Leicestershire v Lancashire at Barwell, June 1946

Cricket at Barwell should have been by all rights the greatest fun. The ground is tucked away in the heart of England, on the borders of Warwickshire and Leicestershire but just inside the latter county. Although as central as can be from that point of view, it is remote from the fashionable world of the ‘shires’, from the sophisticated atmosphere of Quorn and Pytcheley and Cottesmore. At least it seemed to be in those intervals when a bright June sun shone down on it during the Lancashire – Leicestershire three-day championship match there.

How such a fixture could ever have been allocated to Barwell seemed at first a mystery. But the Leicester club had temporarily lost the use of their county ground and it was their policy to spread their matches over what is a surprisingly compact and bulky county. Ashby-de-la- Zouche, Loughborough, Hinckley, these were all likely centres of population to tap for the shillings and sixpences which are so necessary to a cricket-club’s existence.

But the Hinckley ground, where county matches have been played in the past, has been sold as a housing estate, an apt commentary on the present-day world of, save for war’s intervening mercy, unabated ribbon-development. Hinckley had provided the only ground in that south-west corner of Leicestershire, so now, for the first time in its history Barwell was given a county match. Barwell has a history too. The local club is one hundred and fifty years old and its yearly match with North Warwickshire is claimed to be the oldest fixture which has continued to be played every year for nearly a century. Barwell is the birthplace of the England bowler, George Geary, and Sam Coe, ten years his senior and holder of the record score for the county, learned his cricket in the next –door village of Shilton. Their names, incidentally, bring the recurrent reflection that the Leicester team has nearly always had a pair of professional cricketers as its ‘twin fathers’, Knight and Pougher in the 1890s and then King and Coe, Astill and Geary from 1920 to 1935 and, last of all, Armstrong and Berry.

Barwell has much to commend it, but not in the modern money-making sense. There is only one stand and that faces, perversely but understandably, directly away from the cricket ground on to the football field to the east of it. Money has a way today of turning its back on the traditional, more English game. Seating accommodation is limited to benches arranged in two rows round the whole of the ground. There is a pavilion with two dressing-rooms but little else. There are no boundary railings, no turnstiles, no perimeter wall but only broken hedges through which members of the public could, and in fact did, force a somewhat furtive and bramble-scratched entrance.

But Barwell has things that the average county ground in a large town so sadly misses – trees- not so many as in the Oxford Parks, but in pleasant green clumps and marching, Middlebarnis avenues, a long view westward of fields rolling and hedgerows winding away to the low lines of Warwickshire hills; the smells of newly-cut grass, of the wild flowers in the hedges and among the long grasses of the surrounding meadow, of the village bakery and village tavern. There will be bees later in the summer and crickets chirping along the boundaries, and there are always rooks, whose slow movements and rusty music are as quiet and mellow as the game on the village green.

For the Barwell ground is no more than a magnified village-green. The wicket must have given something of a shock to the players of both Leicester and Lancashire county sides. True, it was moderately smooth but it was slightly but definitely tilted down-hill to the west. And a perhaps over-enthusiastic local grounds man had decided to marl it. This is usually done by applying marl, watering and then rolling it in, in order to produce a stiffer, stronger, more rainproof pitch. But at Barwell the marl had been smeared in a sort of paste over the wicket and left to dry in a thin brown crust, through which grasses sprouting over-night began to peep and which, under a bright sun and the action of bat, ball and boots, was certain to crack and break away into flake and fragment.

And the outfield was more reminiscent of the contours of a sand-map than those of a billiard-table. There were hollows and hills and transverse valleys across the ground. Where now an ice-cream waggonette perambulated unceasingly a heavy tractor had recently churned round the eastern boundary and it had left an area of broken ground where a deep fieldsman might well turn an ankle or take a really heavy toss. Even during the course of the game cars drove processionally at funeral pace to the far corner where refreshments were off-loaded and stacked in an isolated marquee. Whenever this happened, the game by mutual consent was stopped – an action hardly in keeping with the original spirits of the place which would, no doubt, have welcomed the addition of a moving and perhaps hazard. At least one visiting professional remarked, with jaundiced suspicion, that the pitch would produce “nasty boomps”. He lived to experience the fulfilment of his prophecy, but although the quality of the batting may have suffered, there was no bowler on either side fast enough to take advantage of the dangerous ‘naturalness’ of the wicket.

The western side of the ground is flanked by an orchard and on the edges of this was one of the most curious score-boards ever seen. Its figures were put up by an unmethodical hand and for the higher ones, which were seldom and spasmodically changed; a rickety stepladder had to be propped laboriously and uncertainly into position. The result was that the lower numbers often fell with mellow clangour to the ground.

