

THE HAMPSHIRE CRICKET SOCIETY

Patrons: Shaun Udal James Tomlinson

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JOHN WOODCOCK

Members will be sad to learn that John Woodcock died at his home in Longparish on Sunday 18 July aged 94. With John Arlott and Desmond Eagar, he was one of the Society's original Patrons upon its formation towards the end of 1975. He remained a Patron for the rest of his life. For many years, when not with England abroad, he attended the Society's Annual Buffet Supper. He continued to support and maintain an interest in the Society in its affairs in his retirement.

He addressed the Society three times. On the last occasion, in December 2012, he embarked on a delightful ramble on his career covering cricket. He commented upon his colleagues in the press box, including R C Robertson–Glasgow, Sir Neville Cardus and E W Swanton, as well as the great batsmen whom he had seen, particularly the three Ws, Len Hutton, Denis Compton, Viv and Barry Richards, Rohan Kanhai, Gary Sobers, Graeme Pollock, and right up to the recent past, Kevin Pietersen. He thought Barry Richards was the best batsman he had seen. One amusing story concerned Denis Compton, who whilst enjoying his 50th birthday party, received a phone call from his mother, who informed him he was only 49! He also recalled talking to Roy Marshall in the Mayor's tent at Bournemouth after Hampshire had won the Championship in 1961. He asked Roy how often a bowler had genuinely dismissed him rather than he getting himself out. Roy's reply was "once I suppose" (Marshall still scored 2,607 runs in the season). There was also a wonderful nostalgic review of the 1954/55 series in Australia, particularly the bowling of Frank Tyson and Brian Statham which enabled England to win three consecutive Tests after being thrashed at Brisbane. He always said that if there was one innings he

would like to see again, it was Colin Cowdrey's 102 at Melbourne in that series. The tour always remained his favourite.

His first address to the Society was its third meeting on 3 March 1976, when he talked about the West Indies' tour of Australia, from where he had just returned. Australia won the series 4 - 1 and he concluded that, as through history, the test series was won by fast bowlers demolishing opposing batsmen. The West Indies captain, Clive Lloyd, took on board the lesson by subsequently playing a quartet of genuinely quick bowlers to create the most feared side in test history. The West Indies never lost another series for almost twenty years. Their methods, particularly short pitched bowling, to tail-enders never found favour with him.

John came to the Society to speak again on 4 March 1987 in its first meeting to be held in Portsmouth, at the Mountbatten Centre. Members enjoyed a diverting discourse on another recently concluded tour to Australia, this time by England. England famously won the series 3 – 1 but Australia subsequently began a long period of dominance over the old country that lasted until 2005. The report in the Newsletter contained the following: "He paused to recall, nostalgically, earlier tours to the Antipodes which were more leisurely and less frenzied affairs. Times have changed but he conveyed great empathy with the stresses and strains suffered by players in the modern game. The main factor was the surfeit of limited overs matches". (And to think, this was before the advent of T20 cricket).

John Woodcock was always supportive of cricketers and cricket teams in his reports in The Times. He earned their trust. He always sought to be positive in their personality and play. Any criticism was expressed sensitively. That very fine writer, Frank Keating, echoed these observations when he wrote about him on his 80th birthday. On his relationship with colleagues in the press box, Keating remarked: ".....his sweet essencehas continued to bestow on the press box his judgements, acute insights, wise innocence, benign bonhomie and a fraternal feeling and time for tyros". In November 2014 edition of The Cricketer included a wonderful appreciation by Michael Henderson. He stated "(John) was for many of us the first writer on cricket there was or ever will be". John, always a modest man, will have undoubtedly

blushed at the assessment but it demonstrated just how much he was valued by his colleagues, and the avid readers of his reports.

Such was his wisdom that the polymath Alan Gibson dubbed him “The Sage of Longparish”. It was a sobriquet that endured. John was to write a perceptive and acute Foreword for Anthony Gibson’s (Alan’s son) book *Of Didcot and The Demon – The Cricketing Times of Alan Gibson* (pub. Fairfield Books 2009), a delightful anthology of Gibson’s work in *The Times*.

John Charles Woodcock was born in Longparish in the Test Valley on 7 August 1926. His father was vicar there and John lived in the village, opposite the church, for virtually all his life. The family were associated with the village for over 200 years. When the Editor and his wife visited the church some ten years ago, we noted that he continued to be active in the church’s affairs. He was a Churchwarden for many years and when we visited, he was unlocking the church three times a week. He went to Trinity College, Oxford, where he won Hockey Blues in 1946 and 1947. As a wicket-keeper/batsman, despite a permanent hip problem as a result of septic arthritis whilst at school, he played good class club cricket for MCC, Free Foresters, Oxford University Authentics, the Cryptics and the Arabs, among others. He also kept a watchful eye on his local village club, where he was always welcomed by successive generations.

He possessed a fund of knowledge in country lore. He was a most accomplished fly-fisherman who passed on his expertise to such as John Barclay and Michael Atherton.

After a spell in teaching in Basingstoke, he started his journalism career as a newsreel camera man for the BBC and as assistant to E W Swanton, on England’s tour of Australia in 1950/51. He then worked for the Manchester Guardian for two years before becoming Cricket Correspondent of *The Times* in 1954. He held that post until his retirement in 1988. Thankfully, he continued to write some nostalgic and historical pieces for *The Times* until last year. His final piece was on Everton Weekes in July 2020. He watched more test matches than any other man until surpassed by Richie Benaud.

He was also Editor of Wisden Cricketers' Almanack for six years from 1981 to 1986. He found that post a somewhat taxing one; workload pressures eventually prompted his resignation. He was also President of the Cricket Writers' Club from 1986 until 2004. He was made an OBE in the 1996 New Years' Honours List for his services to sports journalism. In June 2018 at the Sports Book Awards held at Lords, he received a lifetime achievement award for his sports writing. In doing so, he joined such distinguished journalists and writers as Brian Glanville, Hugh McIlvanney, Sir Michael Parkinson and Christopher Martin-Jenkins, one of his successors as *The Times* cricket correspondent. There were many who felt the award was long overdue.

It is a pity that his vast volume of work is mainly buried in newspaper and magazine archives, and in various anthologies, as well as forewords to a number of books. He did, though, write *The Times One Hundred Greatest Cricketers* (pub. MacMillan 1998). He demonstrated the depth of his knowledge on the sweep of cricket history by including John Small, the celebrated Hambledon batsman, and the giant 19th Century Kent all-rounder Alfred Mynn. He was also Consultant Editor to the monumental *Barclays World of Cricket*, and wrote some of the biographies, a lengthy history of Hampshire and some of the chapters on grounds of the world. He was a long time Hampshire supporter and, indeed, was a Vice-President of the Club.

The Editor will always remember the last time he saw John. We had visited Andover and decided to return home via Longparish. It was a bitterly cold winter's day. Whilst travelling through the village we saw a man driving a mobility scooter. It was John. He was obviously making his way from a lunch at the pub to his home. He was then in his 90's, and still enjoying life to the full.