

SPORT ON THE HURST – CRICKET

A talk given to the Molesey Local History Society by John Hutton on Friday 12th October 2012 at Mole Hall, Bishop Fox Way, West Molesey

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

Probably the best place to start a talk on cricket in Molesey is on the Hurst itself.



A famous painting hangs in the Long Room at Lord's and shows Cricket being played on the Hurst around 1780. The scene is instantly recognisable. On the right Garrick's Temple is clearly visible. And in the background is the old Church of St Mary's in Hampton.

The scene depicted is still recognisable today and therefore we have a very good idea of the location of at least some of the cricket that was played on the Hurst.

Ironically history doesn't record if Rowland Baker, the noted Molesey historian, ever played cricket on the Hurst, but he certainly wrote about it. The Hurst gets a mention in both *The Book of Molesey* and *Thameside Molesey*, and in *Thameside Molesey*, one of the chapters is entitled 'The Hurst: Cradle of Cricket', and contains a lot of fascinating information about cricket on the Hurst.

My objective this evening is not merely to repeat what Rowland Baker wrote but to try to add another dimension by including things that you won't find in the Baker books, although some overlap is inevitable.

Whether the Hurst really was the 'cradle of cricket' is debateable, but certainly there is evidence that Moulsey Hurst is one of the oldest cricketing venues in England. It pre-dates Lord's; it pre-dates all the other County grounds currently in use; it even pre-dates the ground of the famous Hambledon Club at Broadhalfpenny Down in Hampshire.

During the 18th Century Moulsey Hurst was regarded as one of the best grounds in Surrey. And we know that cricket was played on the Hurst at least 50 years before the date of the painting referred to above.

The first cricket match played on the Hurst, of which there is a record, took place on July 14 1731 between teams from Hampton and Brentford. But that's all we know about the game, except that there was money involved. We don't know who played in it, or how the fixture came about, or what the scores were.

What first prompted the playing of cricket on the Hurst is not known precisely, but its elevation into a well-known cricketing venue can probably be attributed to a member of the Royal Family - Prince Frederick Louis, the then Prince of Wales.



From various sources we know that in July 1733 he was among the spectators for a match played at Moulsey Hurst between Surrey and Middlesex, and gave all the players a guinea as a reward for their exertions. And later that month, also on the Hurst, a match was played between the Prince's XI and Edward Stead's XI at which the Prince presented a silver cup to the winning side.

Proximity to Hampton Court and Royal patronage was all that was required to put Moulsey Hurst on the cricketing map.

There have of course been many Princes of Wales but this one was the eldest son of George II, and a more unlikely person to become an important patron of English cricket is hard to imagine. Why? Firstly, because he was German; born in Hanover in 1707, and secondly because, according to most sources, he didn't actually come to live in England until 1728 when he was 21 years of age.

At the beginning of the 18th century England was still an agricultural society run by the great landowners. But the Monarchy had been restored, the Puritans had been sent packing, and the Aristocracy were enthusiastic in their pursuit of pleasure.

One of their passions was gambling, and cricket provided a perfect outlet for this, whilst at the same time providing an opportunity for what was known at the time as 'manly recreation'.

Thus began the elevation of cricket from a rustic game played on the village green by yokels to the game we know today.

Prince Frederick Louis contributed to this enthusiastically and generously, and during the 1730s and 1740s he was the leading patron of cricket in Surrey.

But cruelly the game cost him his life. Hit in the side during a match, he died some months later, in March 1751, when the resultant internal abscess burst.

His death, closely following that of one of the other great patrons of the time, the 2nd Duke of Richmond, was a big blow for the game, and was to have an adverse impact on its finances for some years to come.

Before I tell you a little bit about how cricket was played at the time of those early games on the Hurst, let's look at some cricketing landmarks to give a bit of perspective.

At the time of the game between Hampton and Brentford in 1731

- It would be 43 years before the first proper Code of Laws was introduced (in 1774)
- And 56 years before the Marylebone Cricket Club was founded (in 1787)
- And nearly 150 years before the first Test Match was played in England (in 1880)

Cricket, if not in its Cradle, was certainly still at Nursery school.

