PILGRIMAGE INTO HISTORY - 6th AUGUST 2015

It was always the same. Every year from 1986 we would turn up at Trent Bridge to

watch England play a test match against whichever country was touring that year.

We made this pilgrimage no matter what the weather, sometimes spending the

whole day in a bar waiting for rain to stop. The names varied a bit over the years,

but it was the same core of people who travelled from all parts to converge on

Nottingham, usually on the first day of the test match, which traditionally was a

Thursday. This is organised with military efficiency by Nigel, without whom none of

it would function. The rest of us have walk-on parts.

For the first three years we lived in Spain, the distance did not put me off, and

somehow I would get to the ground in time for the start. Yet I have not been able to

make it back there since 6th August 2015, the day when history was made. This is

probably for the best, since no memory could top what happened between 11am

and 12.40pm that day.

The memory is so vivid to me that it is almost like it is happening today.

The train pulls into Nottingham station. I leave by the side entrance, across the car

park and along to the corner of the main road by Hooters bar, where even at 9am

waitresses in short skirts and low-cut tops are enticing cricket fans like sirens luring

them onto the rocks. Along the main road towards the River Trent I march, then

across the road, up and over the canal near Notts County football ground and into

the Navigation Inn. A seriously rough pub which I am told used to have lunchtime

strippers, nothing like that is on show other than a pub full of cricket fans having

breakfast before going to the ground. I am there to meet Nigel and some of the

others, primarily as Nigel has my ticket. At this time in the morning, the pub still

stinks of last night´s stale beer. The carpet is rank, and on it lies a large, unfriendly

-looking dog of doubtful parentage. It looks at me sideways in a muscular way. For

some crazy reason, I get down on my knees and slowly extend a hand to it. The

creature looks surprised, and licks my fingers. The landlord and some of his mates

are surprised too, saying they have never seen the dog do that before, as it usually

tries to take a finger or two.

Nigel gives me my ticket and I hand over a large sum of money. We leave the pub

as a group and head for the bridge over the Trent. The river here is full of rowers

and canoeists, at the point where the river divides Notts County’s ground and

Nottingham Forest’s City Ground. By now there are hundreds of us streaming over

the bridge and then approaching the entrances to Trent Bridge Cricket Ground. We

head for our gate which is nearest to the bridge.

I am wearing a vibrant pink and white flowery shirt. As is normal these days, all our

bags have to be searched at a table before we go in. The elderly attendant looks in

my bag, and says “Thank you sir, and may I commend you on your bravery for

wearing that shirt”. We all reassemble inside the ground and then into the large

stand opposite the pavilion, where we have seats in the third row of the top deck, a

great position right behind the bowler’s arm. We climb what seem like an

interminable number of steps and emerge into the sunlight, looking down at the

green of the pitch where both sides are doing some practice and limbering up

before the game.

I have not told you who England are playing. It is the old enemy, Australia. For

those of you who know nothing about cricket, this is as big as it gets competitively

and emotionally. The Australians have a reputation for playing very hard and using

a fair amount of personal abuse against their opponents. This can rebound on

them on occasions, the Trent Bridge crowd always keen to rub salt into any

Australian wound. So on an earlier occasion, after the great Aussie leg spin bowler

Shane Warne’s wife had left him because of his extra-marital affairs, the very

moment he comes on to bowl, a large section of the crowd greets him, erupting into

the song Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep to the words:

“Where’s your missis gone?

Where’s your missis gone?

Where’s your missis gone?

Far, far away.”

There is no friendly banter between these teams when they are on the pitch, and

not much off it either. This is a tense occasion. We prepare for it in the traditional

way. By then we have Nigel a Nottingham solicitor, Nick, a Londoner and keen

supporter of Charlton Athletic, a retired trade union officer, John a solicitor from

Birmingham but coming from Bristol, Keith 1 from Cheltenham and Keith 2 from

London , Andy from the Lake District; plus me. Most of us have brought some

sandwiches, to soak up the beer and to tide us over till lunch. Nigel heads for the

bar for some pints, which are served four to a cardboard carrier. Nigel is tall, over

six feet, with glasses which make him look a bit dense at times, when in fact he is

very bright. He peers round dimly, trying to discover where we are seated. He has a

resemblance to a character in Coronation Street called Curly Watts, so much so

that one year when wandering aimlessly along the stands carrying beers, staring up

vaguely looking for us, a sizeable section of the crowd simultaneously point at him

and chant “Curly Watts! Curly Watts, Get back to Coronation Street!”

