

THE HAMPSHIRE CRICKET SOCIETY

Patrons: John Woodcock Frank Bailey Shaun Udal

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NEIL McCORKELL – CENTENARY ISSUE

The 23rd of this month marks the centenary of the birth of Neil McCorkell. Little could he have imagined, perhaps, that when he retired from the game in 1951 to coach in South Africa, he would remain in that country for a longer period than in Hampshire.

McCorkell was one of those pivotal link figures in Hampshire cricket. When he made his debut at Taunton in 1932, he played with Phil Mead (debut 1905), George Brown, Alec Kennedy and Lionel Tennyson. His team mates in his final match, against Sussex at Dean Park, Bournemouth in 1951, included Derek Shackleton (final match in 1969), Jimmy Gray and Colin Ingleby-Mackenzie, who was making his first-class debut.

Neil Thomas McCorkell, always known as Mac, was born in Old Portsmouth and went to school in the city. Hampshire had been well blessed with two long-serving wicket-keepers in the early part of the 20th century in Jimmy Stone and Walter Livsey. George Brown, of course, had kept wicket for both Hampshire and England intermittently in that period. McCorkell replaced Brown in the second match of the 1932 season and made the position his own for the next 20 years.

In the game following his debut, he conceded no byes and made four stumpings off the bowling of Jim Bailey on an unplayable wicket against Nottinghamshire at Northlands Road. After Notts. had been dismissed for 206, the next three innings yielded 57, 42 and 30 on a devilish drying pitch.

Bailey took seven for seven in the Notts. second innings, yet finished on the losing side! It must have been a startling experience for the fledgling 20 year old wicket-keeper.

He went on to record 71 dismissals, including a scarcely believable career best 33 stumpings during the summer. His ability behind the stumps was rewarded with selection for the Players against the Gentlemen in the end of season Folkestone Festival.

He was also awarded his County Cap in his debut year, a very rare achievement for a player who had come through the ranks. Somewhat surprisingly, he with Mike Barnard and Jon Ayling are the only Portsmouth born players to be capped in the last 80 years. The latter two both attended Portsmouth Grammar School. Neil McCorkell was educated in the state school system. Interestingly, it was McCorkell who "discovered" Barnard in Easter coaching sessions in the city.

His batting remained a work in progress for his first three seasons. In 1935, mindful of his sound technique and defensive prowess, and in the absence of George Brown (retired) and Dick Moore (ill for virtually the whole season with scarlet fever), Hampshire promoted him to open the innings with John Arnold. The move was a spectacular success. He scored 1,319 runs which included his first three centuries. His two inaugural hundreds were in consecutive matches against Lancashire, who were the reigning county champions. First, he scored a marathon, match saving 150 in 365 minutes at Southampton. He played a lone hand before being ninth out. The next highest innings was Sam Pothecary's 52. Two days later, at Liverpool, he was dismissed for a duck. However, as Hampshire followed on later in the day, he again batted heroically as he amassed 154 not out in 330 minutes.

These two innings elevated him onto the England selectors' radar screen. With Leslie Ames beginning to suffer from back trouble in the following season, he was undoubtedly in the frame for the tour of Australia in 1936-37. He was selected for the Players-Gentlemen fixture at Lord's in the preceding summer, where he effected a stumping off Hedley Verity. Sir Pelham Warner wrote 'that he did all that was asked of him'. Wisden also commented that he kept 'smartly'. However, Ames recovered and the reserve wicket-keeping berth for the tour was given to the more experienced and extrovert George Duckworth. In the event, the latter, who was 11 years older, scored only 46 runs in seven matches. McCorkell surely would have been more productive.

His only overseas tour was in the following winter, when he accompanied his former captain, Lionel Tennyson, on the latter's tour to India. As with virtually every other member of the touring party, he succumbed to dysentery and was rarely at his best. Crucially McCorkell's rival for the wicket-keeper's place, Paul Gibb, then an amateur, received the nod in four of the five unofficial tests and was, effectively, to deprive him of future test consideration.

Neil McCorkell continued to serve Hampshire faithfully. He passed one thousand runs in a season in each year from 1935-1939 and kept wicket in his

normal efficient manner. During the war he served in the Royal Navy, the only Hampshire player to do so, and was then on permanent nightshift on the Spitfire production line.

