



Two Cricket Matches

Wittersham, on the Isle of Oxney, has an unusual distinction for a village in the history of cricket. It has twice staged cricket matches (102 years apart) which are rare in the annals of the game. On each occasion the Isle of Oxney took on two of the top professionals of the day who were forced to do all their own bowling, fielding and wicket-keeping and to bat on the principle of "one out – all out".

In 1834 Wittersham, the "capital" of the Isle of Oxney, had a cricket team which was regarded as unbeatable. One night they were celebrating their latest victory in the local Norton's Inn when the landlord, growing tired of their boasting, said: "You can't play cricket. I could get two men to beat the lot of you."

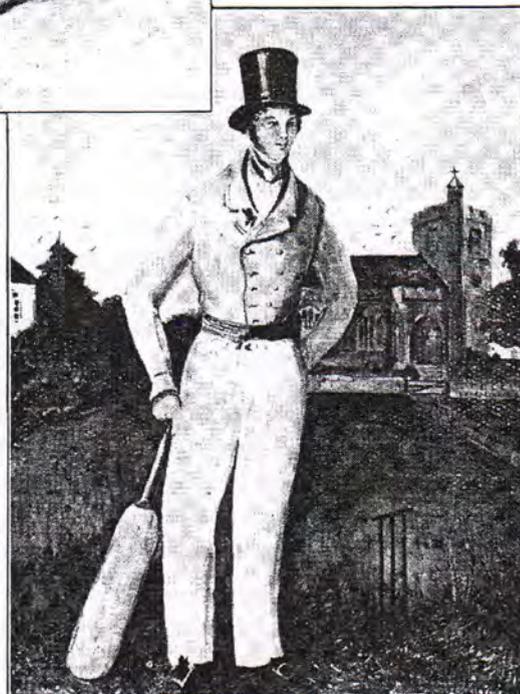
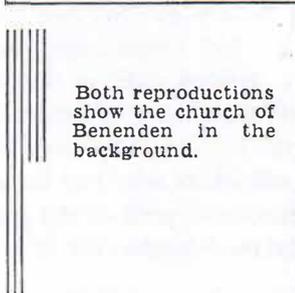
The outcome of these exchanges was a challenge match for £20 between the landlord's two chosen men and the village eleven from the Isle of Oxney. He chose Ned Wenham and Richard Mills, two of the finest cricketers of the day, who lived at Benenden, eight miles away. The match took place at Wittersham on 4 and 5 September 1834. It was estimated that more than 2000 spectators from this very marshy and thinly populated district assembled to witness the contest. Such was the confidence of many present, bets of up to £500 were placed on the Benenden players.

The Two batted first and made 150 before Wenman was bowled. Then they dismissed their opponents for 55, the Extras of 22 being top score. Going in again Wenman and Mills could make only 48 before Mills was caught off a big hit. This left the Isle of Oxney 143 to win. They were soon dismissed for 77 (Extras 26) and thus Wenman and Mills were the winners by 66 runs. The scoreboard was as follows:-

| | | | |
|----------------------|------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| BENENDEN | | 1st Innings | 2nd Innings |
| Mr E G Wenham | c Mills | 65 | 16 |
| Mr Richard Mills | not out | 84 | 29 |
| | Byes | 1 | 3 |
| | | 150 | 48 |
| ISLE OF OXNEY | | 1st Innings | 2nd Innings |
| Mr J Wood | c Mills | 7 | 7 |
| Mr E Brignall | lbw | 0 | 23 |
| Mr F Haines | b Wenham | 0 | 0 |
| Mr H Hoskins | c Wenham | 2 | 3 |
| Mr H Neve | b Mills | 2 | 0 |
| Mr D Neve | run out | 12 | 13 |
| Mr J Neve | b Wenham | 0 | 2 |
| Mr J Wood | c Wenham | 5 | 0 |
| Mr T Tichner | b Wenham | 5 | 1 |
| Mr J Morphee | not out | 0 | 2 |
| Mr R Callow | not out | 0 | 0 |
| | Byes | 15 | 15 |
| | Wide Balls | 7 | 11 |
| | | 55 | 77 |



