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O F D A G E N H A M

## THE EARLY HISTORY OF

# Cricket

By S. M. TOYNE



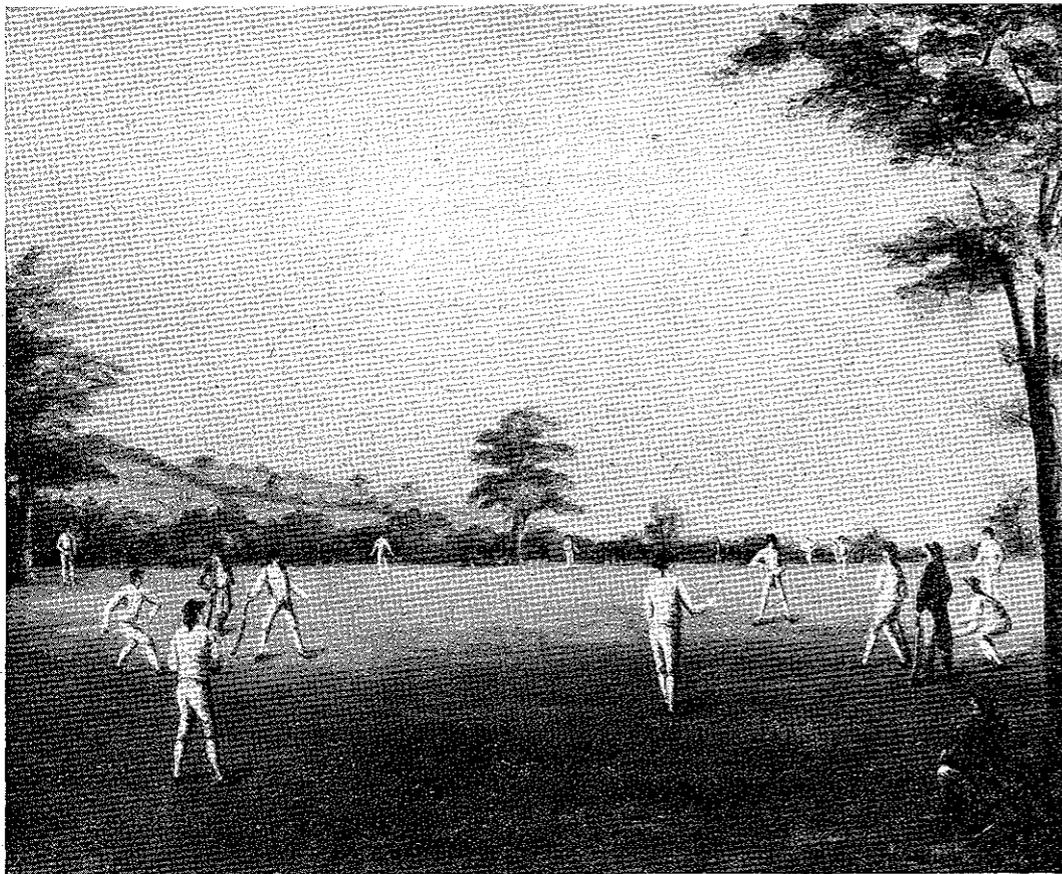
By courtesy of the Marylebone Cricket Club, Lord's

Cricket played by the Gentlemen's Club, White Conduit Field, Islington, 1788

IF THE FRENCH NOBLESSE had been capable of playing cricket with their peasants, their chateaux would never have been burnt," Trevelyan wrote in his *Social History of England*. He was alluding to cricket in the eighteenth century, when for one day in the week, Sunday as often as not, social differences were forgotten. "Butchers, tinkers, gardeners, farm labourers, noblemen, gentlemen and clergy," all were equal under the rules of the game. Villagers, their wives and children, watched together and applauded their favourite team and players, while sporting bets were placed. A team without its singer or its fiddler was almost unheard of; in fact, the bet, the song and the tankard were as necessary for an enjoyable day's cricket as the bat, the ball and the wicket. The gay scene thus evoked might

be dismissed as an imaginative dream, no more real than an eighteenth-century description of the Golden Age, were it not borne out by historical evidence.

