

ALRESFORD'S FAMOUS CRICKETERS

by

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'Alresford' wrote Mary Russell Mitford 'will always be famous for two things; first for that it was my birthplace, second, for its cricketers'. When the town's most illustrious native set down those words in the mid-nineteenth century, though, Alresford's great days as a centre of cricket were already past. Between about 1770 and 1795, however, it stood higher in cricket than any town of its size has done in the history of the game. It saw some of the finest matches, and all the most distinguished players, of the period. Indeed, in that period, Alresford was second in Hampshire cricket only to Hambledon, and Hambledon was second to none in the world. Hambledon, though, even in its finest days, was happy to include Alresford players.

Between 1772 and 1796, the club known sometimes as Hampshire, more generally as Hambledon, met All England in 66 matches and won 38 of them. They played generally for five hundred guineas a side, and it has been estimated that Hambledon won £22,497.10s to £10,030 in match-stakes alone. Worked out in modern values, of course, those were fortunes but in the obsessional gambling of the Regency period, many times more money than that depended on side-bets.

Hambledon has been called 'the birthplace of cricket': it certainly was not. Organized, and highly skilled, cricket was played much earlier in Kent, London, Sussex and Surrey. Hambledon, though, was the first consistently great club, probably the greatest in the history of the game. It is, too, the earliest of which we have substantial knowledge, thanks to the recollections, entitled 'The Cricketers of My Time' which John Nyren, one of its players, set down in his old age.

It would be a mistake to think of Hambledon simply as a village cricket team. It was a private club of noblemen and country gentry. Some of them occasionally appeared in matches but, like their London successors. White Conduit and M.C.C., they employed professionals to carry out their main fixtures. That was the only possible realistic attitude when such huge stakes were involved.

The professionals were drawn from as far afield - by the standards of eighteenth century communications - as Odiham, Alresford, Northchapel (Sussex), Farnham, Alton and, even, in the case of James Bayley, Mitcham. They were recruited by one of the earliest systems of athletic talent spotting and in one of the first professional team operations, managed and trained to a high level of proficiency. They were paid travelling expenses not only for matches, but to take part in pre-season and regular weekly practice sessions. The standing of Alresford in the cricket world of Georgian and Regency times is indicated by the fact that a number of the Hambledon matches - including even major fixtures with England - were played there.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century there were four cricket grounds in Alresford. The chief was Stoke Down, reached by a sunken lane from the road junction at Abbotstone. It is now part of Lichen Down Farm. Another used for important games was Tichborne Down where the ground coincided then with the racecourse, and, now, with the fifth (former fourth) hole of the golf course, and the field to the south of it. A report of 1780 refers to 'the new laid ground' at Alresford; that was The Nythe, on drained land between the Pond and the Bighton Road. Fourth of the old pitches was at Fob Down, now part of Fobdown farm; it, too, has been ploughed up. There was

also a private ground at the Grange in Northington: but the present Old Alresford ground, in Bighton Road, is substantially later than any of the others.

Hambledon teams of the great period included seven Alresford men. Veck, Taylor and Andrew Freemantle appeared quite regularly in major Hambledon matches; John Freemantle from time to time; Cole, Hall and Thomas Skinner on a few occasions. An eighth was 'poached'. John Crawte had the reputation, as a batsman, of playing David Harris - the outstanding bowler of the day - better than anyone else. 'Silver Billy' Beldham of Hamble- don related that Crawte 'was taken away from our parish of Alresford by Mr Amherst, the gentleman who made the Kent matches.'

Tom Taylor was ranked by Nyren in the finest eleven of Hambledon cricket history. A considerable all-rounder, he constantly took useful wickets; was an attacking batsman and, at cover point, his speed in gathering, and accuracy of return, ran out many men on what appeared safe singles. He was born at Ropley, in 1753, but lived for much of his life at Alresford where he kept the Globe Inn, and regularly appeared for Alresford in matches played for stakes. A brilliant cutter, he was said to take risks - and often lose his wicket - by playing that stroke at a ball too near the stumps. Nyren, in his summing-up, thought Taylor 'had an excellent general knowledge of the game; but of fielding, in particular, he- was perfect both in judgement and practice. He was a short, well-made man, strong and as watchful and active as a cat; but in no other instance will that comparison hold good, for he was without guile, and was an attached friend.' He died in 1806 and was buried at Old Alresford.

Richard Aubery Veck, born in New Alresford, played in 'grand' matches (or only nine seasons. A highly talented cricketer, he played for Hambledon - unusually early by the standards of the time - when he was barely twenty. He was a reliable and consistent bats- man but at twenty-nine, entering the usual prime of a batsman's career, he married, gave up the game, and moved to Bishops Waltham.

There, in Haygarth's words, he 'engaged in mercantile pursuits'; and became the main draper, hosier and undertaker of the town. Obviously he prospered. His son, whom he was able to send to University, entered the church and became 'perpetual curate' of Alverstoke Richard Veck died at Bishops Waltham but was buried, in a handsome vault, at Old Alresford.

The Freemantle brothers, Andrew and John, were born in Bishops Sutton, but they and their sons, nephews and grandsons played for Alresford for the better part of a century. The younger brother, Andrew, was, in the sporting 'cant' of the day, 'one of the cracks'. As a regular player for Hambledon, he had a remarkably long - twenty-three-year - career on the highest level as a left hand batsman and safe deepfield In the days before wicket- keepers wore gloves or stood back, he often fielded long stop - so well that the Reverend James Pycroft wrote - 'Freemantle brought the province of long stop to perfection, never suffering a ball to pass, and covering a great deal of ground.' Nyren wrote of him 'a shortish, well-set man, he was an uncommonly safe as well as a good hitter; and few wickets that I could name were more secure than Andrew's. He would often get long hands, and against the best bowling, too; and once he had warmed into his hitting, it was a duced hard matter to get him out. Andrew Freemantle could be depended upon, whatever he might undertake, whether in cricket or in his worldly dealings.'