At the beginning of the 18th Century, cricket was, as I have said

- Still a rustic sport. It was poorly endowed – which means there was no money in it.
- It was, so far as we know, confined to Southern England.
- Teams had no set number of players.
- Rules varied from place to place.
- Dress was informal.

The concept of the carefully-prepared modern cricket square was unknown. Wickets were pitched on bumpy, grassy surfaces that were unpredictable and could cause nasty injuries. It would be another hundred years before anyone wore leg pads or other protective gear.

Having selected the venue and assembled the players, the next thing was for the Principals to agree on the rules of the contest and of course the stakes. These were often high and it was not uncommon for matches to be played for 1,000 guineas – about £100,000 in today's money.

Next came the toss, the winning of which gave not only the right to bat first, if desired, but also the right to select the location of the pitch, and the pitch could be located anywhere provided it was within 30 yards of a centre determined by the opposing side. The job of selecting where to pitch the wickets was usually given to the best bowler.

When the first code of laws was introduced in 1774 both the right to bat first and the right to select the location of the pitch were given to "the side going from home", i.e. the away side.

At the beginning of the 18th Century, the wicket usually consisted of two vertical 'stumps' topped by a single horizontal 'bail'. Each stump was about 12" high and the bail was about 24" in length. Soon thereafter - for reasons unknown, but probably because the ball kept going over the top of the wicket - the height of the stumps was increased and the length of the bail was reduced, so that by 1730 the wicket was 22" high and 6" wide.

And so it remained until 1775. After an incident which I will describe in more detail presently, it was agreed to add a third stump, and this format has remained unchanged ever since, although from time to time changes have been made to both the height of the stumps and the overall width of the wicket.

Incidentally the terms wicket, stump and bail give a clue to the game's origins. In some areas, perhaps where there were orchards, batsmen defended a tree stump. Whilst in areas where sheep were kept, the target became the wicket gate of the sheep pen. This gate had a moveable cross-bar which was used to secure it, and this cross-bar was called the 'bail'.

Obviously, as time went on, it was easier to carry around 3 pieces of wood rather than a tree stump or a sheep pen, but the terminology stuck.

In the early days bowling was underarm and trundled along the ground, Drake-style (hence 'bowling') but much faster. The ball, which was made of leather, weighed between 5 and 6 ounces, much the same as today. Each over consisted of 4 balls.



The bat was shaped a bit like a hockey stick and was made of whatever wood came to hand. Bats made of oak, alder and pine are still in existence, though not in use.

Cricket's first great bowling revolution occurred probably in the mid-1700s when bowlers started to pitch the ball through the air instead of trundling it along the ground. This was known as "length bowling" or sometimes "lob bowling", and generally involved less speed but more subtlety.

This became the dominant style of bowling until "round arm" bowling was made legal in 1835. One of the great exponents of this new type of bowling was a man called "Lumpy" Stevens, of whom more in a moment.

The curved bat was less effective against this type of bowling and it wasn't long before straight bats were developed. Prior to this there had been no rules as to the size of the bat but after one fellow turned up with a bat that was wider than the wicket it was decided to restrict the dimensions of the bat to more or less as they are today.

Returning to our picture of Moulsey Hurst, we can now see that by 1780 a game recognisable to us today had evolved. The wicket now has three stumps, the fielding side has eleven men, dress is more formalised, and the bat is straighter. There are two umpires, and you will notice two gentlemen sitting on chairs not far from the action. These are the scorers and they kept the score by cutting notches on a piece of wood to represent each run. Each umpire carried a bat which the batsman had to touch in order to complete each run. At this time there were no boundaries, so all "notches" had to be run, but a lost ball only counted for 3 runs.

We've already seen that Patronage was the oil that lubricated the wheels of 18th Century cricket. This provided opportunities for commercial gain for those of more lowly birth. The aristocrats of the day, like most cricketers, preferred batting, and needed someone to bowl at them. This role was often provided by retainers or artisans, who sometimes proved to be better at the game than their masters, who then were very keen to have such players in their teams.