As early as 1700 may be found this notice of a two-day match to be played on Clapham Common in March: "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 played for £10 a head each game (five being designed) and £20 the odd one." Other matches were played for a crown a head, but after the game had become fashionable in the 1740's, betting rose to fantastic sums of £1,000 or more. Of one match it has been stated that side bets among spectators and players totalled £20,000. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the game itself was in



Lord's first ground in what is now Dorset Square, 1788; the land acquired by Mr. Thomas Lord

By courtesy of the M.C.C.

danger of ruin, since it had become the chief medium for national gambling. Bookmakers attended the matches, odds were called as the fortunes of the game fluctuated, and side bets on the scores of individual players led to bribery and cheating. One noted player took £100 to lose a match. It was not until the M.C.C. had been recognized as the ruling authority that reforms were effected, and only at the beginning of the Victorian era was the game wholly purged from this canker.

Even the Hambledon Club (1750-92) was said to have usually staked £500 on each match. The glories of this club have been immortalized in the lively narrative of John Nyren. From his account of a match in 1772, we can

estimate the hold that cricket had over the hearts of the people. It might seem a fanciful story, did we not know that he was a player and his father, proprietor of "The Bat and Ball," captain of the side :

"There was a high feasting held on Broad-Halfpenny during the solemnity of one of our grand matches. Oh ! it was a heart-stirring sight to witness the multitude forming a complete and dense circle round that noble green. Half the county would be present and all their hearts with us—Little Hambledon pitted against All England, was a proud thought for the Hampshire men. Defeat was glory in such a struggle—Victory indeed made us 'a little lower than the angels.' How those fine brawn-faced fellows would drink to our success ! . . . Punch, not your modern cat-lap milk punch . . . but good unsophisticated John Bull stuff—stark—punch that would make a cat

speak ! . . . whenever a Hambledon man made a good hit worth four or five runs, you would hear the deep mouths of the whole multitude baying away in pure Hampshire 'Go hard—Go hard—Tick and turn' . . . but I cannot call to recollection an instance of their stopping a ball that had been hit out among them by one of our opponents. Like true English men, they would give an enemy fair play."

That was cricket, indeed, yet less than sixty years later Miss Mitford, an ardent supporter of the game, paints a very different picture, showing the evil effects of the gambling craze and of increasing social cleavage :

"I anticipated great pleasure from so grand an exhibition. What a mistake! There they were—a set of ugly old men, whitehaired and baldheaded (for half of Lord's were engaged in the game, players and gentlemen). Mr. Ward and Lord Frederick the veterans of the green, dressed in light white jackets with neckcloth primly tied round their throats, fine japanned shoes, silk stockings and gloves; instead of our fine village lads with their unbuttoned collars, their loose waistcoats and the large shirt sleeves, which give an air so picturesque to their glowing bounding youthfulness, there they stood railed in by themselves silent, solemn, slow-playing for money, making a business of the thing, grave as judges, taciturn as chess players, a sort of dance without music, instead of the glee, the fun, the shouts, the laughter, the glorious confusion of the country game, but everything is spoilt when money puts its stupid nose in . . . so be it always when men make the noble game of cricket an affair of betting and hedgings and maybe cheatings !"

Such, in George IV's reign, was the blight hanging over cricket. Miss Mitford might have added that the mania for making money out of cricket had led to lawsuits, free fights and fatal accidents. On October 31st, 1776, "A terrible affair happened at Tilbury Fort," when Kent were due to play Essex. Essex asserted that Kent had brought in a "foreign" player, whereupon "a battle ensued and, the Kentish men being likely to be worsted, one of them ran to the guardhouse and getting a gun from one of the invalids fired and killed one of the opposite party." Both sides got guns from four soldiers, then "fell to it, doing a lot of mischief. An old invalid was run through the body with a bayonet and a sergeant was shot dead!" So wrote the London Chronicle, and this was only one of many recorded rows. Yet by the end of the century cricket had spread widely throughout England and Wales. Buckley<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Fresh Light on Pre-Victorian Cricket, 1709-1837*

records 43 counties and 508 places where it was being played, and this excludes "other places" unnamed. But if it is in the eighteenth century that cricket began to achieve universal popularity, it was nevertheless certainly played in Queen Elizabeth's reign.