By the time play resumed in 1946 he was 34 years old and had lost six years when he should have been at his peak. For his remaining time with Hampshire, his fortunes oscillated. In the dismally wet season of 1946 he was mired in his blocks and struggled for form throughout the season. A hand injury curtailed his appearances two years later. In 1950 he started brightly but then faded. In the two dry, sunny summers of 1947 and 1949 he probably batted better than at any time in his career. In the first of those years he recorded a season's best average of 40 in scoring 1,665 runs and in the latter he amassed his best aggregate of 1,870 runs. However, in 1949 his form behind the stumps began to suffer and Hampshire tried three other men; Ralph Prouton, David Blake and Leo Harrison, though he retained his place as a batsman.

In his last season in 1951 he again passed the one thousand run landmark and made his highest score of 203 at Gloucester.

And so, how is Neil McCorkell remembered? He was small in stature. Alan Rayment has commented that he was a model professional and totally respected by his peers. He was a quiet man but in his last season, he opened up to tell a fund of stories. He was a sound right hand opening batsman who gradually expanded his range of strokes. He was particularly effective square of both sides of the wicket off the back foot. He square cut and pulled prosperously. He also drove soundly. He played the ball against the spinners very late. Rayment remembers a master-class on a turning wicket against Tom Goddard and Sam Cook at Bournemouth. Like two other contemporary Hampshire wicket-keepers – Adi Aymes and Nick Pothas, he sold his wicket dearly. In 303 matches for Hampshire he scored 15,833 runs, average 25.87, including 17 centuries and 76 fifties. His total of centuries has only been equalled by Pothas among Hampshire wicket-keepers.

A natural athlete he was an unobtrusive, unfussy wicket-keeper. His powers of concentration were exemplified by his not conceding a bye as Leicestershire ran up 535 for eight off 973 balls at Aylestone Road, Leicester, in 1938. For good measure, he also scored a hundred runs (53 and 47) in the same match. He dismissed 690 batsmen (514 catches; 176 stumpings) in his Hampshire career.

Neil McCorkell was a committed family man. His son Dennis was on the Hampshire staff before undertaking National Service. He left to coach at Parktown Boys' High School in Johannesburg immediately after his departure from the County. When he arrived in that country, two of his rival coaches at other schools were Alec Kennedy and Jack Newman.

Neil McCorkell holds a special place in the hearts of those who watched Hampshire cricket immediately after the Second World War and all the County's followers will undoubtedly extend their best wishes for a happy

centenary birthday. David Allen has managed to contact some of the players who knew him to sign Hampshire's Pictorial History, which will now be sent to him.

(The Editor thanks Alan Rayment and Dave Allen for their help in producing this article).

MEETINGS

Wednesday 7 March 2012

The Society extends a warm welcome to **ANTHONY COLLIS** to this evening's meeting. With Geoff Wellstead, he is the author of *Inns and Outs*, a book about cricket related pub signs. The book was privately published to excellent reviews in October 2012 and received a nomination for the Cricket Society's Book of the Year award. Besides *Inns and Outs*, our speaker wrote a biography of Graeme Pollock in the Association of Cricket Statisticians' Famous Cricketer Series.

Anthony lived in Johannesburg in the 1970s and much of the 1980s. He achieved two notable feats there. He founded the Cricket Society of South Africa and organised, at short notice, the opening match of the rebel tour in 1982, between Arosa Sri Lanka and Nicky Oppenheimer's XI.

Anthony is co-founder of the Cricket Memorabilia Society and is currently a committee member of the Midlands branch of the Cricket Society. Away from cricket, he is Vice-Chairman and Publicity Officer of the Inn Sign Society, an organisation dedicated to the preservation of pub signs. He has visited all the pubs in Worcestershire and researched the origin of the county's pub signs on which he published in a book in 2008.

He has lived in Stourbridge, Worcestershire, since returning from South Africa in 1986, though he is a lifelong supporter of Somerset CCC.

HAMPSHIRE'S LONGEST LIVED CRICKETER

The longest lived of all Hampshire cricketers was Edward Apsey English. Born in Dorking, Surrey on 1 January 1864, English played 18 matches for Hampshire between 1898 and 1901. Broad-shouldered and of medium height, he was a right-hand middle order batsman. His best score was 98 made on a difficult wicket against Surrey at The Oval in 1898. He was caught off the great Tom Richardson off the last ball of the match. Trying to cut for four to reach a much coveted century against the county of his birth, he was caught at deep third man. When he died at his daughter's home in Tiverton, Devon on 5 September 1966, he was 102 years and 248 days old. At the time of writing he is the only Hampshire cricketer to reach his centenary.

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