

THE HAMPSHIRE CRICKET SOCIETY

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ARTHUR HOLT CENTENARY ISSUE

The 8th of April this year marks the centenary of the birth of Arthur Holt; perhaps the most loved man ever to be associated with Hampshire cricket. For Arthur was utterly unique. To have met and spent any time in his company was a memorable, heart-warming and life-enriching experience. He was always the most kindly of men, totally genuine, cheerful, even impish, with a never-ending reservoir of stories. He gave himself to those he met. He possessed the priceless gift of being able to communicate with people of all ages. Whether aged five or eighty-five, everybody thought the world of him.

Those whom he took under his wing during his period as Hampshire's coach from 1949 to 1965 revered him and still do to this day. He instilled a sense of values, not only related to cricket but life itself, that they have carried through their own lives. Such was the fondness, respect and esteem in which they held him, one of his charges, named his home Holt House. The role of his wife, Joan, in supporting Hampshire's young cricketers was also important. It was a real partnership.

He was a regular supporter of the Society. In January 1994, just a few months before his death, he braved a cold night to make the journey to Netley to renew acquaintance with Derek Underwood. The warmth and regard which both men, from different generations, held for each other was very evident. Arthur's influence therefore pervaded far beyond the County's boundaries.

His contribution to Hampshire cricket was immense. The famed "Holt's Colts" ensured a regular supply of local talent to the County's first XI, which brought the County's two Championships, in 1961 and 1973, in their wake. It was

fitting that the Pavilion on the Rose Bowl's nursery ground should bear his name though many ex-players feel he deserves a special place in the main arena.

Arthur George Holt was born at Bitterne Park. He was, of course, a dual professional sportsman, playing for Southampton FC in the winter and Hampshire in the summer. He signed as a professional at The Dell in 1932 and the County Ground in 1934. As a footballer he was an unselfish, hard working inside forward. Of medium height and squarely build he possessed a powerful shot, feared by goalkeepers. He scored a hat-trick against Nottingham Forest in 1936 and ended his career with two of the three Southampton goals against Bury in their last match before the war. He made 201 appearances for the Saints, scoring 46 goals. During his time with the Club he played alongside three other cricket professionals – Hampshire's Ted Drake and Johnny Arnold and Surrey's Laurie Fishlock.

Football usually had first claim on him and he did not make his mark as a county cricketer until 1938. It was then that he scored his maiden century, as an opening batsman – 116 in four hours at Aylestone Road, Leicester. He and the diminutive Neil McCorkell (53) put on 101 for the first wicket. He was then joined in a fifth wicket partnership of 113 with Sam Potheary (100). It was an innings of great character as he twice had to leave the field whilst in the nineties, first as a dust storm from a nearby iron foundry and then heavy rain passed over the ground. In a batsman's match he and McCorkell then shared a partnership of 87 in the second innings.

He made another hundred, batting at three, in 1939 – 115 at Birmingham during which he and John Arnold added 137 for the fourth wicket in only 95 minutes. It was in this match that he also took his only wicket - that of Warwickshire captain, Peter Cranmer, who having just struck two sixes, holed out to Stuart Boyes at mid-wicket.

During the war, he enrolled in the war reserve police. He was on duty throughout the Southampton bombing where he experienced some of the worst moments of his life. On the lighter side, he also allegedly caught an armed robber!

Nevertheless, he still managed to enjoy some cricket. He played with Learie Constantine for a British Empire XI at Coventry, as well as in a charity match organised by Lionel Tennyson on the College Ground in Winchester. That game featured his ex-Saints team mate, Ted Drake, as well as Charlie Knott and the Bedser twins. His most memorable match, which he and Drake organised, was in Southampton's Parks. It was between a Park's XI and the RAF, on a Wednesday evening in May 1954. It was the first time that the great Australian all-rounder, Keith Miller, entered the public consciousness. Miller had been in the UK for only 2 months and his only cricket gear at the time amounted to a pair of boots. Nobody knew anything about him. Arthur always told the story of their encounter with relish; Miller's run up increased with every telling of the story, as did his pace. The scorecard is recorded in the newspaper archives for posterity "Holt - bowled Miller 9". The Australian

took six wickets that evening, but Arthur's side just ran out winners by two wickets.

The war took away his best years. However, he earned his county cap in 1946, when he enjoyed a season's best 891 runs (avge. 24.75) including 94 against Essex. When he retired from playing in 1948, he had played in 79 matches and scored 2,853 runs (avge. 22.46).

