

DONALD GEORGE CROSSLEY

A Tribute from his brother Andy

Don was christened Donald George, named after reputedly cricket's greatest batsman of all time. What was Donald Bradman doing on July 23rd nineteen thirty eight, the day of Don's birth? He was on an Australian tour scoring 103 runs against England at Leeds in the 4th Test. Thus began Don's lifetime affinity with the great Australian cricketer.

Having left Blackburn where he was born to move to Essex due to his Father's promotion in the National Assistant Board, Don went, at the age of 10 to Southend, along with his Dad and older brother Ian, to watch the touring Australians score a world record 721 runs in a day off 129 overs. Donald Bradman scored 187 of those runs. This was one of 3 momentous cricket occasions that he witnessed and captivated his love of cricket.

On leaving school at 15 Don's first job was as a Tally Clerk in Tilbury Docks. The highlight of this was on the eve of the first £10 emigrants leaving for Australia. Don was carrying two boxes up the gangway, balanced on top of the boxes were the keys of the cars stacked on board for transit. He stumbled, all the car keys fell into the river Thames, panic ensued, a diver went into the sea and fortunately found the keys. It was the talk of the docks for days. Don very surprisingly kept his job. I only found out about this days before Don passed away when a visiting friend, Ray, was talking to him in the nursing home. About this time Don did his National Service in the Army based at Wrexham and West Moors where he played a season with Wimborne. His only misdemeanour was, he told me, when he overslept on the night train to West Moors, waking up at Wimborne. It could have been a lot worse as the train continued to Poole. Don then had a spell working at Fords before joining the Merchant Navy in 1963, the lure of the sea was too strong for him to resist.

The second of Don's momentous cricketing occasions was when aged 18 he attended the 1956 Ashes Test at Old Trafford on his own where he witnessed Jim Laker taking 19 wickets. Don's scoring of this event was very neat and he could well have become a signwriter.

Don spent a couple of holidays watching Lancashire League Cricket, he became engrossed in watching the competitiveness of Gary Sobers, Everton Weekes and Charlie Griffiths. This fuelled his desire for League Cricket in the South of England. Although Southampton Parks league was formed in 1907, it didn't receive the high-profile status that club matches received. All of this I personally saw as I was scorer for Gray's Methodist Cricket Club in Essex. Don was convinced that league cricket was the way forward.

Here are memories of some of the matches that Don took part in during his cricketing career. These matches confirmed to him that disciplined league cricket was the way forward.

The first was an away fixture to Tate & Lyle at the company's East London ground. Immaculately banked on all sides, the ground was a replica of Arundel, and to my delight possessed a county style score board with ropes to automatically work the board. The opposition were above our level, mainly offspring of the Windrush generation. At Grays by

now the Methodist connection was no longer. Don fervently believed that naming the club after the town was paramount.

Grays batted first, Don opened and at tea he told the opposite skipper, 'your over rate was far too slow, I am batting on'. Don was then joined at the crease by Reg Dalby who was very stocky, with broad shoulders and shirt sleeves rolled up to his biceps. Memory tells me that the bowling was still accurate, even though there appeared to be no paceman.

Two sixes early on by Reg comfortably cleared the boundary, then I witnessed field placing which I am correct in assuming, that in the decades involving West Indian cricket, has never been replicated at any level, club, county or test. Two long ons and two long offs, two more sixes from Reg that a giraffe wouldn't have caught and then Don eventually declared. I don't think that Reg got his 50. When I visited Don in the Nursing Home the words "Reg Dalby, Tate and Lyle" always produced a broad grin. Tate and Lyle were set 176 to win in 15 minutes plus 20 overs in the last hour. (I believe it was the first season for this law). Boy could they bat! They won by 8 wickets with possibly three or four overs left. We played them away again the following season, this time on their second ground. Basic facilities, a grey and miserable day, scoreboard made of wood with the relevant nails banged in to put numbers on. I think we lost and I never saw that beautiful first team ground again. When doing research I discovered that Graham Gooch (Essex and England) played there as a 15 year old.