William "Silver Billy" Beldham, (pictured here in his 80s) after whom Beldham Gardens is named, and so-called because of his flowing golden locks, was for 35 years between 1787 and 1822 the best batsman in England. Born near Farnham in 1766, he graduated from farm labourer to become one of the stars of the famous Hambledon Club, and played in many of the big matches of the time, including many on the Hurst.

He was one of the early exponents of forward and back play when bowlers started to pitch the ball through the air rather than trundling it along the ground. In fact it would have been much more appropriate if "Beldham Gardens" had been called "Beldham Drive".

His usual rate of pay was 5 guineas for a win and 3 guineas for a loss, plus possibly a cut of his patron's winnings.

One of the most important patrons was George Finch, the 9th Earl of Winchilsea, in whose honour Winchilsea Crescent at Hurst Park is named. A nobleman of the old school, he was firstly a military man and fought in the American War of Independence, before taking up cricket in his 30s.



Soon thereafter in 1787, he was a co-founder of the MCC and became an important figure in the history of cricket.

But he was also a very keen player who would, so it was said, 'go anywhere for a game of cricket'. In a playing career stretching from 1786 to 1804 he made 128 first-class

appearances for a variety of teams. His enthusiasm was such that, in the 1790s, he even had a home close to the Hurst. Rowland Baker thinks this was Hurst House.

Needless to say he died a bachelor.



Another important contributor to cricket on the Hurst was Charles Bennet, the 4th Earl of Tankerville. An Old Etonian who was introduced to cricket at school, he was for long the greatest patron of Surrey cricket.

He lived at Mount Felix near Walton-on-Thames and maintained a cricket ground at Byfleet. This was suitable for practice, but inadequate for formal games; these he staged at Laleham Burway or Moulsey Hurst.

He was, apparently, a handsome man, about 5' 8" in height, with a lively temper that was not always kept in check. After a fracas where he whipped a coachman in 1774, he was rebuked in a newspaper of the time as 'renowned for nothing but cricket playing, bruising and keeping low company' – a harsh judgement for a man who, was at the time, Chairman of the East India Company's Court of Directors.

His other claim to fame was that for a time he employed at Mount Felix two of the finest cricketers of the day.

One of these was William Bedster, after whom Bedster Gardens is named, a professional cricketer whose career spanned the period from 1777 to 1794. Mainly a batsman, but also a useful bowler, he was famously employed by the Earl of Tankerville for five years as his butler, and played many games for his patron as well as being lent to other sides as a so-called "given man". After his playing days were over he became an innkeeper in Chelsea.

Also employed by the Earl of Tankerville was Edward Stevens who was known universally as "Lumpy". The son of an innkeeper, he was discovered by a cricket-loving brewer, and as his skill blossomed he became the Earl of Tankerville's gardener at Mount Felix in the early 1770s.



By general consent considered to be the outstanding bowler of his day, it was his accuracy that made him a legend. Tankerville once won a bet of £100 (about £10,000 at today's prices) that Lumpy could hit a feather placed on the pitch at least once in four balls.

When the time came for choosing the location of the pitch, "Lumpy", who had a passion for shooters, always sought to choose his ground so that he might pitch on a downward slope. A verse of the time went "for Honest Lumpy did allow, he ne'er could pitch but o'er a brow".

Inevitably "Lumpy" was involved in the change from two stumps to three. In a match in 1775 "Lumpy" beat the bat of one of the best batsman of the day on three separate occasions but each time the ball passed through the wicket without disturbing either a stump or the bail and so the batsman was not out. As a result of "Lumpy's" protests, the authorities agreed that a third stump should be added to stop the ball going through the wicket. This took some time to become universally applied, particularly by some of the aristocratic patrons, most of whom were batsmen.

Lumpy remained a top class bowler well into his fifties, and he is mainly associated with Surrey teams in general but like Bedster often featured as a "given man". In contemporary scorecards and reports his name was always recorded simply as "Lumpy" or "Mr. Lumpy".

When he died in 1819, his old patron Tankerville erected a gravestone for Lumpy in Walton-on-Thames churchyard; the two had shared many cricketing exploits, and Tankerville had not forgotten his protégé. Sadly the developers of Hurst Park did overlook him because, despite searching high and low, I have been unable to locate a "Lumpy Gardens" anywhere in the vicinity, which is a great shame. Whether or not anyone would have bought a house in "Lumpy Gardens" is quite another matter.