His greatest, indeed legendary, contribution to Hampshire cricket still lay ahead. Between 1949 and 1965, as the county's coach, he developed the famed 'Holt's Colts'. Many doubted whether he was a sufficiently strict disciplinarian to be a coach. He only ever laid down two rules – trousers should never be tucked inside the socks and that a batsman should always walk for an edge to the wicket-keeper. More than one youngster earned a quiet but very firm rebuke if they did not adhere to the latter requirement, with the addendum they would not play in one of his sides if they transgressed again.

Whilst playing for the 2nd XI in the Minor Counties Championship, he was able to watch and appraise the youngsters making their way in the game. In 1950, he played with Peter Sainsbury and Malcolm Heath whilst making 127 not out against Kent 2nd XI at Broadstairs. Two years later he scored 185 (out of 300 all out) on the same ground. Sainsbury, Mike Barnard and Mervyn Burden were also in the side that day. These four players were, of course, integral members of the Hampshire team that won the Championship in 1961

However, he also did much else with the members of that side. He persuaded Henry Horton to resurrect his cricket career when the latter had considerable misgivings about doing so after his initial excursion with Worcestershire. He discovered Butch White and knocked off the rough edges when he joined the County as a tearaway fast bowler. Similarly he also played a crucial role in Danny Livingstone's development.

He also discovered and brought on Alan Wassell, Alan Castell, Keith Wheatley, Bryan Timms and Bob Cottam. The last mentioned went on of course to play 4 Tests for England, and become a bowling coach of the highest calibre. Uniquely, one of his other discoveries, Roger Tolchard, decided to go elsewhere to further his career. The Hampshire Cricket Committee also reaped the benefit of his infinite wisdom after his retirement as coach.

He formally managed Hampshire Colts, the Under 19 side, between 1966 and 1980. It was in that capacity that he laid the foundation of the 1973 Championship side. Among his charges were Trevor Jesty, Gordon Greenidge, David Turner and Richard Lewis. He recognised Greenidge's awesome talent from the start, often commenting that it was a question of "what not to change". In his later years with the Colts, Nigel Cowley, David Rock, Tim Tremlett and Jon Hardy heralded a third generation of Hampshire cricketers.

He also brought his special gifts to the national coaching scene. In 1951 he went to the MCC cricket coaching conference at Lillehall and then attended for the next 21 years. He was one of the first to obtain the MCC's Advanced coaching certificate – in 1952. It was signed by former Hampshire player and then secretary of MCC, Ronnie Aird. It brought him opportunities to go on coaching trips to South Africa and Rhodesia, thus enabling him to develop players and coaches in the international arena. Later on, he managed Hampshire Colts sides on trips to Holland and Denmark.

But let us return to Arthur Holt, the man. The first of his numerous visits to the Society was on 8 December 1977. The Society's first Newsletter editor, Phil Bichard, captured the essence of his address perfectly:-

Arthur was a superb coach, for not only did he have a vast knowledge of the techniques of the skills so that he was always being asked to give courses in this country and abroad, he had the good sense to remain a good learner himself, and he had those personal qualities of kindness and patience which enabled him to give enjoyment and hope to the poorest of performers. It is so difficult to write down what he says, for his words look very cold and humourless in print. To write to him as Mr. Holt is out of place, A.G. Holt is suitable for Wisden, but Arthur has a warmth that fits the man.

In many of his jokes, he himself is the sufferer. Many of the humorous situations occur before the war, in an age when workmen were obedient servants with a great fear of unemployment. So Arthur is aware of his lowly place in society, he would approach his employers county cap in hand, fearful of the sack, knowing his place in a society where the gap between Gentlemen and Players was clearly defined. But if that is the impression that he likes to

give in his speeches, what is the man really like? He cannot quite be this humble coach for not only has he been a great instructor and lecturer, together with his friend Reg Haskell, he has been a successful businessman with a thriving sports shop. Did Arthur suffer genuine pain or grief, when picking up a lovely, expensive bat belonging to a fellow player and discovering on the back the stamp of the rival firm, Mead and Toomer? But are all or some of his stories apocryphal, or are they partly true and partly fiction and imaginatively elaborated in the dressing room and pavilion? Only our speaker knows.

Arthur began his talk by apologising for the absence of his former business partner, Reg Haskell, who was an Alderman and the Mayor of Southampton in 1966. When Reg was Mayor he asked Arthur to accompany him to Buckingham Palace where the Queen's garden party was to take place. Our speaker infers that he is more used to donning clips for his bicycle than riding in a limousine, and that he would be more at home in a terraced cottage than the palace, but although he might be dazzled by the Mayoral chain and overawed by this trip to London and this possible proximity to the Queen, he does agree to go. In her office the secretary pinned up the Mayoral arrangements for the journey; the Mayor's car TR1 was first to proceed to 94 Upper Shirley Avenue to pick up the Mayor and Mayoress, then to 16 Ripstone Gardens to collect Mr. and Mrs. Holt, drive to Buckingham Palace, where the Mayor and Mayoress will attend the Queen's garden party. The Mayor's limousine, TR1, will then take Mr. and Mrs. Holt to the zoo.