The next match was away to The Toby club in Dagenham Essex, Charrington breweries were their parent company. Fixtures were confirmed for a 2.30pm start. But even now I recollect away games often starting late. Put into bat this game actually commenced at ten to three. At the 5 o'clock tea interval, Don told the opposition skipper, 'I am battling on. We started late.' Even though the fifth wicket was an unbroken stand of more than 100, Don batted on another 10 minutes.

In both of these games Don opened the batting and declared with himself at the wicket, just imagine if Don had opened with Chris Westbrook, the number three batsman might not have got to the crease. At least the length of the tea interval was always roughly adhered to – 30 minutes –but not by the Toby team. After tea Grays went out to field, traditionally waiting for the opposition batsmen to appear – this they eventually did at ten to six. We never played them again.

Finally an end of season fixture on the last Saturday in September, a 1.30 start at home to Overseas United, a team from London. Stumps were set and we waited and we waited. Eventually Don told me (a 12 year old youngster) to go out to the square and pick up the stumps. Next to the pavilion was a café with a clock on the top. As I was walking to the square the opposition arrived, trailing their gear behind them, I looked at the clock and it said ten to four. By the time I collected the stumps and arrived back at the pavilion the opposition team had departed.

I never did find out what their mode of transport was, hopefully not train as the local railway station was approximately 2 miles away.

Those three matches were invariably locked in Don's mind when at the local cricket association AGM, and with the additional experience of having watched Lancashire League Cricket he pointed out that League Cricket was the only way forward in the south. As most of the committee members were of an age to have seen service in World War II, he was portrayed as a young upstart and there was a lot of negativity spoken. Don's vision was correct –six years later the Surrey championship was formed, the Southern League followed in 1969, and the rest is history. He told me years later that clubs would vote for league Cricket as the workload for Club fixture secretaries would be reduced

While serving five years in the Merchant Navy as a purser, including service on the Queen Mary, Arcadia, Oronsay and Cremona, his voyages took him round the world to ports in the USA, Australia, Venezuela, Hawaii and cruising in Northern Europe. His most traumatic experience was upon boarding the cargo vessel Kinnaird Castle. The captain said to Don, 'Crossley, do you know anything about a first aid'. Sheepishly Don said yes. 'Right Crossley you are the ship's Doctor'.

Don froze and just days out of port his surgical skills were put to the test. Down in the galley a member of the crew had suffered a deep cut on their hand while preparing a meal. Don thankfully managed to seal the wound, feeling confident he approached the Captain on the bridge. How many hours to port Don asked. Four days Mr Crossley was the reply, Don's heart sank, he had four more days of nursing ahead of him.

Don's most lucrative job as a merchant seaman was as a steward on a ship hired out by the underworld for illicit gambling in international waters off New York. He was paid well by a mobster who produced a wad of notes which he waved in front of Don's face and said "will this do Laddie"

Don later settled in Southampton, working for Townsend Thorenson for 17 years, a ferry company organising coach tours across the channel to France. Visits to Paris, Dunkirk and D-day sites were popular. French tourists came across on the ferry to visit London and southern England as well as enjoying five nations rugby visits to Twickenham and Cardiff. The rugby trips were Don's own initiative, he thrived on organisational challenges.

Don was flabbergasted to learn that there was no team playing cricket actually named after the city of Southampton as Touring club and Wednesday were an added suffix. Don, with his enthusiasm, was given the role of obtaining vice presidents for the embryonic Southampton Cricket Club. He never lacked confidence when writing to people, he obtained the support of such notable people Sir Basil Smallpiece, chairman of Cunard. As Don said Southampton and Cunard are as synonymous as Liverpool and the Beatles. Another vice president was Stanhope Joel, racehorse owner and breeder, who had close liaison with West Indian cricket.

In 1973 Don became a life member of Hampshire County Cricket Club. He reckoned that after 8 years, watching home county cricket would be free – a shrewd investor!

Don briefly played league cricket for Basingstoke where his elder brother Ian played, before in 1976 joining me, his younger brother Andy at Hursley Park Cricket Club.

