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AN EVENING AT CANTERBURY

If there were any doubts that Shane Warne's powers were on the wane then they were surely dispelled under the lights at Canterbury in mid-July.

That Hampshire had a half decent total to defend at all was due to the ever-growing maturity of Dimitri Mascarenhas. The England Selectors had chosen a 30-man squad for the ICC Champions Trophy a few days earlier. His omission was incomprehensible but Hampshire followers have become desensitised to such situations over the years.

Kent's reply was progressing without too many alarms until Shane Warne began to weave his magic, not only with the ball but with his captaincy also. In a double-change he brought on Shaun Udal at the other end and immediately set the batsmen unusual challenges. They simply weren't familiar with a slip, short leg and silly point in a 45-overs match.

Warne induced Andrew Symonds to edge the first ball the latter had received from him. Michael Clarke leapt wide to his right at slip to claw the ball inches from the ground. Later on in the piece Clarke, with his left-hand, threw down the stumps from backward point to effect a run out and, at the end, eased the ball to Mascarenhas over the stumps, to complete Kent's collapse. Is there a better all-round fielder in the world at the moment?

But the eternal memory will be that of Warne. When men played Bjorn Borg at Wimbledon they had to endure mental torture as he never let them rest. He always kept the ball in play before fizzing shots down the line, across court or demoralising them with a topspin lob. So it is with Shane Warne. Alex Loudon initially came down the track; he used his feet well as he lofted the ball in the arc behind the Hampshire captain. However, Warne kept making him play. The pressure in the space of barely a dozen balls began to wear him down. He was eventually despatched bowled round his legs.

On a turning wicket most expected Warne to bowl himself and Udal through. Not a bit of it. He recalled Alan Mullally and "Spider", with Clarke's unerring aim, took Hampshire to victory in a memorable contest. Shane Warne does not harbour a negative thought in his head. All things become possible. He will undoubtedly be regarded as one of cricket's "immortals". This Newsletter sees the start of a periodic series on such men which majors on their performances against Hampshire. The first man to be featured is another who graced Canterbury. However, Frank Woolley was omnipresent for over 30 years and nearly a century after his first appearance is still revered.

FRANK WOOLLEY

One of the most loyal supporters of the editor's cricket club is a man aged 96. He retains an alert mind and misses little of events on the field of play. He has spent a longer than average lifetime playing, scoring and watching cricket. He grew up in Kent, spending countless hours on the former lovely old Crabble ground at Dover. He then moved along the south coast to Hampshire, via Hastings. As the editor extracted this information from him during a rain break in play in a match some years ago – he scored until his 90's – it suddenly occurred that, given his longevity, he must have seen the legendary Frank Woolley in his prime. So the inevitable question was asked. What was he like? An approachable, yet taciturn, man of few words he replied "very eleganthit the ball very hard". That cryptic, but insightful response, confirmed the comments of those wonderful cricket writers in another age.

No man in the history of cricket has evinced such lyrical and purple prose as Frank Woolley. For many he personified all of summer's virtues. R.C. Robertson-Glasgow – "Crusoe" - once wrote "there was all summer in a stroke by Woolley" and then added "and he batted as it is sometimes shown in dreams". Sir Neville Cardus evoked "Cricket belongs entirely to summer every time that Woolley bats an innings. His cricket is compounded of soft airs and fresh flavours. The bloom of the year is on it, making for sweetness. And the very brevity of summer is in it too, making for loveliness".

His elegance moved A.A. Thomson to wax "Woolley, whose very name evokes the loveliest image of evanescent beauty that the game can reach." "Crusoe" began his Cricket Print portrait with "Frank Woolley was easy to watch, difficult to bowl to, and impossible to write about. When you bowled to him there weren't enough fielders; when you wrote about him there weren't enough words. In describing a great innings by Woolley, and few of them were not great in artistry, you had to go careful with your adjectives and stack them in little rows, like pats of butter".

His biographer, Ian Peebles, recounted that he approached the wicket "unhurriedly but purposefully..... On arrival at the crease there were no affectations or mannerisms..... On being given guard he would glance around the field and take his stance, standing upright and bending only so far as his height compelled him, feet slightly apart, hands high on the bat".

Both Robertson-Glasgow and the Society's previous correspondent Lyn Wellings both referred to the fact that his reach made him particularly difficult to bowl to. In his much under-rated book "Vintage Cricketers" Wellings wrote that "when he was in the mood there seemed almost nowhere for the bowler to land the ball. The bowler's good length area was greatly reduced. A fraction beyond it and Woolley was hammering the ball off the front foot; a fraction short and it was flying off his bat no less rapidly. "Crusoe" confirmed "his great reach, and the power of his pendulum, made a fool of length".

The Hampshire cricketers of his era would have had good cause to view this paragon with mixed emotions for he scored more runs against the County than any player has

ever done. In 56 matches between 1906 and 1938 he scored 3625 runs (average 44.75), including 10 centuries.