Once the beers have been sorted, the next task is to write down on a small scrubby

piece of paper whatever score we think will be reached at the end of play. We

each deposit a pound coin. The scrubby piece of paper is folded over so many

times in the process so that no one can see what the others have written. This is all

done with almost religious reverence. At the end of the day whoever is nearest to

the score keeps all the pound coins. This is the closest I ever come to gambling.

Keith 1 and Keith 2 meanwhile are studying the form in the racing pages, deciding

what horses to bet on. Keith 1, known as Rocky, a natural sportsman and an

accomplished boxer, has retired from being a lawyer, and is now a bookie with a

pitch on several racecourses. He has also qualified as a cricket umpire. A

Cumbrian by birth, his home is close to Cheltenham racecourse. Keith 2 is a

Yorkshireman, once a solicitor but now with a senior position at the Financial

Services Authority, living in London. They both look up as the England team trot

onto the pitch. The ground looks packed - apart from two empty seats in the row in

front of us. The two Australian opening batsmen stride out to the middle, and the

umpire at the bowler’s end says “play”. The weather is fine and clear, not too hot,

just right for a full day’s play. It is 11am.

So who is in the crowd? There is no such thing as an average cricket fan. There

are parents with kids, eager to see their heroes; knowledgeable club cricketers,

taking a day off work before a league match on Saturday; retired men and women,

come for a day out eating their sandwiches and pork pies, with flasks of tea; young

women either with their boyfriends looking a bit bored but keen to get a good

suntan, or cricket groupies hanging around the pavilion entrance in the hope of

chatting up players coming in and out; groups of people like most of us, taking a

day off to relax; other louder groups, mainly men, who have come to get drunk in

the sun; and then there is the huge hospitality sector of companies taking out their

clients on a junket, in the expensive hospitality suites with free lunch and unlimited

booze. All human life is on display.

I now have to go into some technical detail about what happens next, but don’t

worry, non-cricketers, it will not take long. England’s opening bowlers are Stuart

Broad, and the young but very fast Mark Wood. Broad, six and a half feet tall, is

thoroughly disliked by the Australians as he is cocksure, mouthy and taciturn. He

has been a successful bowler for some years, and loves to wind up the opposition.

He is also playing on his home ground before his own fans. Something about the

occasion sets him alight as he comes steaming in towards us from the pavilion end.

Always an accurate bowler, he has acquired a couple of yards of speed as he is

shouted on by the crowd. Chris Rogers, the Aussie opener, gets an edge to a fast

ball which is caught, and Australia are one down with no runs to their name.

In the very next over, Mark Wood, demonically likeable but clearly a little deranged,

removes the dangerous and pugnacious David Warner; two top batsmen gone for

no runs. Over the next few overs, Broad rips the heart out of the Australian batting,

claiming six of the next seven wickets so that by 12.15pm, the pride of Australia are

reduced to 47-9, their last man in and completely out of the game.

It is difficult to describe what we feel. None of us could have anticipated the havoc

that Broad had just wreaked against the cream of Australian batsmen. How could

we? I am pinching my own arm in case I am dreaming. I am not saying

thisfiguratively, I was really getting my fingernails right in there. Keith and Keith have

forgotten about the horses they have betted on. John is sitting silently with a huge

grin on his face, supping his ale. Andy, who runs a climbing equipment and

outdoor shop in the Lake District, is shaking his head and laughing. Nick and Nigel

are both repeating “I can’t believe this” We look at each other nervously saying “Is

this really happening?” We have a drink, and try to settle down. Some of the crowd

are stunned into silence, which is odd as the rest are making so much noise

that it is deafening; some are standing and shouting, others are singing, everyone

keeps staring at the scoreboard trying to make sense of it.

It is at this moment that some of the row in front stand up to let two young men in to

the spare seats in front of us. They have flown from Sydney, arriving at Heathrow

this morning, they have made their way across London, on to a train at St Pancras,

arrived at Nottingham and walked the half hour to the ground with all their worldly

goods. They have climbed all the stairs to the top of the stand, found their seats,

and then looked at the scoreboard. I could see that their brains were having

difficulty in processing the information they were witnessing. They are

dumbfounded. Eventually, one says;

“Strewth”.

The other says “What do we do now?”

The first: “Get blind, I suppose.”

We don’t have the heart to make fun of their predicament. We try to commiserate

with them though they can see we are loving every moment of it. Australia

struggles on to score 60 when Broad puts them out of their misery, having taken 8

wickets and conceding only 15 runs.

