couldn't be dismissed for three days. He was an expert judge of a quick single but was renowned more as a 'blocker', generally making slow progress to some of the first hundreds recorded in the history of the game. He was hugely influential though, nudging Hambledon to consistent success and national prominence. His method encouraged a swathe of imitators and the carving of straight blades like his to replace the old curved hockey stick type, a trend he capitalized on by converting his shoemaking business into cricket bat manufacture. His stoic obduracy was, however, also an early indicator to commercially obsessed terrestrial TV bosses that given the choice of buying live England cricket matches or *The Simpsons*, they'd plump for *The Simpsons* every time.

Small was a pillar of society in every way: not only did he play 'straight', but he was also a 'capital' shot, sang bass in the Petersfield choir, played the violin, and repaired them in his workshop, and once calmed a loose bull down by serenading it, and excelled at 'skating' on Petersfield Heath pond. This tells you something about global warming if nothing else. They haven't had serious ice on that bit of water for half a century. Small lived till he was eighty-nine so all this activity must have done him good.

His prowess with the bat also brought about another major change in the game. Despite the presence of a couple of deceptive underarm bowlers – if that's not an oxymoron – he was consistently hard to dismiss. The two stumps were so thin that on the rare occasion that

he missed the ball it went straight between them and his wicket remained intact. This happened three times in succession in a match in 1775 against the legendary Kent bowler Edward 'Lumpy' Stevens – rightfully renamed 'Grumpy' after that. It'd be a bit like knocking over Mr Boycott's wicket three times in succession only for it to spring back into position with the bails somehow still in place, while he smirked down the pitch and exclaimed, 'My moom could bool quicker than that!' From that point it was decreed a third stump would be placed in the gap (though some self-aggrandizing dukes elected to do without it when it was their turn for a bat).

So now we have three stumps, a roughly scythed (or sheep-chewed) pitch, creases cut into the turf, underarm bowling and straight bats that had been restricted to 4¼ inches in width after Thomas 'Shock' White of Reigate attempted to use one about two feet wide. It was shaved down to half its size on the day, and the Hambledon committee, who ran the game at the time, had an iron frame made which, from then on, all bats had to conform to (and which they could whack non-compliers over the head with).

## Harris Tweak

Hambledon in the 1770s was a sort of Chelsea of today. It attracted the best players, who were on a massive win bonus of five guineas (£5.25) a match, and they spent their money reshoeing and re-saddling their horses, the eighteenth-century equivalent of getting customized suspension and Dolby surroundsound for your Hummer. The Hambledon team was superior to 'England' (an amalgam of Kent and Surrey), beating them twenty-nine times out of fifty-one over a fifteen-year period, and often had crowds of 20,000 turning out to watch them, and afterwards buy a tacky Polyester replica shirt made in Taiwan. They were also notorious entertainers famous for their after-match singing and revelry, the forerunners of today's top footballers getting smashed on Cristal champagne and organizing spit roasts.

You'd never know it looking at the rather dingy nature of the Bat

and Ball pub now. The lunchtime I went with a friend it was practically deserted, and hung with a haphazard assortment of 'memorabilia' (a euphemism for old junk), including someone's rather smelly 1960s-style cricket boots in the dusty fireplace. There is an early bat – which looks more like an oar – on the wall, but no reference to whose it was or when it was used, and framed drawings of some of Hambledon's famous players jostle for wall space with cheap ornamental plates, an incongruous caricature of Imran Khan (who had no connection with the place) and the barman's signed bat.

An opportunity has been missed to create a complete cricket-themed experience, using equipment – stumps, bats – as furniture (boxes as sugar bowls?) and having stunning pictures of the great players dotted around and spicing up the menu perhaps with a Warne-burger (he did play for Hampshire and famously said that his idea of a balanced diet was a cheeseburger in each hand) and a Gower banoffee-pie (he lives nearby). The apology of a monument – an ugly lump of stone, like part of a meteorite – dumped in a corner of the exposed ground across the road sadly sums up the total lack of artistic vision at one of the most significant sporting sites in the world.

