



CECILIA ROBINSON (International Cricketer)

(22 May 1924 – 3 November 2021)

When Mary Cecilia Robinson recently died in a Folkestone Home, it was over ten years since she was regularly seen among St Mildred's Church congregation, at church social events as well as other Tenterden activities. Hence, the passing of this eminent international woman cricketer, understated as she was throughout her long life, caused little more than a ripple of interest among those who remember her. When Cecilia Robinson toured Australia and New Zealand with England in 1948/49 she encountered some mixed signals. There was no beer on offer, which would have been considered indecorous, but there were post match aphrodisiacal oysters laid on. The papers, meanwhile, reported that the side, none of whom were married, all had 'English complexions', adding that they did not concern themselves about putting on make-up when they came off the field. None of this especially concerned Robinson, who was a determined opening batsman (the term 'batter' had not come into collective usage). In her debut test against Australia at Adelaide, England were bowled out for 72 in their first innings with only Robinson reaching double figures. Her dogged 34 was completed over three and a half hours, which was three hours longer than anyone else lasted at the crease. England lost the match and ultimately the series.

Her 14 Test matches were spread out over 15 years, which was indicative of how little women's cricket took place in her era. She had to pay for her own passage on tours abroad. Players were generally put up in homes of the opposition, so there was no escaping them at close of play. Robinson scored 829 Test runs for England at an average of 33.15, including centuries against Australia (105) at Scarborough in the 1951 home series and 102 in the third test at Adelaide in 1958. In the Scarborough match she attributed a blaze of elegant stroke play to the coaching of the Sussex players John and James Langridge. When she led her country in the fourth and final test at Perth in 1958, because of an injury to Mary Duggan, she carried her bat through the second innings to score 96 not out and help save the match. The knock was a reminder that she could play attractive attack as well as stoic defence. As a batsman, she cover drove and square cut particularly effectively and in the field she performed well at silly mid-on or slip. Her time playing for Kent is less well documented. Several scorebooks are missing and hence her official tally of 1109 runs in 30 recorded matches is considered to have done her a disservice. In 2020, Kent finally awarded her a cap, their seventh in the women's game. This was presented to her in her care home in Folkestone.

Robinson did not marry and was able to devote her life to the game. This included coaching girls at Roedean School in Sussex where cricket was a long established sport and she became senior housemistress in the junior house. She also acted as a Kent Women's selector but she did not join the campaign by Rachael Heyhoe Flint to obtain female membership of MCC. "Cecilia was not a campaigning sort and I don't think they got on," said Norma Iazard, another England cricketer. "But she would never let that show." The campaign was successful with 10 top women cricketers being offered Honorary Life Membership of MCC in 1999 – but not Robinson. Cecilia was offered Honorary Life Membership of MCC in 2000 when 5 more names were added.

Mary Cecilia Robinson ("Robbie" to her fellow cricketers) was born in the precincts of Canterbury Cathedral, the daughter of Canon Arthur Robinson, who came from a long line of eminent clerics, and Beatrice (née Moore). She had two older brothers, John and Edward. Cecilia was besotted by cricket from an early age and her brothers allowed her to join in with their backyard games so long as she acted as chief ball retriever. It did not take long for her to surpass them in potential. John became an outspoken Bishop of Woolwich and writer of (among other notable books) 'Honest to God' (1963) a book which gave the media newsworthy material. His evidence at the 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' obscenity trial also provided journalists with much copy.



Sydney 1958

Robinson had to move out of her mother's house in Canterbury (her father died when she was four) when it was requisitioned by the army during the Second World War. "When she eventually returned, it was in a terrible state," said her niece Catherine Robinson. She was educated at St Paul's School for Girls, which was evacuated during the War to Wycombe Abbey in Buckinghamshire, where she became a member of the cricket first XI.

Though able mathematically, this was never developed by those who taught her and she regretted not being able to follow her brothers to university. Her cricketing ability, however, is said to have been noted from an early age and her later education was at Bedford Physical Education College.