This essay has concentrated to date on his batting but it must not be forgotten that he was a high quality spin bowler well into his thirties. The complete left-handed all-rounder, whom only Sir Garfield Sobers has ever surpassed among Southpaws, he modelled his action on Colin Blythe. Cardus tells us that, like his great Kent colleague, he ran in to bowl from behind the umpire “swinging his arm with the master’s own loose suppleness”. In a History of Cricket, the perceptive Harry Altham commented that on sticky wickets he could be very difficult, but on hard, true pitches, Blythe was much more adept at stemming the flow of runs. If Woolley was beauty incarnate with the bat then Colin Blythe was his parallel with the ball. Those Kent cricket followers who saw these two men play together and display their sublime, aesthetic skills before the First World War were extraordinarily privileged and fortunate. For good measure, therefore, Woolley also took 138 wickets (avge. 21.37) against the County.

No outfielder, of course, has rivalled Woolley’s record tally of 1018 catches, 57 of which accounted for Hampshire batsmen.

Thanks to the unique pen of Cardus, Frank Woolley’s first-class debut at Old Trafford in 1906 has passed into cricket folklore. A replacement for the indisposed Blythe he followed a first innings duck by dropping Johnny Tyldesley three times as the latter ran up a scintillating 295 not out. However, he gave early notice of his exceptional talent with a dazzling 64 in the second.

He made the first of his 145 centuries three games later against Hampshire on Tonbridge’s Angel Ground, now buried beneath a supermarket. Woolley emerged, of course, with Blythe among others, from Kent’s famed Tonbridge nursery and was effectively playing on his home ground. After dismissing Hampshire for 131 Kent then lost three quick wickets for only 23. The fledgling Woolley then moulded the game to his own design; first, he raced to 116 in only 90 minutes before taking 6 for 46 as his side secured an innings victory in two days. Only Philip Mead stood firm; he scored 79 before being bowled by Woolley.

Born within two months of each other, Woolley and Mead were the two best left-handed batsmen in England during the course of their careers which ran almost concurrently. The latter actually scored more runs against Kent than Woolley did against Hampshire – 4368 (avge. 52.63). Most Hampshire followers felt that Mead was harshly treated by the Test selectors. His Test and first-class averages were better than Woolley’s but he played in far fewer Tests. However, in an era of three day Tests prior to the First World War, the Kent batsman’s superior rate of scoring, allied to his considerably better slow left-arm bowling and mobility in the field swayed the odds in his favour. Crucially, perhaps, Woolley made his maiden century (133 not out), the first ever by an English left-hander against Australia, at Sydney in 1911-12, a match from which Mead was omitted. However, it is arguable whether, in reality they were in competition for the same Test spot. Mead played in 17 Tests, only one in which – his last in Australia in 1928-29 – he was not accompanied by Woolley.

The years leading up to the war were golden ones for Kent. Their exciting team not only captured the imagination due to the presence of Blythe and Woolley, as well as stirring strokemakers such as Kenneth Hutchings, but they also won the County Championship on four occasions (1906 – Woolley's debut season; 1909, 1910, and 1913), finished second in 1911 and third in 1912 and 1914. It was a magnificent spell of sustained success in cricket's Golden Age.

Hampshire, never the strongest County during this period, fielded out to felicitous half-centuries in the next few years and coped with his bowling fairly well, though he did take seven wickets at Dover in 1910. They next felt the full force of his bat in 1911 when he scored 77 and 65 at Northlands Road. This match was a run-fest as it produced a match aggregate of 1446 runs – a record for a championship match at the time. Hampshire then conceded 108 to Woolley at Canterbury later on in the season.

The latter match was more notable, for a century in each innings – 123 and 112 - by C.B. Fry. Wisden reported that at one stage Fry complained that Blythe was deliberately bowling full pitches so that he would lose sight of the ball in the sunshine! Fry had also scored 104 in the previous encounter.

Spectators at Portsmouth were entranced by 105 glorious runs two years later. The match at Dean Park, Bournemouth, in 1914 was to be the last played by both Counties for five years. By this time Lionel Tennyson was already serving with the British Expeditionary Force in France and coming under enemy fire. Frank Woolley also clearly had his mind elsewhere. Though he had passed two thousand runs for the first time, he was dismissed for 0 and 2. Perhaps he was thinking of Colin Blythe. The latter too had gone to war, but unlike Hampshire's future captain he was not to return.

Woolley married a month later and served in the war in the Royal Naval Air Service. He did not see action but during some months as coxswain of a rescue launch he spent a harrowing time attempting to pick up pilots whose planes had come down in the sea. Unfortunately, they seldom picked up a pilot alive as the strapping in the cockpit was such that airmen stood little chance of extricating themselves.

Now aged 32, Frank Woolley enjoyed his most productive seasons as an all-rounder in the years immediately after the war. Hampshire were often on the receiving end of his attentions. In 1919, when championship matches were two-day affairs, he took 5 for 70 and 3 for 101 in a drawn match at Tunbridge Wells and then raced to 134, and bowled tightly in the return at Bournemouth as Kent won by an innings. It was only one of two Championship centuries he made that season and Wisden remarked that the extent to which he was required to bowl was handicapping his batting. It was a refrain that was to be repeated in the ensuing seasons.