Another familiar sight on the Hurst was the Hon. John Tufon, after whom Tufon Gardens is named. Both he and his brother Henry were noted amateur cricketers of the day. John tragically died at the age of 25 but he had already achieved lasting fame as the person against whom an LBW dismissal was first recorded whilst playing in a match at Moulsey Hurst in 1795.

Perhaps I should explain that although LBW as a means of dismissal had first appeared in the Laws of Cricket in 1774, prior to this game it had always been recorded in score sheets as bowled. So Tufon's dismissal was not the first actual LBW dismissal but the first one recorded as such. Interestingly both William Beldham and the Earl of Winchilsea were participating in this match.

How much cricket was played on the Hurst? The short answer is "we don't really know".

- Records of matches played in both the 18th and 19th Centuries are rather patchy.
- Very few scores were recorded prior to 1770.
- One of the main cricket archives lists a total of only 56 matches played on the Hurst in the 120 years between 1730 and 1850.

This seems a very low number, particularly as the Hurst was rated as one of the best grounds in Surrey. Possibly there were a lot more matches between local teams of which no record was kept.

- The peak appears to have been in the last quarter of the 18th Century, as interest in cricket took off.
- It is perhaps surprising to note that three and even four day matches were not uncommon at that time.

Towards the end of the 18th Century, particularly after the founding of the MCC in 1787, there was a preference on the part of the wealthy aristocratic patrons for playing their cricket either in Central London, within easy reach of their London houses, or at their estates in the country. This will certainly have had a negative impact on the number of important matches played on the Hurst.

The 19th Century also saw the emergence of professional teams who earned their living touring the country playing 'challenge' matches against local opposition, and the market for the entertainment they provided lay in the cities, particularly in the North of England, rather than in rural back waters like Molesey.

In the whole of the 19th Century, only 2 first-class matches were played on the Hurst, one in 1806 and the other in 1890.

Many of the matches played on the Hurst in the 18th Century were represented as 'County' Matches (e.g. Surrey v Kent, or Surrey v Hampshire, or even Surrey v England) but they were nothing of the sort. These names were merely 'coveralls' for groups of scratch players brought together by wealthy patrons for gambling purposes.

The formation of the County clubs we know today did not get underway until the middle of the 19th Century and an official County Championship was not inaugurated until 1890.

I'd now like to say something about the clubs who have played on the Hurst or nearby.

On various occasions during the 18th Century, teams bearing the name "Moulsey" or "Moulsey Hurst" are mentioned in the historical record. For example, in July 1739 a joint Kingston & Moulsey side played a match on the Hurst against London, and a year later Richmond & Moulsey joined forces to play the same opposition. Then in 1787 a joint Moulsey Hurst and White Conduit side played Hornchurch. Finally, in July 1855 Moulsey Hurst played Eton & Riverside.

There is no evidence however that a Moulsey Hurst Club or even a regular Moulsey Hurst side existed at this time.

The first club to play on the Hurst of which we have any knowledge was the Royal Clarence Cricket Club. This appears to have been formed in 1828 under the patronage of the Duke of Clarence, who later became William IV, and who lived at Bushy House in Bushy Park until he became King in 1830.

The only records we have of the matches played by the Royal Clarence Club are those against Epsom between 1828 and 1834. The honours were shared fairly evenly over this period but the last game in 1834 was apparently unfinished, which leaves one speculating as to whether there might have been an incident, possibly an umpiring decision, which led to the game and the relationship being abandoned. In any case within a year the Royal Clarence Club had apparently played its last game.

The next club to emerge was connected with the setting up of Hurst Park Racecourse in 1890. It was intended to be part of an exclusive type of Country Club but it doesn't seem to have lasted long. However, it is memorable for the fact that in September 1890 a three day match was scheduled between the Hurst Park Club and the 1890 Australian Touring Team, which the Hurst Park Club won by 34 runs inside 2 days. Needless to say the Australians were not very complimentary about the wicket.