On that draughty field 250 years ago, bowling was evolving from the primitive underarm skidders which Richie Benaud, if he had been on commentary, would have described as 'mullygrubbers'. The prime mover in this was the anonymous-sounding David Harris, who in the twenty-first century you'd assume would be an accountant or a central-heating rep or something even more boring like a property developer. (Have you ever met anyone duller than a commercial property bloke with his pallid, greasy face and his grey-suited paunch and his intimate knowledge of office rents in Basingstoke?)

Harris was a potter by trade, but in cricket just as much a pioneer with the ball as John Small had been with the bat. In many ways he was like an eighteenth-century Warne – well, one without the earring or the predilection for texting buxom blondes anyway. With an idiosyncratic way of releasing the ball – still underarm – Harris managed to get it to bounce and deviate off the pitch, posing a constant threat within a suffocating blanket of accuracy. He practised

assiduously both outdoors and in a specially adapted barn (so not only did he perfect 'length' bowling, but also invented indoor schools). He kept a metronomic length, landing the ball some way short of the half-volley the batsmen preferred, and often got it to lift up and bruise their unprotected fingers.

John Nyren, son of the Hambledon captain (and barman) and cricket's first great chronicler, wrote an account of Harris's unique bowling action. 'First he stood erect like a soldier, upright. Then, with a graceful and elegant curve, he raised the fatal ball to his forehead and, drawing back his right foot, set off on his left.' His delivery was mercurial: 'he would bring it from under his arm by a twist and, nearly as high his armpit, and with this action *push* it, as it were, from him.' Lord Frederick Beauclerk, one of the best amateur batsmen of the day, called Harris's bowling 'one of the grandest sights in the universe'. Clearly he needed to get out more.

There was no denying Harris's prowess though. He had an uncanny eye for the roughest patch of grass to bowl on (the visiting team were allowed to choose where the stumps should be pitched and Harris had a particular penchant for mole hills) and he made the ball fizz and spit off the surface. This demanded a whole new approach to batting, forcing batsmen to step forward to smother the movement and attempt to play it with a perpendicular bat rather than try and swipe it into the heather. Nimble footwork was required, otherwise batsmen became virtually scoreless.

Still he outwitted them, removing numerous batsmen caught, a mode of dismissal which in those days wasn't credited to the bowler. He knew how to exploit a pitch and in one match in the mid-1780s took 3 wickets in 3 balls. He was presented with a gold-laced hat for his achievement. By the 1800s it was the norm to give a bowler a similar gift for such a feat. It is the origin of the term 'hat-trick', now common parlance in most sports for an individual getting three of a kind whether it be wickets, goals or wins.

Harris was so good that even when in later years his body was ravaged with gout he was allowed to walk to the middle on crutches, bowl his deliveries and then recline in an armchair for the rest of the game. Now that's the way to play cricket.

## Get Your Legs Out of the Way, Man!

The advent of Harris and other devious bowlers brought about a more cautious approach from batsmen. This was the age of the 'block'. Tom Walker, a celebrated opening batsman, took this to considerable extremes in one match, scoring only 1 run off 170 deliveries he received from Harris. He would have made Geoff Boycott look like Kevin Pietersen.

Runs were accumulated, 403 of them in one Hambledon innings in 1777, then a record, as was James Aylward's individual contribution of 167. In another match Noah Mann scored an all-run 10 when he hit one behind the wicket and miles down the hill at Broadhalfpenny, though you do wonder what the hell the fielders could have been doing. Accidentally on purpose treading it into the ground and declaring a lost ball would have been more sensible (costing them only 6). The *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack* doesn't record the most runs ever achieved off one ball, but I once saw a 12 registered during an indoor international at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff when the Pakistani Shahid 'Boom Boom' Afridi managed to launch a ball into the roof, a height of nearly 300ft.