In his early thirties he moved to Easton where he took the Bat and Ball Inn; and worked as a carpenter. After he died, his elder son, Henry, took over the inn and another, George, lived in Winchester; both played for Alresford.

Andrew's elder brother, John, early became a master builder in Alresford. Stoutly built and fairly tall, he was reckoned good enough cricketer to play at times for Hambledon.

Nyren recalled that 'He delivered his ball high and well and tolerably fast; as a batter he would have been reckoned a good hand in any club. As a man, he bore a high character for straightforward, manly integrity; in short, he was a hearty John Bull, and flinched no more from

doing his duty than he did from a ball in the field, and this he never did, however hard it might hit him.'

Some indication of Alresford's standing about this time can be gathered from the press, though usually through announcements - in effect, advertisements - of matches to be played than from reporting of the scores or even of results. For instance, in 1778 Hambledon announced home and out matches - on level terms and with no 'given' players - with Alresford for fifty guineas a match. In the next year, Alresford, with two Hambledon men given, met the combined sides of Farnham, Alton and Odiham (with one given man from Yateley) for a silver cup. In 1780, a match was made for 22 guineas between Odiham with Noah Mann of Hambledon against Alresford with Taylor and Veck. In 1782 Alresford and Odiham combined, played the County of Southampton. There were frequent matches between Old Alresford and New, usually won by the latter; but for some fixtures they joined forces.

A rare match report - though of 'news' rather than strictly cricketing interest - appeared in The Hampshire Chronicle of August 29th, 1774: "On Friday, August 5th - on Tichborne Down, Alresford v Alton and Chawton - only two innings and a part of the third were played. The game ran in favour of the united parishes. It is imagined it will never be decided, as the Alresford gentlemen would not conform to the custom coeval with the game itself, viz. of playing it out the next day on the same ground when it is not finished on the first; which the opposite party were very desirous of doing.

The reason generally assigned is that, not having lost a match the whole summer, they were determined to preserve their fame entire throughout the season, and being now in danger of losing the day, struck upon the above expedient to evade the decision of it."

Alresford's reply, published a week later, read: "The Alton and Chawton party sent word on Friday morning that they would not come to play as the weather was bad, but they came afterwards, two hours past the time appointed, to the great surprise of the Alresford party who were so dispersed that it was nearly one o'clock before they could get their side. The other side should have forfeited their deposit money. The next day, Saturday, two of the Alresford mates could not play, but they offered to play it out on the Monday following or any other day. "

Alresford are rarely seen in quite such an unfavourable light. In 1775, according to The Hampshire Chronicle, 'On August 28th at Stephens Castle Green, New Alresford beat Bishops Waltham with two given men by nine wickets. This is the first match lost by the Waltham Cricketers these last two years'. Later that summer New Alresford beat 'Odiham with three picked men from Farnham and Bentley' by 26 runs. An even more impressive fixture was 'On Wednesday June 19th, 1776, on Tichborne Down, Alresford with three of Waltham and two of Warnford v Petersfield and Catherington with the famous Messrs Small, Brctt and Barber and H. Bonham Lsq.' Although no result is recorded, these matches, invariably played for wagers, were based on teams of more or less even strength; and to set three such eminent Hambledon players on the other side means that Alresford must have been immensely powerful.

These cricketers were the sporting heroes of a county; virtually of a country. Nyren wrote of a Hambledon match 'Half the county would be present, and all their hearts with us. Little Hambledon against All England was a proud thought for the Hampshire men'. At the end of the eighteenth century, the wealthy gentry of the Hambledon Club, who had already left Broad-Halfpenny Down for Windmill Down - barely less bleak but conveniently nearer the village - finally decided London was more in tune with their social taste. So White Conduit and M.C.C. came into being; and, soon, into control of the cricket world. The Hambledon and Alresford professionals - and the skill of many of them impressively withstood the sapping of age - went on to play on Thomas Lord's different grounds, and at White Conduit.

Of course, cricket continued at Alresford, as at Hambledon, but it no longer stood at the high peak of its world. It was symbolic of the passing of an age when, in 1835, the 'old' Cricketers Inn was advertised for sale. It was the building, subsequently a laundry, now a private house, at the corner of Sun Lane and Tichborne Down. The advertisement in The Hampshire Chronicle read 'To be sold; CRICKETERS INN, NEW ALRESFORD. This spot is well known as the most favourite place of amusement in that part of the county; and has been in the present proprietor's and occupier's family upwards of seventy years. Apply to Mr William Freeman on the premises'.

The production of Taylor, Veck, Andrew and John Freemantle, Cole, Skinner, Hall - and, arguably, Crawte as well - by Alresford (Old and New) with a population of only 1,100, was equivalent, nowadays, to turning out eight Test players in thirty years: a prodigious feat.

On into the Victorian period, Alresford remained a strong cricket club; good enough to beat Southampton and Alton; even to stage, and win, single-wicket spectaculars on Tichborne Down; and there were still Freeman tics and Skinners to play. Even then, though, it was clear that the great days - and history confirms that they were, indeed, great - had ended with the eighteenth century.