"John Derrick a gentl," according to a document in the Guildford Records, swore on oath in 1596, "being ffyfty and nyne yeeres or thereabouts . . . that hee being a scholler in the free schoole of Guldeford, hee and diverse of his fellowes did runne and play there at Creckett and other plaies . . ." He was giving evidence in a case brought to prevent the enclosure of some waste land, used by sawyers as well as schoolboys. The first use of the word cricket is in Florio's *World of Words*. In this he renders "sjittare" or "sqvillare" as "to make a noise like a cricket, to play cricket-a-wicket : to make merry." There is no reason to doubt that Giovanni Florio, son of an Italian Protestant, who had taken refuge in England, did not mean the game of cricket. He was a highly educated man, tutor in the house of Cecil, and showed intimate knowledge of English games in his "Garden of Recreation" (1591).

On the false assumption that cricket was one of those "unlawful games," classed with "bull and bear baiting interludes," it has been freely stated that James I's "Declaration of Sports" in 1618 was directed, among other things, against cricket. But cricket is not named in this document. The very first mention of a ground reserved specifically for cricket, and rated as such, is at Smithfield in 1661; it was owned by the innkeeper of "The Ram." This offers sound evidence that cricket was not an "unlawful game." Moreover, when cricket is first mentioned in connexion with bull-and-bear baiting and cock-fighting, it is on record that the people of Sheffield and Leeds encouraged it as an alternative sport. "The Burgesses of a Parish Church (Leeds) paid 14 shillings and 6 pence to professional cricketers" precisely for that purpose.

Though King James's Declaration of Sports deprecated the playing of any game, until after Divine Service, it nevertheless stated that "the King's pleasure was that the Bishops and all other inferior churchmen shall be careful to

instruct the ignorant . . . and reform them that are misled in their religion . . . ” and encourage them in their Sports. The Declaration tells us that it is applying to the whole kingdom “ the directions given in Lancashire ” on King James’s return from a progress to Scotland in 1617. A crusade against games had been started by the Puritans in that county, which then, as at the beginning of the Civil War, contained a high percentage both of Puritans and of Roman Catholics. Until “ to our great regret ” this crusade began, popish recusants were “ being converted to our great contentment ” ; but “ this amendment ” ceased because “ their priests will persuade them that no honest mirth or recreation is lawful or tolerable in our religion. ” King James saw the light. If there were no games, there would be no converts to Anglicanism. The extreme Puritans were doing him a disservice when they brought cricketers before the Ecclesiastical Courts, whenever these courts showed Puritanical leanings. In spite of the warning in the Declaration, cases were still brought forward, not without success, and this Puritan attitude to cricket had a profound bearing on its history.

Much of the evidence for the early history of cricket, and for the English people’s attitude to it, is to be found in the records of these Ecclesiastical Courts. Two typical cases may be cited in which cricketers were brought up for trial side by side with other laity, who were charged with “ swearing, drunkenness or fornication. ” Of the first case at Boxgrave (near Goodwood) in 1622, the verdict of the Archdeacon’s Court on the five men playing cricket on the Lord’s Day is not given. The second case in 1640, just before the outbreak of the Civil War, when the Declaration was still operative, is in the nature of a trial of strength between the divergent views of Royalists and Parliamentarians on games. The scene was laid at Maidstone, which the Rector, Thomas Wilson, described some ten years later as “ formerly a very profane town in as much as I have seen . . . crickets and many other sports openly and publicly indulged in on the Lord’s Day. ” The charges preferred against the unfortunate cricketers were cunningly laid in the Canterbury Archdeacon’s Court : (1) they were breaking the Lord’s Day, (2) they smashed a window, (3) if a child had

been passing on the common, the ball might have beaten its brains out ! They were sentenced only on counts 1 and 2.

