

Rickling and Cricket – “The most perfect of wickets”

By Alexander Rich

Since the 17th Century cricket has been played on many village greens. By the early 18th century the game had become popular, especially in the southern counties of England. It was played by every strata of society with wealthy patrons forming their own "select XIs". A notable early fan of the sport was Charles Lennox, 2nd Duke of Richmond and in 1751 Frederick, Prince of Wales, tragically died after being hit by a cricket ball whilst playing cricket at Cliveden House (so the sport has undeniably changed the course of history). By the 1730's grounds were being "staked and roped out" and large crowds were flocking to watch matches at venues such as the Artillery Ground in Finsbury (now the Honourable Artillery Company's pitch). Thomas Lord opened his first cricket ground, the home of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), in 1787 (though it didn't settle on its present site at St John's Wood until 1814). In 1788 the MCC established the definitive 'Laws of Cricket' (and they are still responsible for their upkeep).

In the first few decades of the 19th Century many cricket clubs were founded. Rickling Green certainly had a side by 1842 and in August of that year a match between Audley End and Rickling Green is recorded in a number of contemporary newspapers as far away as London (Rickling Green won). The *Hertford Mercury & Reformer* of Saturday 22 July 1843, records a match between Stortford and Rickling and *Bell's Life in London & Sporting Chronicle*, records the return match between Royston and Rickling Green on 25 September 1844 suggesting that by this time Rickling Green were a well established travelling side (Rickling won by 65 runs). By 1846 they were on a circuit which included *Albion* cricket club and a further mention that year in the London paper *The Era*, reports "a vast concourse of spectators" watching a match on Rickling Green. The Chelmsford Chronicle records a cricket match on 7 April (very early in the season) between Matching and Henham played at Rickling Green, suggesting that by this time Rickling Green had become such a well-established cricket pitch that it was being used as a ground by a number of teams. White's "History, Gazetteer & Directory of Essex 1848" lists James Hayden and as keeper of a "beerhouse" at Rickling Green (which was taken over by his widow Elizabeth). This "beerhouse" is not specifically named in directories until Kelly's Essex Directory of 1878 but there is listed as the "Cricketer's Arms" confirming the firm association between Rickling Green and the game of cricket.

It is not surprising therefore that in October 1861 a young army officer, mad-keen cricketer and MCC Member, Thomas Hallam "Tommy" Hoblyn, chose to move with his wife and their infant daughter to the "The Views" at Rickling Green (the residence now known as "Rickling House"). Hoblyn's arrival heralded a new, prestigious era for cricket on Rickling Green. For six years, from the 1862 season onwards, Rickling Green was a regular venue for notable matches between the home side, the MCC and other distinguished teams. In May 1862 Rickling Green played 'I Zingari' at home (a club which still survives and derives its name from Italian meaning "the Gypsies"). MCC and *I Zingari* fixtures are well documented so it is possible to tease out who was playing for Rickling Green at this time (a number of whom might be considered "ringers"). Along with Tommy Hoblyn players included Henry Plowden (MCC, Cambridge and Hants), William Pitt Prest (Cambridge University, Cambridgeshire and the Gentlemen of England), Ferdinand Hope-Grant (Cambridge University and MCC), George van der Meulen (Rugby School, Cambridge University and Hertfordshire), Walter Edward Grimston (Harrow, Hertfordshire and MCC). Other regulars included H Perkins, J Perkins, B Spencer, A Spencer, R Forster, W Bayliff and A Court.

Bell's Life records a match between Rickling Green and a Trinity XI which was delayed by rain. There was a "Strict enforcing of Law X" (which deals with preparation of the wicket and resulting postponement of the start of a match). *Bell's Life* gave credit to Mr Hoblyn for adhering to the Laws "as an MCC man" and comments that "Large scores were consequent upon *the most perfect of wickets*".