Qualifying as a PE Teacher in 1945, Robinson became a games teacher at St Saviour's and St Olave's Grammar School for Girls in New Kent Road in London. The following year she made her first class debut for Home Counties women when cricket resumed after the war. Taking up a place on England's 1948-49 tour of Australia and New Zealand meant giving up her first teaching position as the school would not give her leave of absence. She worked at a poultry farm to help raise the considerable funds required to finance the six-month trip. This was to be England Women's second tour of Australia and New Zealand, the first having been in 1934-35. It was by no means universally popular. One writer in the magazine *Women's Cricket* wrote: "Women should occupy themselves in doing things for which they are fitted and not trying to act and dress in the same way as men. It is a most ridiculous thing for females to waste time in going overseas to play at cricket." Rationing was still in force in England but there was at least plenty of 'slab chocolate' for the women to eat on the outward four-week journey, when the players took on the ship's officers at deck cricket. Robinson, who kept a diary, detailed a broken team curfew – 10 pm – by her roommate, Aline Brown. "Aline stays out with chief steward.... Causes stir.... Netta (Netta Rheinderg the manager) furious....

...have to wait up..... give up waiting at 12 but I'm still awake when Aline comes in at 12.35." No mention was given of what punishment was handed out to the errant Aline Brown. The England party had moved on to New Zealand when Robinson received a letter from Norah Horobin, headmistress of Roedean, offering her a temporary post as a games teacher for the summer term of 1949. The post then became permanent for the next 32 years.

On retirement Cecilia moved to Tenterden living at Weavers Cottage on the Cranbrook Road. She was a very active member of the St Mildred's church community being PCC Secretary for a few years. I also remember the St Mildred's church cricket matches arranged in the 1990s and subsequently by the then vicar of Tenterden, Canon David Trustram. Informal and fun as they were, Cecilia was probably the only one taking it more seriously. However, I can still recall, in her late seventies, the elegant off-side ability. She was, not surprisingly, a Vice-President of Tenterden Cricket Club, played bridge, attended art classes and drove for Age Concern. Like many cricketers in retirement she polished her golf game and was ladies' captain at Tenterden Golf Club in 1990. She partnered me a few times in golf matches and two of her golf course remarks as we strolled along were 'I was the first England cricket captain (male or female) to lead a side in a Perth test match' and 'Roedean School hired me for a term to teach the girls batting and I stayed 32 years'. Margaret Sparkes (Tenterden Golf Club) remembers once playing against Cecilia when she was partnered by a lady, apparently also of senior years, from Rye Golf Club. During a discussion between Cecilia and this lady as to their tactics, Margaret heard 'Yes, Miss'. It was indeed an ex-pupil!

Leaving Tenterden, with failing faculties, Cecilia went to live with her niece Catherine Robinson before moving to St Heliers Care Home in Folkestone where her life drifted to its close. Her funeral took place on 22 November (which is St Cecilia's Day, the patron saint of music) at St Martin's Church, Acrise (in the Elham Valley just off the Canterbury to Folkestone Road) followed by cremation at Hawkinge Crematorium. At the funeral Catherine spoke of the many messages that she had received from ex-pupils, particularly speaking of her enthusiasm and encouragement, whether or not they were good at sports. Catherine said of Cecilia that she inherited the daunting Robinson family motto 'Not for us alone but for the whole world were we born' – an affirmation which in her teaching, sports career and Christian faith, she lived out to the full. Two nieces and two nephews survive her.

Her *Times* and *Daily Telegraph* obituarist, Ivo Tennant (author and sports journalist) was interviewed, together with Catherine, on *Times Radio* on 25 November 2021. Having summed up her life in an age when women's sport was unsupported and tough, he said "She will be regarded very highly in the Pantheon of women cricketers."



Cecilia Robinson with her collection of cricketing memorabilia