How popular cricket had become before the Civil War cannot be gauged with any certainty, but it must have been widely known, or Sir William Dugdale would not have mentioned it in his diatribe against Oliver Cromwell. He branded the great Independent as a “ roysterer ” who had spent “ a dissolute youth ” playing at “ cricket and football. ” Whatever truth there may be in this, it is a fact that soon after the execution of Charles I the Commonwealth set about discouraging amusements of all kinds ; their view of cricket seems to have been the same as of other games—“ undesirable on all days, but damned on the Lord’s Day. ” Between 1649 and the Restoration cricket was, nevertheless, occasionally played on week days, and Wykehamists continued to play “ at Hills, ” it being stated that Bishop Ken as “ a junior ” in 1650 “ on his fifth or sixth day is found for the first time attempting to wield a bat. ”

As soon as the bells had pealed in welcome for the home-coming of Charles II, the games of the people were enthusiastically resumed. The commons south of the Thames became the regular battlegrounds of cricketers. A club was started at St. Albans, with the 4th Earl of Salisbury as one of its earliest Presidents. Taverners began to see that a cricket pitch could be an added source of income, and during the next century a tavern was frequently considered to be the natural companion of a ground. Sometimes, as in the case of the White Conduit Field and the Artillery Grounds, the innkeeper was “ the master of the field ” and responsible for its upkeep. Since the journals and “ intelligencers ” published in those days did not give news of sport, we have scant records of the game before 1700. Teonge, a naval chaplain, tells of games near Aleppo in 1675, when the Governor came to watch the “ kricket ” from “ a grand pavilion. ” But, for the most part, references to the game take the form of cautionary tales upon the evils of Sabbath-breaking ; admonitions against letting “ this manly exercise . . . interfere with the duties of a man’s life, ” and other moralizings upon “ the fashion of playing cricket this summer ” (A World Bewitched, 1699). In a broadsheet, *The Devil*



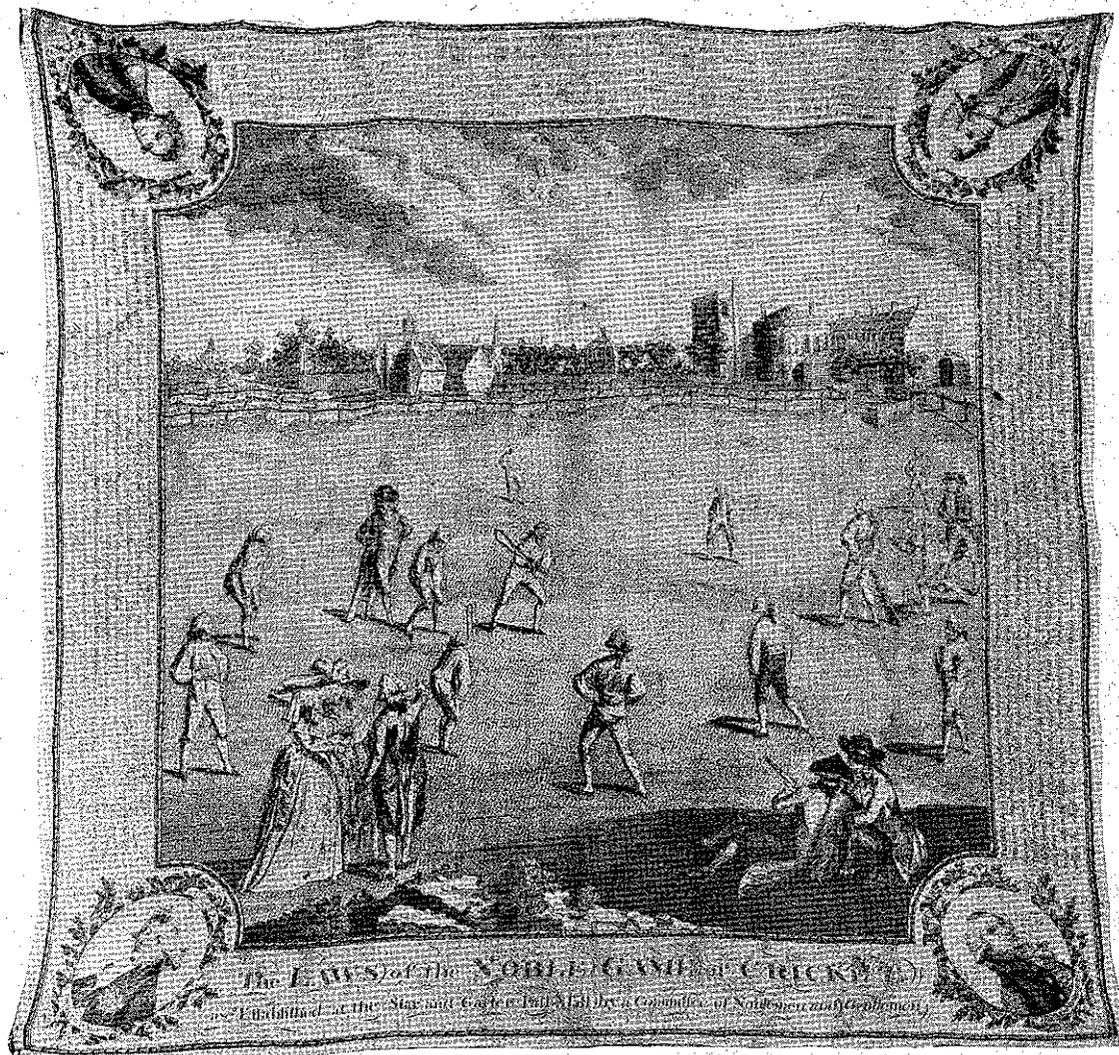
By courtesy of the M.C.C.