Frank Newton Streatfield CMG records in Chapter VI of his book "Sporting Recollections of an Old Un" (published in 1913) about having a "Bellyful of bowling at Rickling Green". Streatfield's MCC Membership had been sponsored by Tommy Hoblyn who also invited him to play for Rickling Green against the "Quidnuncs" (a club founded in 1851 by former Cambridge University Cricket Club members whose membership usually required players to have gained a Blue in the Varsity match). Streatfield recalls a "frightful leather hunt... what might somewhat coarsely be exceedingly correctly

described as a most unconscionable bellyful". He recalls that Rickling Green were soundly beaten and that C. G. Lyttelton (who went on to become Lord Cobham) scored over a century. This match is almost certainly the one recorded in Lord Cobham's obituary in the 1923 Wisden where it is written up that during an innings at Rickling Green he made "74 runs off 26 balls out of 27 delivered to him" and that Lord Cobham went in to bat with the express purpose of hitting a ball over a big tree which was growing on the edge of the Green "on the top of which was a flagstaff". His hits, extraordinarily, "included an eight, without an overthrow, and not downhill" the ball being "stopped in its course by a gate."

In January 1865 Tommy Hoblyn was advertising in the Herts & Essex Observer for a gardener/handyman (whose duties may well have included maintaining the Rickling Green wicket) but, unfortunately Tommy Hoblyn died, at the tragically early age of 31, just before Christmas 1866 and is interred in Quendon churchyard. The cricketing records show that Hoblyn's demise effected Rickling Green's fixtures list. The MCC did not return to Rickling Green for another five years after which there is a further hiatus of well-documented matches on the Green until the 1880's when a new era of players included Henry Swarder (Essex and Hertfordshire), Frank Silcock (Essex) and Richard Spencer (Essex) who all started playing for the club. Richard Spencer lived at Birchhanger and was Honorary Secretary of Rickling Green Cricket Club for many years (his death was reported in the 1906 Wisden). It was during this period that one of the most remarkable events in cricketing history happened on Rickling Green – placing it on the world cricketing map.

August 1882 was a fine, dry month and on 4th and 5th of that month Rickling Green played Orleans Cricket Club (recently founded by Charles Inglis "Buns" Thornton (1850–1929) and named after the Club's home ground at Orleans Road, Twickenham). Thornton played more than 200 first-class matches in the late 19th century and other notable players on his Orleans side included Arthur Trevor (Winchester, Oxford University & Sussex) and George Vernon (England & Middlesex). "Buns" Thornton and opened the batting for Orleans with George Vernon and scored 15 runs before being caught by Richard Spencer off Henry Swarder's bowling. At that stage Orleans had just 20 runs for 1 wicket, but what followed was one of cricket's most extraordinary feats. Arthur Trevor, the OCC number three batsman, walked out to the crease: it was not until 605 runs later, the following day, that the next wicket fell (when Vernon was finally bowled by Silcock). The rest of the Orleans side all put runs on the board (except for Bernard Posno (England and MCC - once a batting partner of WG Grace) who was caught for a duck by Silcock off Spencer's bowling). Orleans Cricket Club's total was 920 runs – at that time the highest ever authenticated total score. However, Orleans had not completed their innings until a few minutes before the stumps were pulled - so the match was a draw!

The 920 runs had been scored off 1174 balls. Arthur Trevor's runs were made up of four 6's, five 5's, 16 4's, 32 3's, 29 2's and 71 singles. George Vernon's innings comprised of two 6's, 15 4's, 24 3's, 21 2's and 73 singles. Five of the batsmen scored 795 runs between them. Frank Silcock bowled 485 of the balls. Papers throughout the British Empire reported on the score made on Rickling Green and the statistic was included in WG Grace's book "Cricket" published in 1891. The total was beaten six years later in Melbourne, Australia during a match between Carlton Cricket Club and Melbourne University – but even now, after 133 years, it remains the eighth highest all-time score and is still the second highest 2nd wicket partnership.

The sports journalist Alfred William Pullin (known as Old Ebor) recorded in "Talks with Old English Cricketers" (published in 1900) that in 1883, a year after the mammoth Orleans Cricket Club score, they returned to Rickling Green requiring "250 runs in two hours" to win a match. Apparently "the runs were got in a hundred minutes"!

Rickling Green remains one of the most picturesque cricket pitches as home to Rickling Ramblers Cricket Club. It is on the circuit for Essex/England testimonial matches. A sympathetic, purpose-built pavilion was finally erected on the Green in the 1980's superseding facilities laid on by the Cricketer's Arms "beerhouse" for some 150 years. One visiting player wryly noted that Rickling Green is one of the few grounds where you could be out by being "Run Over" (as you have to cross Belcham's Lane (a public highway) to get from the new pavilion to the crease).