Don's roles at Hursley have been well documented. He was one of the top recreational cricket administrators of his time. I remember when Hursley Park held their presentation nights at the Cotswold Hotel, Don would organise coaches to pick up members, take them to the venue and collect them afterwards all at no cost, sponsorship was arranged with his employer and a local coach company.

At the same time Don was involved with Southampton Cavaliers (a youth set up) some of whose luminaries who made a professional living from playing cricket include Tim Tremlett and Phil Green. He was also instrumental in forming a touring Club called Crossed Hearts in Essex with fellow cricketer Ken Hart and Don's school boy friend Ray. They toured in Hampshire for over twenty years.

In addition Don was also Chairman of the Cross Solent Sunday League for eight years between 1996 and 2004.

The third of Don's momentous cricket occasions was when he was in Barbados where he witnessed what was probably the greatest ever bowled in English Test cricket, Michael Holding versus Geoffrey Boycott. He was sitting three rows from the front, he told me later that they bet on anything out there, for example 'Boundary off the next ball'. The atmosphere was electric and when Boycott was bowled, the crowd around Don rose up in unison shaking his hand with the comment 'well done man'. The downside to this event is that there is no video of the action from behind the bowler's arm, only at an angle, so you never saw Boycott's stumps up-rooted. For all you Hampshire supporters, the nearest atmosphere you can relate to is Liam Dawson bowling Kevin Peterson first ball. I am told that a certain Hursley Park Cricket Club member in his sixties did a jig down the aisle.

Don travelled widely throughout the world, both for work and pleasure, and in 2003 he went to Australia to attend the Ashes series, his last long haul venture abroad.

Don innocently involved himself in two mildly controversial incidents, one on the field and one off. When umpiring for a Hursley Park ladies league game, before league appointed umpires, he no balled and signalled wides against the opposition opening bowler on numerous occasions. Eventually she broke down in tears and had to be comforted by the opposition umpire. She then resumed bowling at the other end. In all my time in cricket this is the only occasion of this happening that I can recall. I used to rib Don about this occasionally, my revenge for his mocking of my typing ability, after a lifetime of only able to type one letter at a time, he used to call me one finger Joe. Incidentally he was a very competent typist.

Don was definitely not a connoisseur of Oriental cuisine and anything with the word chicken in he ordered. On tour on the Isle of Wight with Hursley Park Cricket Club a dozen players ordered a meal after the match. Don was served first and proceeded to eat his chicken. When the last meal was offered a booming voice was heard to say 'this is not what I ordered'. Investigation revealed that Don was eating his fellow tourist's meal and had just about finished it. The other tourist and rightful owner of the meal was not impressed!

In 1987 Don was instrumental, with co-founder Tony Sheldon, in forming The Cricket Memorabilia Society and became vice president. He was an astute collector always sensitive to the fluctuations in the value of various items. His books and autograph collection are extensive. Apologies Alan for plagiarism.

Don also founded a mobile fruit and veg venture as well as a vending business protecting one's health.

As a youngster Don's footballing prowess was limited to 2 matches. One match the team of whom he was a player lost seventeen one with the opposition's star player scoring 11 goals - that player's name was Jimmy Greaves. Don and I played in the same football team on only one occasion in an end of season league fixture for Chandler's Ford. Don's boots were not too modern, but what stood out more was that he was wearing a zip up jacket over his club shirt!

Don was a loving brother who because of the age gap between us looked after me throughout much of my life. He will be deeply missed by myself, the rest of the family and his many friends. Finally a big thank you to you all for your attendance today and for the plethora of sympathy cards and letters that I have received.

An anecdotal story developed yesterday at the local supermarket. Paying my bill the female cashier asked how my Father was keeping. Unfortunately he died of dementia last month I replied. She offered her condolences; this was the second female to enquire about my Father's health during the pandemic. I'll live on that.

Sorry if this tribute has been a bit long, but as those of you who knew Don well are aware, it could have been a great dealer longer, and after all it is shorter than Meat Loaf's 'Bat out of Hell.'

Andy Crossley