“ Matches were played for ever-increasing stakes ” ; Sussex v. Kent on the Sevenoaks Vine Ground, 1773

and his Peers (1711), a charge is brought against the Duke of Marlborough and Charles Townsend, that they staged a boys’ match in Windsor Forest and gave bribes to the players in order to secure votes for their party. This, if true, was by no means the only case of cricket’s being used for political purposes. Frederick, Prince of Wales, and his Court, until his death in 1751, exploited the sport for their own ends, thereby gaining considerable popularity with the crowds that flocked to the “ grand matches ” played for ever-increasing stakes. In London and the Home Counties, during George II’s reign, cricket matches were so many, and so widely advertised, that no events attracted so great a concourse of people, especially when patronised by Royalty. We have a record in 1735 of “ a memorable match, ” staged at Kennington Common, where great crowds saw the Prince of Wales lead a team of players from London and

Surrey “ from a pavilion specially erected ” to do battle against Kent captained by Lord George Sackville. By a coincidence, the activities of the Prince’s cricketing clique have come down to us because the old system of scoring on “ notched ” sticks was now replaced by sheets recording the names of players and their individual scores.

One “ grand match, ” played in 1744, may be cited in example of the interest aroused by the game ; even the contemporary newspapers allowed space not only to report the scores, but even to mention the onlookers. These included the Duke of Cumberland, then recovering from the wound he had received at Dettingen and who may be regarded as the founder of Army cricket, the Prince of Wales, the Sackvilles, Admiral Vernon and probably Lord Sandwich. To the last a poem is dedicated written in pseudo-Homeric style, telling of the



By courtesy of the M.C.C.

Handkerchief of 1785 with the laws of cricket and a game at White Conduit; at the corners four patrons of the game: top, Colonel Tarleton and Sir H. Mann; bottom, Frederick, Prince of Wales and the Duke of Dorset

glories of the encounter. An entertaining light is thrown on Sandwich's attitude to cricket by his remark to the Admiralty in the following year, upon his appointment as First Lord; "I'll be at your Board," he told them, "when at leisure from cricket"! This was at a moment when Britain was engaged in the formidable war of the Austrian Succession.

