

“Nothing to Play For”

June: ‘You have to catch the bloody thing’

Jesters at Thongsbridge

Match abandoned at 7:00 pm. because of rain

Jesters 224 for 6

Casuals not enough for 6 off 35 overs and 4 balls

(Will Ward 55, Marc Davis 33 no, Bill Crossland 19 no)

So far this season we’d visited Stainborough, Yapham, Old Almondburians and Whitley Bridge. Jesters was the first home game and it was the usual suspects: Bill, Will, Jim, Marc, Umbers, John Burgess, first time out for the season, and myself supplemented by Dom, and we were two short. John, or rather Burge, was introduced to The Casuals by his uncle in the late 1970’s and eventually made captain. Latterly, work in the pub trade has restricted his availability. He’s proud of his leg spin, but maybe not so proud of his unwitting hilarious fielding.

Our home fixtures were played at Thongsbridge. It sits in the valley bottom alongside the river Holme. A football pitch and grassy hillside make up two further borders, whilst the fourth comprises stone mills and warehouses. Balls are easily lost here. A big hit will effortlessly make the river, which explains the long pole with net attached. There’s no side screen and despite the whitewashed walls, an old ball with plenty of air is readily confused with the grey industrial background, much to the chagrin of long on and long off trying to take a catch.

Thongsbridge has become associated with the current regulars. Teams seem to go in eras when, by chance, for a number of seasons, half a dozen or so form a nucleus and become attached to a certain ground, a pub and a tour. “Cricket in Perspective” (1987) documents the generosity of Thurstonland and Shepley CC’s, whilst The Golden Cock gets fond mention as a popular spot for after match drinks. Then its another era. The stalwarts move on, replaced by the next generation, the pub loses character or changes landlords, the local league club need their ground for other things and the tour loses its flavour or relevance, either for the hosts or the visitors. It could be a natural process which is gracefully negotiated, but I suspect its more of a lurch from a crisis to a period of relative stability.

On the one hand its a sad fact that The Casuals rarely started with a full side. On the other it meant I got a game. Despite the age and fitness factors, it was a good team and deserved better. I’ve often thought it was just one good innings per game short of winning regularly. There are no financial worries and the regulars enjoy turning out together. Some play for the same league team. Some are friends outside of cricket, maybe from school, or work together, successful in business, competitive in sports. And there is just a touch of ‘being one of us’. The comfort of similar middle class values.

Though I’d experienced idiosyncratic selection I’d become comfortable-ish with the need for skippers to share out the work and broaden contacts. Grumpily, I’d accepted that age inevitably erodes stamina and skill. But I still hoped there would be room for the hopeless romantic. David Pedley, current President of The Casuals, wrote in “Cricket in Perspective” (2006), “the result; almost irrelevant - the Casuals probably won slightly more games over

the years but the hospitality and good fellowship were of prime importance”. Strange really as David’s wife clearly remembers that he never once played to lose.

Jesters came on the Sunday of Jubilee weekend. My dad saw to it that I’d never be a fan of The Royal Family. Too much inherited privilege for him. I felt I grew up with Prince Charles, but despite following him through private schools, Cambridge, posh commissions in the armed forces, his marriages and the family business, he and the rest of the royals have been too remote to be an influence on my life. As I’ve mellowed though, The Queen as an idea has impressed me. Like the rest of us, she is flawed. Cool and aloof with limited parenting skills. But she embodies values like civility and continuity. Things we can all sign up to without New Labour passing an Act of Parliament.

My university colleagues talked about respect in cricket. Like The Queen, cricket is a big idea. Why on earth does it mean so much to so many people? It must be the same for any sport really and I don’t know the answer, which is a relief. Social scientists have written libraries about accommodating a variety of individual and group needs within an overall common purpose. They tell us that it’s all about who has what power within the prevailing economic, social and political wind. Cricket has been around for a long time and despite massive change, remains easily recognisable. What can be more powerful than that? I imagine a benign maiden great aunt charged with herding nephews whose way of getting on varies from a squabble to a brawl. The image doesn’t work with a father figure because he’s a nephew too.