EDWARD GOWER WENMAN one of the most celebrated cricketers the County has ever produced, played his first match for Kent in 1825 and his last in 1854. He was a fine back player and an admirable wicket-keeper. It was considered one of the sights of cricket to see him and Fuller Pilch at the wickets together, the forward play of one contrasting with the back play of the other, both being first-rate batsmen. Wenman was born at Benenden on August 18th, 1803 and died at his native place on December 28th, 1879.

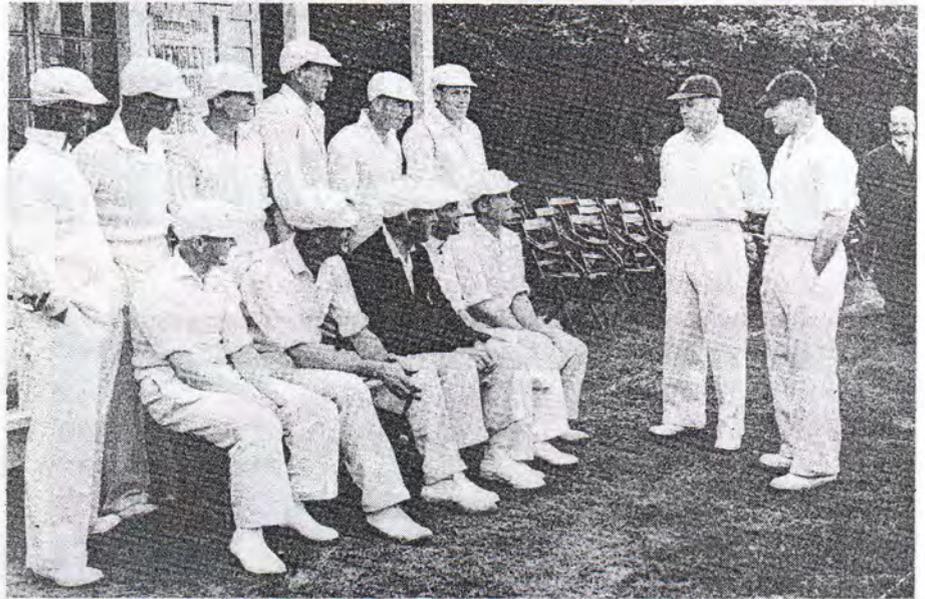


RICHARD MILLS, of Benenden, played for Kent from 1825 until 1843, and was by far the greatest cricketer of his family, which produced so many good players that the village was enabled to meet the County on even terms. The highest score of his career was 94 for Kent v. M.C.C., in 1827. He was born near Benenden, on February 16th, 1798, and died at Rolvenden on 25th January, 1882.

There was a sad ending to this match. The villagers were so annoyed at losing that they boycotted the Norton Inn and the landlord was made bankrupt within the next three years. In 1936 someone had the idea of repeating the game. Different players, of course, two professionals against a team of local lads. A two innings game was planned, whereby the professionals would be 'all out' as soon as they lost a wicket, but they were given the concession of being able to change their bowling at will. The two man professional team consisted of Bert Wensley of Sussex and Bill Ashdown of Kent.

In 1934, Ashdown hit 332 for Kent v Essex and today this is still the highest score made by a Kent player while Wensley had achieved the double of 1000 runs and 100 wickets in a season.