The Sackvilles—the Duke of Dorset and his brothers—were at this time practically the

feudal Lords of cricket; one was the constant companion of the Prince, the other a member of the Duke of Cumberland's staff. And Admiral Vernon's presence at this match must have been a great draw. He was one of the most popular commanders of the age and had himself learnt his cricket at Westminster School, where the excellence of the scholars' games attracted "many elegant persons," and others too, to witness their matches. Tradition has it that

the first game of cricket to be played in Jamaica was in 1741-2 during Vernon's West Indian command.

Cricket enthusiasts may praise patrons such as these for their encouragement of cricket, but it must be laid to their charge that by their extravagant stakes they set a deplorable fashion in gambling. A Sackville, captaining the Old Etonians *v.* All England, once staked 1,500 guineas and side bets ran to £25,000. Could the integrity of a poor man—a groom, a gardener, a part-time professional—withstand the temptation of a bribe to "queer the pitch"? Especially since we have on record that the employment of servants and the granting of tenancies by great lords and landed gentlemen often depended on cricket ability. One reason why cricket survived the dangers of corruption is that in many a village, and especially in the north of England, it was played simply for enjoyment and for no other reason. Often these games had local rules of their own, and differed considerably from cricket as we know it today.

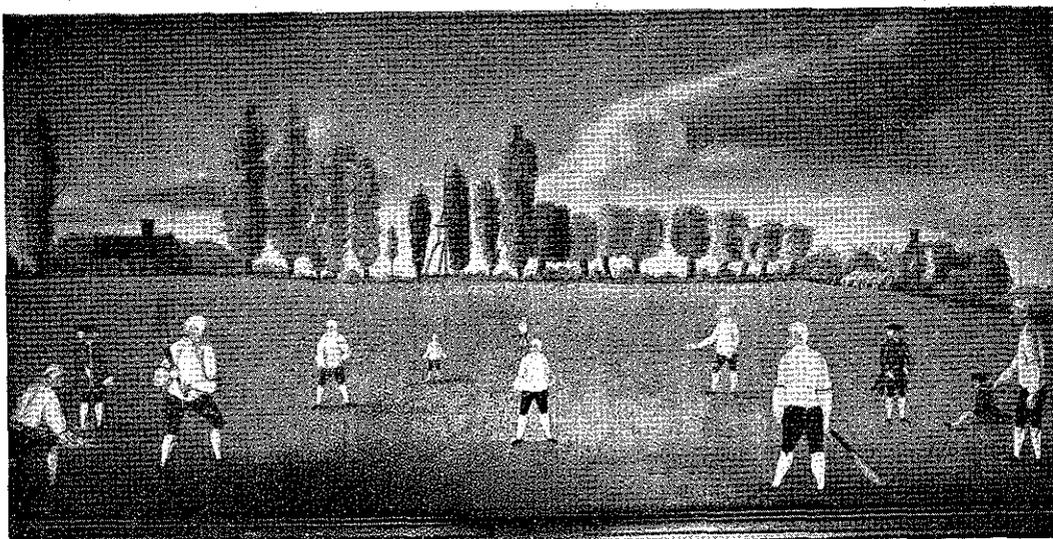
In the extreme north, for instance, the farmers and country people of the North Riding of Yorkshire and South Durham had been playing their own form of cricket from time immemorial. Their milk stools—"Criccies"—laid on their sides, formed their wickets; curiously enough, they were of the same dimensions as the original wickets sketched in Lillywhite's *Scores and Biographies* (1847), which were in use before the London Club published the first rules in 1744, thereby regularizing the precise measurements of upright wickets. This northern region developed a game which had "a profound influence on the lives of those lonely, but hardy people of the broad acres"; even today, some would be prepared to maintain that cricket in its most elementary form was first played in these parts. Certainly, these northerners cared little for rules drawn up in the south, for as late as 1798 a local Derby between Yarm and Stockton was played "on agreed rules," and the imported umpires were congratulated on carrying out their duties "like true gentlemen." The whole of this district still abounds in small clubs dating from early times.