Just what its hieroglyphics meant it is hard to say, particularly as none of them ever seemed to bear any relation to the current score. But they were one with the general atmosphere of the place, with the patches of daisies on the pitch, the grasses thrusting the lightly white-washed creases, the canvas sight-screens and the cinder-path, which meandered half-way round the ground and came, like a life, or a man who sees a ghost, to a sudden dead stop. Barwell distilled a pleasantly rustic vagueness.

But this was a village ground with a difference. In the early stages of the game the atmosphere was placid, friendly, and reflective. For two days surprisingly large crowds assembled. They were out to enjoy themselves, to smoke their pipes along the boundary, eat ice-cream, gossip and watch the game appreciatively. But the weather was against them and the cricket they wanted to see. Long convoys of threatening black clouds came beating up from the south-west, dropped sudden, violent showers and dissipated to allow an incredulous sun to beam down on the wet green expanse of playing-fields. Then, just as the soggy ground was drying out nicely, the next storm would heave up with uncanny speed over the far hills, race across the rolling grass-land between and empty itself disobligingly on Barwell. Quite understandably the crowd grew impatient and vented its temper, “sullen as the climate”, as one foreign observer has said of us in the past, on helpless umpires and captains who were as anxious as they were to get on the game. Still, at the end of two days there was a fair chance of a finish. Lancashire made only 118 and then Leicester fared even worse with 85. On the second evening, Lancashire made 45 for 1 man out, and before lunch-time on the third day they carried this score to 144 and declared with only 2 wickets down. Leicester were left with 208 runs to win and plenty of time to make them. The declaration was sporting and well-timed and there was every chance of a good finish.

But it was when the Leicester second innings began that some evil spirit took hold of a crowd which, up till then, behaved as one might expect cricket-lovers to do. Berry and Howard opened Howard was soon out leg-before. A moment later a Lancashire bowler appealed for the same decision against Prentice. It must have been a near thing, yet quite a large section of the crowd, evidently sensing intimidation, broke into prolonged booing and cat-calling. For several overs, perversely bucolic wits on the boundary punctuated the play with periodic sarcastic appeals of “Huzzat” followed by bursts of raucous laughter.

Berry was Leicester’s hope and he batted stoutly, but shortly after lunch occurred the incident which resulted in the marring, for many of the audience, of much of the subsequent play. Berry turned a short ball on his body to leg. He played the shot a bit carelessly and Ikin, standing very close in at short-leg, dived forward and took a wonderful catch with his arms outstretched and his hands three or four inches from the ground. Probably only Ikin, on the Lancashire side, was capable of such uncanny anticipation and speed of hand and eye.

The fieldsman rose to his feet still holding the ball in both hands and turning with a suppliant attitude towards the umpire at the bowler’s end. Berry, who could not possibly have seen what had happened, very properly, waited for an appeal. Up went the umpire’s hand and out walked Berry without any sort of hesitation or suggestion of dissatisfaction.

Immediately there was uproar. People whistled piercingly, booed and jeered. There were laoud cries to the effect that Ikin had cheated and that someone had bribed the umpires. When the next over was bowled, ironic voices shouted “Give him out again, umpires!” after almost every ball. The rustic jesters appeared to forget that it was not, in fact, this particular umpire who had given Berry out. They vented their spleen with bad judgement as deplorable as their bad taste.

But worse was to follow. Ikin was still fielding right on top of the batsmen and a loose ball was passed straight at him. He had no chance of making a catch and the ball hit him very hard and painfully on the wrist. While he wrung his hand, some of the audience shouted “That’ll teach him! That’ll shift him of out the road!” Such barracking has the sadistic flavour of the all-in wrestling ring. It has nothing to do with cricket.

And just afterwards a small group of spectators picked on a member of the Lancashire team who was fielding on the boundary and made him the butt of their boorish sallies. He had had the misfortune to miss two catches on the previous afternoon. One would, on the whole, have expected the Leicester supporters to appreciate the fact that he had let off two of their batsmen and thus, in effect, made up their side to thirteen men. They should have been grateful to him for his clumsiness; instead they shouted, in his very ear, such remarks as, “Let’s see if you field as badly as you catch,” and while he was actually running for the ball, “You’ll miss it this time, too! You couldn’t catch it in your lap!”

Fielding opposite the most boisterous section of the crowd, Place made a remarkable attempt to catch Tomkin on the edge of the boundary. Running at top speed he got both hands to the hard-hit ball and swept it half-volley like Owen-Smith at his best in a Twickenham Rugby International. Then he checked in his stride and threw it back to the bowler. This is the player’s conventional way signifying ‘no catch’, but a crowd, ignorant of the etiquette as well as the spirit of the game, took immediate umbrage and pelted Place with verbal brickbats. When he turned to them and indicated that he had not claimed a catch, their language changed – for the worse, he merely laughed at them.

Pages taken from the book ‘Lancashire Hot Pot’ written by T C F Prittle, and published in 1949, about Lancashire County Cricket Club.