How do we put this into perspective? If this script were written, it would be rejected

as being utterly implausible. It is like an English footballer scoring a double hat trick

against Germany. It is like the English army crushing the far superior might of the

French at Agincourt. For a team like Australia to be bowled out before lunch on the

first day of a match is unknown. To be bowled out for only 60 runs is unheard of,

and had not happened to Australia against England since before the First World

War. Broad’s performance is the best ever by an English fast bowler against

Australia.

But this is not the time to think about statistics. It is now 12.40pm. There is a 10

minute break, then England have to bat until the lunch break at 1pm. This fits in

well with Nigel’s plans. One thing Nigel must have is a proper cooked lunch, and

as Nigel does the organising, this is built into our tradition, which is that some time

before the 1pm lunchbreak, we hasten down the steps, leave the ground after

having our hand stamped like leaving a disco, and walk briskly for 5 minutes to the

Stratford Haven pub in West Bridgford. This is a very busy, well-run pub, heaving

with cricket fans on matchdays. Not only has Nigel booked a table for us, he has

already pre-ordered what we are going to eat, so that by leaving the ground a bit

early, we get to the bar before the main rush, get our drinks, sit down at the

reserved table and have our meals served to us in minutes. It is a well-oiled

operation, designed to get us in pole position so that we can eat, have a couple of

drinks and get back to the ground not too long after play resumes at 1.40pm. It

works like a dream every year.

Nigel does enjoy his food. A few years earlier, on a visit to a conference at

Blackpool where we were due to go to a formal four-course dinner, Nigel had just

arrived and feeling a little hungry insisted that we should all go at 6pm, an hour and

a half before the dinner, to a fish restaurant for large cod and chips, bread and

butter and a pot of tea each. Though large of frame, he is not overweight. I have no

idea where all the food goes.

During lunch, we worry. If we have done that to Australia, what are they now going

to do to us? They will not take this well. We need not have been concerned. We

return to our seats, console the Aussies again, and for the rest of the day watch

England going quietly about their business by building up a large score. The

excitement and tension relaxes. We can take a deep breath and do what we

normally do, talk about everything else other than cricket. We talk about old friends

and colleagues, our families, what we are making of our lives, humorous

memories we have shared. We discuss politics and world affairs. In test matches,

there is plenty of time to do this with one ball bowled about every 45-50 seconds.

As the afternoon wears on, the drinking slows down. We may even drink some

water, or a cup of tea.

Grounds in the Midlands like Trent Bridge, and in the North, are very different from

Lords in London, where the crowd claps politely, treating the occasion with a

snobbish reverence, where the members in their egg and bacon ties and ridiculous

gaudy jackets, look and behave like a tableau from a hundred years ago. At Trent

Bridge, the crowd fuelled by now with too much beer, are singing and chanting

loudly. Many are in fancy dress. Some have collected hundreds of empty plastic

beer glasses to make them into a long bendy snake. Some are making witty

comments to the Australian fielders. Some of them are answering back, though

most just smile as they know it is not a good idea to antagonise a Trent Bridge

crowd. Some are dancing up and down the aisle doing the conga. A few

spectators overdo it and get ejected by the police. Many break into a fine rendition

of Sweet Caroline, and a host of other songs. Mexican waves begin, going round

the ground to great cheers, turning to boos when the wave gets to the posh

members in the pavilion who refuse to take part. The two unfortunate Aussies

spend the afternoon eating pies washed down with several pints of amber nectar.

All is well with the world.

England has lost all caution by the tea break and go on to finish the day on 274 runs

for the loss of 4 wickets, Joe Root making a perfect century; the end to a perfect

day. We examine the scrubby piece of paper. No one has got anywhere near the

final score, most of us having predicted Australia still batting at the end of the day. I

had got Australia out near the end and England starting to bat, so I win the pot of

pound coins. We say goodbye and head in different directions, for me the walk

back to the station and on to a train packed with England supporters heading to

Derby, Birmingham and all points South-West. Somehow I manage to get a seat

and listen to the conversations about the game. A day like today raises everyone’s

happiness levels. Great sporting events have an almost unique ability to rouse us

from the predictability of our existence, and, if only for a while, make life a little bit

special. I leave the train and stumble home.

England go on to amass a large score the next day, and bowl Australia out again so

that this five day match ends in less than three days. England has won the Ashes.

The old enemy lies crushed and vanquished.

I have not been back. Visits to England have been less, and do not always fit in with

test match dates. Nigel very kindly invites me every year. I decline politely. I know

that nothing could ever match that day six years ago.