Every era will have examples. I’ve chosen one from the 1950’s because it was part of my university presentation. In 1958, CLR James, the celebrated W. Indian cricket writer, was the guest at the Huddersfield and District Cricket League annual dinner, held at Haywood’s cafe. He said the English took three things to The West Indies: cricket, English literature and puritanism. Children on the islands were thus brought up to play according to the rules. The examiner report didn’t mention slavery, nor the bitterness some of the West Indians felt when they settled here. But clearly we didn’t play according to the same rules as the islands.

In 2006, I briefly came into contact with Stanley Innis, respected JP and churchman, who came over in 1955. Originally he was bound for The US, but a friend here thought he could make a living in cricket. His friend wrote to Derbyshire, and Stanley is still waiting a reply. He played at Fartown where there was only one racist incident when a batter asked the umpire if Stanley would roll his sleeves down whilst bowling. ‘Well you know what happened then?’ said Stanley. Many other West Indian cricketers didn’t find it easy to get a game so, in the late 1950’s, they joined together to play in friendlies. In 1960 they entered the Huddersfield Association, won trophies immediately and a Caribbean side has played in the leagues ever since. Stanley is quoted as follows on the university web site, ‘When I came I was accepted because I was a good cricketer. A good many of my friends who had not been accepted had a lot of problems. In the end some of them decided to go back home.’ No prizes for guessing the 1950’s prevailing wind.

Thongsbridge was a picture, bathed in sunshine and the success of their win against Marsden the day before, in which Dom, club captain had top-scored. It was however an oppressive muggy heat, and no-one was surprised by the thunderstorm that brought the game to a premature conclusion.

While the rest of the country, including Rupert, celebrated, The Casuals laboured against a nomadic side loosely associated with cricket clubs that skirt the N. Leeds bypass in Bradford. The Rawdon CC. emblem was noted on one player’s shirt, confirming The Jesters’ habitual sprinkling of Bradford League players. Their name originates from the pub where they were founded 41 years ago, but that connection has now lapsed.

It seems that The Jesters were too good for The Casuals last year, and there was a certain expectancy of the same today. This was compounded by being two short. Its an uphill struggle to bowl effectively to an understrength field without the additional need to contain batters with sound technique who are unafraid to punish the wayward delivery. Thus, within this unclouded setting of national revelry, morale was a little low.

From six o'clock onwards we knew it was a lost cause and when it rained an hour later, it seemed a fair reflection on the day. It hadn't been a disaster, playing for The Casuals never is, but we've had better days. Skipper Bill felt it more than most,

'I haven't been at my best today. I think its the heat.'

The chance that was in his hands one minute and on the floor the next could also have been relevant. He'd also been despondent about getting the side together, 'I'd four up to Friday night. I nearly cancelled.'

Sam Stier bravely umpired despite severe backache, giving the autumn golden boy out LBW off his brand new bat. Autumn Gold was Jim Harris' latest hair colour, celebrated by new boots, new bat and a quick march back to the pavilion. The prize for not being at his best was taken by Will Ward. Their number four batsman came across, a plumpish fourteen year old in a 'Rhinos' baseball cap,

'Can you tell me where the toilets are, please?'

'Yes, round the back,' said Will, indicating the whitewashed open air stone box behind the pavilion, next to the river. A long intake of held breath is recommended for those sensitive souls who faint in the presence of strong pong.

'I need the ladies.'

It, she, was a batswoman, or is it batsperson? Will was dismayed at this violation of accepted convention, but isn't it a fair assumption that the opposition will be male most of the time? Still, he has an innocent old fashioned charm.