The Isle of Oxney team, captained by coal merchant S J Pridham, were mainly local workmen – three gardeners, two carpenters, one hop-dryer, two farmers, a bricklayer and a motor mechanic. The match was played on Saturday 5 September 1936. The publicity for the game was excellent. It was advertised in all the pubs and the idea caught the imagination of people in the region. The contrasting newspaper reports, local and national, provided telling insights into relations between country and town and also into social attitudes in the 1930s. Oxney was described as an island ‘only by virtue of a sewer’ and the village people as ‘cum-sandwiches and pop, cum-grandmothers and umbrellas, cum-greybeards and young



The XI from the Isle of Oxney with WH Ashdown (Kent, left) and AF Wensley (Sussex)

‘Erberts and ‘Oraces, as relaxing from the strenuous business of a village Saturday’. The BBC decided to broadcast a radio commentary of the game. A big crowd turned out on the day – estimates were given as anything between 2000 plus and 4000 - and the proceeds went to charity. The photographs in the full page spread from the Kentish Express of 11 September 1936, headed ‘Cricket Match of the Century’, show the cricket field (one or two fields away from the church and on the same side of the road) surrounded with large numbers of cars and farm wagons which provided grandstands for some of the spectators. There were also marquees and sideshows. The Kentish Express gave a very full account of the game. The two innings a-side game started at 11.30 am and the Isle of Oxney batted first. The two-man team of Wensley and Ashdown rotated between wicket-keeping and bowling. There were no other fielders, which meant there were only two gaps in the field – all the on side and all the off. Not surprisingly, neither Ashdown nor Wesley managed to bowl a maiden over in the whole innings, which lasted 24.4 overs. When Bill Catt, the bricklayer, and A Bromham took the Isle of Oxney score from 39-1 to 102 things looked really bleak for the professionals (and the onlookers who had betted on them). However, despite being forced to run to all parts of the ground, the two men stuck to their task and dismissed the Islanders for 153.

ISLE OF OXNEY

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|---|----|
| F.G.H. Pridham st Wensley b Ashdown | 11 |
| W. Catt b Ashdown | 68 |
| A. Bromham run out | 20 |
| G. Cook b Wensley | 0 |
| C. Gorman b Ashdown | 0 |
| C. Bush c Ashdown b Wensley | 2 |
| A. Bush b Wensley | 14 |
| P. Shanbrooke lbw b Ashdown | 28 |
| F. Jenner b Wensley | 0 |
| F. Burt b Wensley | 0 |
| F. Bromham not out | 5 |
| Extras | 5 |

153

Bowling: Wensley 12.4-0-66-5, Ashdown 12-0-82-4.

THE PROFESSIONALS

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Ashdown not out | 83 |
| Wensley c Cook b Bush (A.) | 96 |
| Extras | 7 |

186

Bowling: A Bush 1-39, F Bromham 0-92, G Bush 0-19, W Catt 0-29

According to the paper, a rather extravagant meal was served in the lunch interval – the same as that 102 years before. The menu included baron of English beef, prime York ham, saddle of mutton and roast stuffed cygnet, followed by national pudding and brandy sauce, fruit salad, old English cheddar and Kentish ale. It should have been a centenary match, but Sir Willam Jowitt, on proposing a toast at the lunch and noting that it was two years late, excused the delay by remarking that it was nothing for Wittersham to be two years behind the times!

The professionals’ innings, with Ashdown and Wensley knowing that one mistake would end the whole innings, started off like the proverbial bomb. While Wensley kept up his end, Ashdown launched a violent attack on the village bowlers. The 50 came up in half an hour and the 100 in 65 minutes. With Wensley (3 sixes and 13 fours) joining in the assault the two men equalled the scores. A hook by Ashdown (14 fours) to the square leg boundary for the winning runs brought cheers heard for miles around. Continuing their innings they took the score, in 36.4 overs, to 186 before Wensley was caught at the wicket by Cooke off the bowling of ‘Charcoal’ Bush, a local gardener, who had previously had a trial with Kent with a view to taking up county cricket. It was an excellent first – and last – wicket stand. Unfortunately the rain came down and the last two innings were never started. The professionals won on first innings, and had emulated the performance of their counterparts in 1834.

References

Kentish Express

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