The M.C.C. honoured the centenary of the Norton-on-Tees Club in 1921 by sending

a side containing some well-known players, such as Hendren and Durston, and in the evening on the village green a lively resurrection was witnessed of the old scenes immortalized by Nyren—the dancing, the fiddlers, the blazing flares—and the ale. This outpost—and possibly birthplace—of cricket was socially and commercially completely cut off from the centres of "big" cricket in Sheffield, Leeds, York and Hull, which in their turn were for some fifty years or more isolated from the south.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the story of cricket in the North and South displays marked contrasts. Rivalries between town and town and village and village were common to both, but in the North, there were no wealthy patrons, and no extravagant stakes; cricket sprang from the people and remained a people's game, especially in its stronghold—industrial Sheffield. For as the tempo of the Industrial Revolution increased, and people flowed in from the country to the towns, cricket became an urban as well as a village game. Sheffield, a centre for smelting iron from Norman if not Roman times, had expanded very rapidly under the impetus received from the introduction of cast steel and the incorporation of the Cutler's Company in 1740. As the city grew, so did enthusiasm for cricket. Teams from different firms and factories competed against each other, and the supporters of the men of Sheffield travelled every year in great numbers to watch the principal match of the season against Nottingham.

These matches were played in deadly earnest and more than once led to blows. A dour Sheffielder named Osguthorpe stayed in "for several hours" till the score crawled to 50 for eight wickets. The Sherwood Foresters (spectators apparently) so hampered him, that the match was abandoned. The men of Sheffield retaliated on the return match by putting in the visitors, "tired out with their journey," to bat "at 6 p.m. on a pitch" so sodden and slippery "they could neither strike nor run." Having dismissed their opponents for fourteen, the cunning Yorkshiremen, according to the Derby Mercury in 1772, had coal slack spread on the pitch and, by this brilliant piece of tactics, gained an easy victory; they may well claim to be the originators of the use of sawdust! The



By courtesy of the M.C.C.  
*"Butchers, tinkers, gardeners, farm labourers, noblemen, gentlemen and clergy";  
 village cricket, about 1750*

tale of these encounters, which lasted from 1771 to 1860, alleviates to some small extent the grim stories of the "satanic mills" and the appalling conditions of the industrial revolution. Some employers must have been more enlightened than is popularly supposed, else how did these workmen manage to get so much time off from their labours?

The York club, one of the oldest existing clubs in the country, boasted two recognized grounds, as did Sheffield, and we have copies of the articles of association in 1784, with the minutes of a meeting. Austerity and discipline were enforced on the members, who were bidden to assemble at 4 a.m. on Heworth Moor and were fined if not ready to play as the Minster clock chimed five! The better ground was on the Knavesmire, scene of the Gimcrack Stakes and Ebor handicap. Since the first World War, the western end of the great race-course has been laid out for cricket, and in the evenings and on Saturday afternoons half a dozen games are to be seen in progress, as they were two hundred years ago. Of great antiquity is the rivalry between York and Hull and to this day it is the match of the year; to this day, also, a fine is imposed on teams or players if not present at the appointed time.

From York, cricket spread slowly northwards through Richmond, Bedale and Thirsk, till a link was formed with the keen cricketers of the Stockton area. The huge stakes of the South had no place in these matches, although a modest crown would in the natural course of events be laid to back an opinion. The big match at Nottingham was originally for 42 guineas or £25, and in the early part of the nineteenth century the stakes increased to £500, but this is an exception. To the credit of cricket, it may be noted that when the increasing use of machinery caused temporary unemployment, ten shillings a man was paid to those "not in employ" in one match. The unemployed still managed to play, and a party of Luddites once caused some consternation when they turned up in force and drew nearer and nearer to the wicket. All was well, however, since the Luddites were merely prompted by curiosity to view some star players from London who had travelled north!