Our bowlers toiled without luck. Burge was the pick, varying the flight and pace of his leg breaks to the astonishment of all, especially his two victims. One of them was the batswoman's younger brother who unfortunately failed to miss a totally innocuous straight short one and was caught at silly mid off. As he'd only faced one ball he was understandably distraught. Shame.

Jesters always seem to have enough batting firepower to take advantage of those one or two balls every over that are short or too full or wide, and they have their share of good fortune. Their main bat kept wicket on Saturdays and batted number ten where he hardly ever got a knock. For The Jesters he came in much higher. He rarely played across the line and had either a standard on drive for one off his legs, or a fearsome belt to the boundary on everything outside off stump. Some of these are airborne, some to the poor unfortunate at long off. Now Umbers likes to bowl a bit. He walks to the crease, lobs it up and hopes for a miscue and a fielder with hands like buckets. He came on against Jesters and got their main man to sky it to long on where I was waiting. I lost the ball amongst the dismal grey warehouse and it pitched half-volley at my feet. I couldn't even stop it going for four. This was a personally devastating moment. Not that I'd made a mistake, not that I'd let the team down. Put simply, I was turning into a hopeless cricketer. Once The Casuals can get a regular full side, I'll be relegated to the hopeless quota system.

'You bottled out of that one Dave,' what a comforting thought from Will at midwicket.

Umbers was all heart as usual, 'You have to catch the bloody thing. I only bowl it.' No prizes for guessing who'd be twelfth man in his team.

Some days it really doesn't matter. Other days it does.

Will then scored a rapid 55 for us. The other batting highlight came from the last pair of Marc and the skipper, momentarily shaking off his depression. Marc repeatedly late cut off a thick outside edge, bringing gasps of incredulity from the opposition. When the rain came they remained not out, second and third highest scorers.

The fielder at fine leg, third man, long off and long on, which was all the same to him and usually me, engaged a passer-by in conversation, strolling along the boundary edge with his two boys, neither yet the size of a cricket bat.

‘Who’s playing?’

‘Jesters and The Casuals.’

‘Which are you?’

‘Casuals.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘Upperthong, Honley, Netherthong, Holmfirth, that sort of area. We’re a refuse of hopeless cricketers.’

I’d intended to describe the club’s mission as a refuge, but the new and unusual collective noun seemed somehow to fit. We weren’t at our best, I certainly wasn’t, and whilst the day’s outcome remained indecisive, the content was never in doubt.

At close of play, I ambled across to the bar with Jim.

‘What do you think of the writing so far?’ I asked.

‘Couldn’t you cut it down a bit? I mean your pieces are quite long.’

Note to self - restrict word length to 500 per article.

I receive an e-mail the following week. “David - Another gem, thank you. It really is disappointing that we can't raise 11 every week, although I was partly to blame this time. I was committed to the Jubilee Knees-up months ago and couldn't change plans. More importantly, I had paid my £7.50 towards the food and ale (a barrel of Church Bitter from the Church Inn brewery at Uppermill).

Any roid up, to the matter in hand: I will refrain from my customary pedanticism (?) with the regard to the application of the apostrophe (several grave errors) and turn to a more significant booboo. Cricket grounds do not have side screens and never have had. Some, however (the better ones), have SIGHT screens, the purpose of which is to enable the batsman to gain SIGHT of the ball as it leaves the bowler's hand. The fact that the very large majority of the sight screens are too low to make any difference unless the batsman is a Haarlem Globetrotter or the bowler is Charlie Drake (or both), is held to be irrelevant. The main thing is that it gives the batsman the chance to disrupt proceedings, extend his time at the crease and tire out a fielder and, it is hoped, the bowler by insisting that it be moved as often as he has the nerve to ask for it to be - Rupe.”

I wonder how many ageing hopeless caribbean cricketers there are? Today’s prevailing wind is different, so its not supposed to be like the 1950’s. The number of West Indians at The AGM or playing on a Summer Sunday down at Thongsbridge resembles my batting average.