But despite the generally slow scoring, cricket as a sport was progressing rather well. In schools and universities it was thriving, and it had penetrated the Midlands and as far north as Durham (where the first recorded match was in 1751 at Raby Castle). Decent crowds attended major club matches. Professional players earnt quite handy money and the big landowners took their turns at one-upmanship and creaming a bit off the top. The game remained relatively simple, with no limit to the amount of time a batsman could stay in or how long a bowler could bowl for. There were, realistically, only three ways of being out – bowled, caught and run out – all fairly easy for the umpire to adjudicate. And there were no stump mikes to pick up new batsmen saying, 'Who the fuck has thrown a jelly bean on the pitch?', thus causing an international incident.

It was all rather lovely and idyllic and mercenary. And then someone threw a spanner in the works. They invented leg before wicket. This aspect of cricket has probably aroused more dispute and death

threats than any other rule in sport, and definitely more confusion. The cockier someone sounds about the lbw law the greater the likelihood that they are absolutely clueless. It has spawned a sort of unofficial private sect – the LBW Society – containing a select band of individuals who properly understand its intricacies and have honey and Marmite finger sandwiches religiously at 4.10pm every day and make the legs of their children's beds from old wickets. Yes, Dad, *you*!

The Star and Garter in Pall Mall was the place the posh sporting set liked to meet, and it was here in 1774 that an assortment of dukes and squires and clergy met to revise the Laws of Cricket. The principal change reflected the new style of batting. The striker with the upright bat – standing closer to the line of the stumps than his hockey-stick-wielding predecessor – would sometimes deviously use his legs as a second line of defence, risking bruised shins in the process (pads were not worn in those days). The London committee, anxious to keep the game 'fair' – mainly for the sake of gambling on it – agreed that a batsman be given out if 'he puts his leg before the wicket with a design to stop the ball and actually prevents the ball from hitting the wicket'. In essence, getting your leg deliberately in the way was regarded as not in 'the spirit' of the game.

The new law immediately vested responsibility on the umpire to be (a) eagle-eyed, (b) able to remain standing up and alert for hours on end despite a scoring rate of half a run an over, and (c) a sort of Mystic Meg and predict the future. It is, of course, impossible to be *sure* the ball was going to hit the wicket if the batsman's leg hadn't been in the way, just as it's impossible to be sure that driving a gas-guzzling Range Rover in Chelsea is going to ultimately bring about the flooding of Holland.

And that's the perennial problem with lbw: no one really knows. The umpire can't say to the bowler, 'Hey, bowl that one again without the batsman in the way and we'll see if it hits the stumps or not.' Occasionally, when the batsman is standing right in front of his wicket with a stump visible either side of his leg and the ball cannons into his shin, you can be pretty certain of the outcome. Usually, though, it's total guesswork, and as time has gone on more

complexities have been added to the lbw law – 'Was the batsman struck outside the line of the stumps?', 'Was he attempting to play the ball?', 'Did he buy me a beer last night?' – to make the umpire's job even harder.

Lbw should stand for a Lot of Bloody Worry, and the problems of applying the new law were underlined by the fact that twenty years elapsed before anyone was officially given out in this way. In 1795 the Hon. John Tufton of Surrey became the first of a zillion batsmen who mutter as they're walking off, 'Where's your white stick, ump? Couldn't you see that ball was missing leg stump?' Hearing the litany of aggrieved complaints about lbw decisions from batsmen (or bowlers) is one of the sadistic joys of dressing room life ('It was too high', 'That was going down . . .', or 'It wasn't fast enough to knock the bails off' – 'Why d'you miss it then?'). The old whingers didn't shut up even in 2001, when Channel 4 introduced the predictive tool Hawkeye to project the exact path of the ball using modern missile guidance technology. 'How can you trust that?' they said. 'Well, the RAF do, and it's a lot better than guessing,' I'd reply but they wouldn't have it. Some people, you see, are just never satisfied.