Next came East Molesey Cricket Club but we'll come back to that in a moment.

The last club to be formed was Molesey Hurst Cricket Club

This was founded, after the second World War, by a group of local citizens who felt that, with an increasing population in Molesey, there was a definite need for another cricket club. Application was made to the Hurst Park Club Syndicate for permission to use the enclosure opposite the racecourse.

This was the area which is now bounded by New Road, Hurst Road, Molesham Way and Mole Abbey Gardens, and this became the home of the Club from 1948 until Hurst Park was sold for housing development in 1962. Thereafter the Club played firstly at the Molesey Recreation Ground, then at the Royal Exchange ground in Hurst Lane, and finally at Longmead Road in Thames Ditton before finally folding in 1974.

The Club played most of its fixtures on Sunday afternoons. In 1960, 45 matches were played, but there was a steady decline through the 1960s, falling as low as 19 matches in 1967. All the regular fixtures were so-called "friendlies", meaning that no points were at stake, but as anyone who has played club cricket knows there is no such thing as a "friendly".

The Club had an energetic social side. Fancy Dress games were a regular feature, as were games for the Ladies, and the pre-season warm up usually involved a bun-fight held at either the Carnarvan Castle or the Jolly Boatman.

Perhaps the biggest occasion in the club's history was the match organised in support of Bernie Constable's benefit in 1959 when a number of the players in the Surrey County side were present. (Edrich, Stewart, Bedsers, Lock)

The origins of East Molesey Cricket Club are not entirely clear but it is certainly the most durable of all the clubs who have played on or near to the Hurst.

In March 1879 the Surrey Comet reported that "a cricket club was in the course of formation under the Presidency of the Rev. William Reynolds, the vicar of St. Mary's, and that the use of a ground on Molesey Park had been kindly given by Mr. Andrews". Rowland Baker states that this ground was behind what used to be the Woolworth's store, but another source recalls the club playing "near to where Distillers now play", which would have put it down by Spencer Park and the Wilderness.

Anyway Kelly's Directory for 1890 mentions a Cricket Club located opposite Tagg's Island, the President of which was the Rev. Reynolds, and it seems reasonably certain that this is the club that still exists today.

It is thought that the club moved to its present ground in about 1885, and in 1901 there was much excitement when the famous W.G. Grace visited to play in a match. Judging from photographs of the time by 1904 the club was clearly well established and playing regular fixtures.

An important figure at East Molesey Cricket Club during the first part of the 20th Century was William Graburn, after whom Graburn Way is named. Willy Graburn, as he was known, was born in Yorkshire in 1865 but his family moved to Molesey around 1890, and he lived for more than fifty years at 21 Spencer Road, East Molesey.

He was associated for many years with Surrey County Cricket Club, mainly in the capacity of 2nd XI Captain and youth coach. He played once for the County first team in 1894 and also played for Hurst Park in the match against the Australians in 1890.

When his days at the Oval finished, he became involved with East Molesey Cricket Club, first as Captain from 1908 to 1920, and thereafter as Honorary Secretary from 1920 until shortly before his death in 1944.

A few months after Willy Graburn's death, the club had the opportunity to buy the freehold of the ground from the owner Mr. C.W. Kent. With its tenure of the ground secure, the club then set about raising funds for a new pavilion, and in the late 1940s and early 1950s annual 'celebrity' matches were organised for this purpose by the club's enthusiastic President Basil Turner.



The climax of this process was a match between the club and the 1953 Australian Touring side. This was the first match of their tour and took place in April 1953 in front of a crowd estimated at 10,000 people, including Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. (A short newsreel clip of the event was then shown).

The new Pavilion was opened in 1955, and 13 years later in 1968 the club was one of the founder members of the newly formed Surrey Championship League. Twelve years later in 1980 the club won the League Title for the first and only time. But last season the club's 1st XI achieved promotion to the Premier division, and the club has never been more vibrant.



You'll be relieved to hear that this innings is nearly over, so back to the Hurst where it all began some 280 years ago. The story of cricket on the Hurst is in many ways the story of cricket itself. From underarm bowling to protective helmets, the Hurst has seen it all.