



Botham surrounded by the tricks of the trade, that have made his fame and fortune

## White-flannelled workers

Even those most careless of the game of cricket have heard of Ian Botham. He's cricket's living news item. And, as an anxious nation witnesses his robust contribution to England's current tour of Australia and his bitter departure from Somerset County Cricket Club, this seems a good time to examine the social world of professional cricket that he inhabits, and his place in its history. It's a story, essentially, of *social class* and *ethnicity*.

Cricket's county championship was formed in 1873 but not recognised by the game's aristocratic governing body, the MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club, founded 1782), until 1894. The first-class game based itself on the localised values of the county and was administered by devoutly amateur patricians, thereby setting its face sternly against the professional leagues which flourished in the North.

Professional players, although in a majority at the county clubs, were subject to caste-like restrictions: they changed in separate dressing-rooms, took the field through different gates, ate their meals at another table and were distinguished on official score-cards by having their initials placed after their names. Pros were obliged to bowl at amateurs in the nets and to do menial tasks around the club. In the winter many of them eked out a living doing manual work.

This situation survived into the post-1945 era, when counties continued to employ between 20 and 35 professionals. County captains were always amateurs, usually educated at public school. England's first professional captain, Len Hutton, was not appointed until 1952 and he responded gratefully by trying (without complete success) to lose his Yorkshire accent.

In the changed social cli-

mate of the 1950s these master-and-man relationships seemed less viable and an increasingly impatient sports press told of ructions at the clubs. Northern clubs, surrounded by professional leagues, seemed especially reactionary in their dealings with staff. At Yorkshire, for example, professionals and amateurs stayed at different hotels and, according to Fred Trueman, a Yorkshire player in the 1950s, amateurs were paid more in expenses than professionals got in wages.

At Lancashire, captain Bob Barber also stayed in a separate hotel and was known to send players out of meals for not wearing blazers. When Barber left, Lancashire promoted Repton-educated Jeff Blackledge from the 2nd XI to captain the side, passing over seasoned pros like England's Brian Statham. England batsman Tom Graveney left Gloucestershire for Worcestershire when CIM Pugh was made Gloucester captain. Other

disgruntled players headed for the (then) lesser counties of Leicestershire and Somerset.

The distinction between amateurs and professionals was abolished in 1963. Wage bills went up, at a time when attendances - especially at weekday county matches - were declining. In 1967 the Professional Cricketers Association was formed. Commercialisation became impossible to resist. 'Brighter Cricket' - principally in the form of one-day competitions - now became imperative, to attract crowds and television coverage. The Gillette Cup began in 1963 and Sunday cricket arrived in the form of the Cavalier matches (1966-8), then the John Player League (1969). In 1972 the Benson & Hedges Cup was introduced, and the county championship itself slimmed down. Clubs, led by lowly, petit-bourgeois Leicestershire, began to dabble in sponsorship on their own account.

The proliferation of one-day cricket, along with the admission to the county championship of overseas players in 1968, raised doubts about the national side. Enormous importance has always been attached by the MCC to success at Test level. It was a vindication of *Englishness*, as opposed to whiteness.

Pelham Warner, an England player of the turn of the century, once asked a bishop if it was wrong to pray to beat the Australians. He was told: 'My dear Warner, anything which tends to increase prestige for England is worth praying for'. Test matches against Australia, which began in the 1870s, have always seemed in recent times to have the keenest ideological edge to them, with the mother country seeking to assert its moral superiority over an ex-colony which represented an ungentlemanly and over-competitive brand of capitalist culture.

This ungentlemanly capitalism asserted itself with a vengeance in the 1970s. In 1977 the short pitched fast-bowling of Australians Denis Lillee and Jeff Thomson led

to the adoption of protective headgear - now almost universal - by batsmen. The same year Australian media tycoon Kerry Packer, angry at being refused exclusive rights to the Test series for his Channel 9 TV station, organised his own series and signed up most of the England and Australia teams to play in it. To make matters worse for the MCC, he worked in league with the then England captain, South African-born Tony Greig, and, when Greig and Packer won a High Court action against the Test and County Cricket Board, there were fears of further defections by England players.

These defections were averted only when David Evans, proprietor of a large cleaning combine, guaranteed certain payments to remaining England players. But Evans proved to be no gentleman himself when, to the consternation of the authorities, he declared his motive to be not patriotism but 'the publicity'. (Evans is now chair of Luton Town Football Club and Conservative candidate for Welwyn and Hatfield.) The following year, a Test series in England was sponsored for the first time - by Cornhill Insurance. Although this was a gesture from the high status elite of finance, it must have seemed to the cricket authorities that few barriers to vulgar commercialism remained to be breached.

Ian Botham represents many of the things that those in charge of the English game fought throughout this century to keep in check. A genuine working class hero who, many of his admirers would be surprised to know, has endorsed Tory candidates and opposed socialism ('... because you have to go out there and do it yourself'), he has often disdained the English cricket hierarchy and their gentlemanly civilities. His brawny masculinity and fiercely competitive nature have, as the popular press have recently observed, made him almost more like an Australian player than an English one.

Yet he is also a hero in the

English village green tradition - a batsman who, even in Test matches, is going to go out there and clobber the ball, come what may. This romantic notion of batting appears to have been behind the crisis at Somerset, for whom he has played since 1973. Ian Botham and his friend, West Indian captain Vivian Richards, Somerset have had two of the most exciting batsmen in the game's history.

But Somerset's recent record is not good and what counts in the modern county game is success: this alone attracts crowds and, of course, sponsors. Somerset captain Peter Roebuck, a ledger clerk of a player who accumulates runs unglamorously (but more often) and is reporting the present England tour for Murdoch's *Sunday Times*, has judged that in cold statistical terms retaining the highly popular Richards, and his West Indian team-mate Joel Garner, was not justified. He, and his allies at Somerset, must have known that Botham would go too, in sympathy.

The model of Englishness that Botham offers is sometimes dispiriting. He shoots animals and decries animal rights campaigners. He's aggressively masculine and a self promoter, having only recently dispensed with the services of an agent who had promised to make him a film star. He complains of the popular press but is contracted to *The Sun*.

But Botham is enormously generous - witness his charity work - and it's worth remembering that he's leaving Somerset out of loyalty to Richards and Garner. Their sacking, as I understand it, has no significant racialist element. But when last summer Richards received racial abuse from a crowd at Leeds (Yorkshire itself selects only players born within the county and despite the huge settlement of Asian families in cities like Bradford in the 1950s, none of them has hitherto been black) Botham was angry and unequivocal in his condemnation. •

*Stephen Wagg*