There followed a short lecture on the importance of coaching correct techniques without destroying the player's individuality. A perfect example, Henry Horton had a very peculiar stance and drove or punched the ball with his bottom hand, he played impeccably straight and always within his capabilities, and after a period with Worcestershire, became a magnificent Hampshire batsman.

His next story might be called "scarred for life" because he prefaced it by lifting his trouser leg, and exposing an unattractive white leg which, he said, contained a scar. Arthur and the senior professional Jim Bailey were coaching schoolboys at Dean Park, Bournemouth, where a manager had just been appointed, a retired Army colonel. In the net, a small 10 year old schoolboy was batting with head in the air and Arthur was walking down the wicket to correct this fault when he heard Jim whisper, "Here he is, here's the Colonel". Arthur, anxious to impress, gazed up at the Colonel and then addressed the boy, "Ever been hit by a cricket ball son, must get your head over the ball. Give me your bat, I'll demonstrate". The tall, imposing figure of the new manager came closer and he inquired, "Holt, do you mind if I bowl?" "Not at all, sir" said Arthur, always willing to serve his superior and better, and he borrowed the small boy's bat, size 3. The Colonel strode off to the horizon to begin his run up; Arthur, crouching very low holding the size 3 bat, peered for the hand holding the ball, left arm round the wicket, slinger; Arthur peered again, blindly but hopefully, played forward, head well over the ball, missed and hence the leg wound. Whereupon, the once wounded leg is again displayed to the audience and Arthur ended the story by informing us that the

Colonel never offered a word of apology, and as Arthur hobbled bravely from the net, the small boy perkily advised him "Should wear pads, sir."

This one was entitled "No ball sense". Coaching hordes of schoolboys is an exhausting task; the day lasts from 10am until 5pm, and it seems longer. The morning session had just commenced when a little boy, perfectly dressed and possessing all the equipment, approached the Coach with, "Told to report, Sir!" Arthur surveyed the boy and his list for the morning, the boy's name, Higgins, was not there; but his name was on the afternoon list for 4.30pm "Didn't want to be late Sir!" So Arthur, not wanting to discourage an obviously very keen young lad let him bowl; but he had no idea, and after a short time Arthur told him to take a rest. But he did stay and listened intently all day. At 4.30pm it was his time to bat, he had clean white pads, new bat, gloves, the lot – but no idea. He always forgot to watch the ball (which was the theme of that coaching session) and whenever the ball was straight, over went his stumps. This happened often and when it did, he called out, "Aye aye!". The young batsman who persisted in saying "Aye, aye!" on the numerous occasions his stumps were knocked over had by now attracted a huge audience of 200 schoolboys, who all with perfect timing joined in the chorus of "Aye, aye!".

Arthur then pointed out that no matter how low was the ability of a cricketer, he still had the right to play and enjoy the game at his particular level. There followed a story concerning off-spinner and wit Mervyn Burden, an encounter with Harold Larwood in Australia, village cricket with Douglas Jardine at Burley, and Lofty Herman's repeated and hopeless attempts to entice Sutcliffe to hook the ball into Arthur's hands at a long leg.

A football story followed, "Summer wages". In the 1930s during the great depression there was massive unemployment, and at the end of the season, the Saints players stood hopefully in a long line outside the manager's office, wondering whether they were to be sacked, transferred or retained and on what terms. Arthur was in the queue, trembling. The Saints' captain went in first and soon returned saying that he had been retained and his terms were: in the summer £6 and in the winter £7 playing for the reserves and £8 for the first team. Ted Drake, a future international, was the next player to enter the manager's office and he was offered £4 in the summer and £7 and £8 in the winter. Ted indignantly pointed out that the previous player would be receiving £2 a week more than him in the summer. Manager George Kay replied that Billy was a better player than Ted. At this, Ted retorted, "A better player, better than me! What, in the bloody summer?"

Great stories from a born raconteur. And he could have continued for days. For Hampshire cricketers and followers, Arthur Holt will be long remembered and always with the utmost affection. He died on 28 July 1994 but some seventeen years on his personality and that rich South Hampshire burr in his voice still resonates.

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