A year later he graced Northlands Road with a sumptuous 158 in three hours, and then returned figures of 6 for 35 and 5 for 64 at Canterbury. He also made 80 in Kent's first innings in that match. In 1921, the pattern of the two previous seasons was reversed. On this occasion, however, his analyses of 5 for 89 and 5 for 64 at Southampton were unable to prevent a Hampshire victory. Interestingly, in Kent's first innings he was bowled by Philip Mead, for 44. He then decimated Hampshire's batting with 6 for 28 in the first innings at Canterbury and was undefeated on 70 as Kent romped home by 8 wickets. The match between the two Counties at

Southampton in 1922 was a marvellous titanic struggle which included several fine performances. Mead made 152, Jack Newman took 7 for 84 but it was Woolley's 6 for 97 and 3 for 91, as well as 188 in Kent's second innings that carried the day. In 1923, the last of his great all-round years, he scored 80 and took 3 for 15 at Southampton but, at Canterbury, his extraordinary feasting ended when he scored only 1 (bowled Newman) out of 480 for 9 declared and failed to capture a wicket.

He continued to torment Hampshire with his left-arm spin for a few seasons more. He returned match figures of 6 for 72 at Southampton in 1924 and though a knee injury incurred on his third Australian tour in 1924-25 resulted in him substantially curtailing his bowling, he was still fit enough to take 8 for 101 (4 – 53 and 4 – 48) at Southampton in 1926. He also struck 67 and 62 not out at Canterbury; he and Percy Chapman hit an astonishing 135 runs in an hour to secure an 8 wicket victory in the latter innings. However, with "Tich" Freeman now in the ascendancy he did not bowl at all when the Counties met at Canterbury a year later and bowled only rarely in the fixture thereafter.

1926 had marked the end of an astonishing sequence of all-round success against Hampshire, unmatched by any player in the latter's history. Woolley, had bestrode, Gulliver like, the matches between the two Counties. In the 34 matches since his debut twenty years earlier, Kent had won no fewer than 21, nine of which were by an innings. Hampshire were successful in only 6. Though Kent had continually dominated those encounters the three great Hampshire players of that period, Mead, Newman and Alec Kennedy, had responded to Woolley's overtures with some magnificent performances of their own. Indeed, Newman dismissed Woolley 19 times during his career, and Kennedy 16. Only another immortal, Maurice Tate, took his wicket on more occasions. He accounted for his England team-mate's wicket on no fewer than 27 occasions.

Apart from a century at Northlands Road in 1926, George Brown never really came to the party. He was, in fact, almost Woolley's "rabbit". He fell victim to Woolley's wiles 15 times; the latter dismissed only Arthur Carr and Nigel Haig more often.

He played in a further 22 matches in which Kent were still in credit (8 – 4). However, significantly, as many as 10 were drawn. If Woolley had been able to partner Freeman in more meaningful fashion in those latter years, there would surely have been a reduction in the number of unfinished games, to Hampshire's detriment.

Frank Woolley was to laud it over County attacks for another decade until his ultimate retirement in 1938 at the age of 51. He continued to remind Hampshire of his prowess. 88 runs flowed from his bat in the Canterbury Festival week of 1927. He was, though, upstaged by Philip Mead in this match. The latter defied the Kent bowling on a drying pitch for four hours in an attempt to save the match. He was last out, eventually dismissed off the final ball of the match (c. Woolley b. Freeman) for 126.

Woolley then made 117 at Folkestone two years later. During his career he was dismissed in the nineties on a remarkable 35 occasions. Two of these were in 1930 in matches against Hampshire: 98 at Southampton and 91 at Canterbury. Both innings were concluded in little more than a run-a-minute. Illness waned his powers for a

while thereafter but he enjoyed a renaissance in 1934 when he hit 10 centuries. One of those was another memorable affair against Hampshire. After the County had made 528 (Mead 198, Kennedy 130) – Hampshire’s highest score of the season – Woolley and Bryan Valentine – another man with a reputation for rapid scoring, added 100 for the 3rd wicket in 75 minutes. Woolley’s 122 was made in only two and a half hours. Kent saved the game easily. After two further 50’s the following year, one (52) on his return to his home ground at Tonbridge, he made his 10th – and final – century against Hampshire at Northlands Road in 1936. It was a glorious swansong. In almost time-honoured style, he fashioned an even-time 101, during which he put on a second wicket partnership of 211 for the second wicket with Arthur Fagg (257) in only 150 minutes. Philip Mead added to the evocation of the occasion by making 126. It was his penultimate century in what proved to be his last season. Though Woolley went on to play two more seasons there was a neat and fitting symmetry to the event.

Frank Woolley signed off his encounter with Hampshire in 1938 with a typical cameo. Opening the innings, he raced to 47 out of 66 in only 50 minutes at Northlands Road. Len Creese gained some belated revenge for the County’s travails at his expense when he hit Woolley out of the ground to level the scores. A fresh ball had to be found before the winning run was scored. Fittingly, though, in the return at Canterbury, after scoring 17 in Kent’s only innings he concluded the match by taking the final two wickets, those of “Lofty” Herman and George Heath, as Kent won by an innings. After 32 years, it must have seemed as if times had never really changed after all.

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