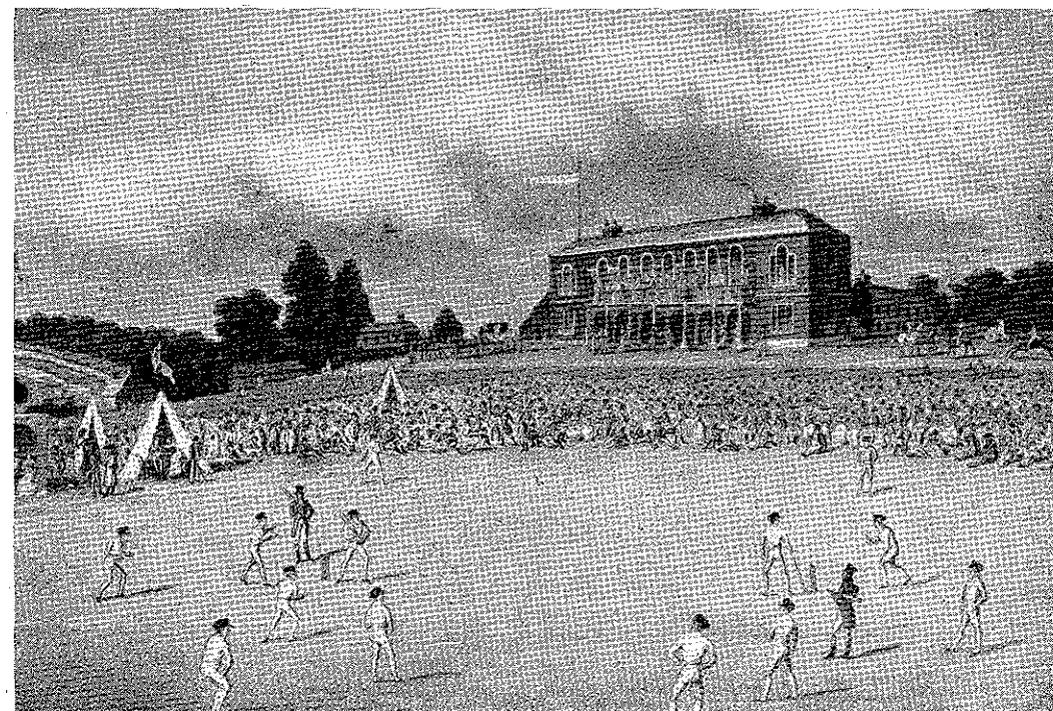
By the end of the century, cricket had become a national game, played in every town or village. The improvement in the roads made communications easier and teams travelled farther afield, till eventually North was linked with South. Differences in rules had to be

ironed out, and the formation of the Mary-le-Bone Club in 1787-8 by the "influential gentlemen" of London, including the Dukes of York, Dorset and Richmond, provided the answer to the question of who should be the ruling body.

The story of "Lord's" and the M.C.C. has been frequently told, and it is enough here to say that one of its greatest achievements was to impose "the rule of law" upon the game. There has been "no written constitution" to support the M.C.C.'s world-wide authority, but cricketers had begun to regard it as an impartial judge even before it moved its headquarters to the present ground in 1812 and all conundrums were thenceforth sent to its committee for solution.

The playfellows of John Derrick on the waste land near Guildford would never have dreamed that 250 years afterwards their crude

game with bat and ball could have developed into a national institution, nor could anyone even a century later have prophesied its influence on the social life of England. In the South it inspired ballad and song, and the saga of the Hambledon Club which, reverently preserved and adorned by E. V. Lucas, is a national possession. In the North it contributed to the solidarity of the working classes, though players from other social strata were always welcome and often became prominent members of the clubs. The political interlude was short-lived, and at no time has the game been the preserve or perquisite of any one party or class. Appreciation of the enemy's point of view, a sense of fair play, ability to endure set-backs—these are among the virtues called for by the game, and if they are also typically English virtues, cricket may be said in many ways to be highly representative of the national character.



By courtesy of the M.C.C.  
*In the industrial North cricket became an urban game; Darnall Ground, Sheffield, 1827;  
 by Cruikshank after Thompson*