

Memories of cricket at the County Ground, Leyton from the 1920s to the 1990s

Waltham Forest Memories 11

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In 1999, as part of a lottery application for funding to restore the pavilion at the former Essex County Cricket ground at Leyton, Waltham Forest Council's Planning Department asked the Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop to undertake a series of interviews. They provide fascinating recollections of Essex's last years with the County Ground as its headquarters, and of the period from 1957 to 1977 when it was used as one of the festival grounds. This is only a brief summary of the full interviews. Tapes of the originals can be heard by appointment at Vestry House Museum, where in most cases there are also typed transcripts.

Watching Essex

Jim Hill wanted a job for life, so he joined the ground staff at Leyton during the First World War. He had not played cricket at his council school in Leyton but was coached by the Essex staff and "learned the coaching business" himself. "I took to it, I suppose, being a sport and now it's continued right...through my life. I wouldn't change it for the world." He played regularly as a wicket-keeper for the Club & Ground side [a team made up from amateur club members and professional ground staff] and once or twice for the Second Eleven, but was never quite good enough for the first team. His main job was to prepare the ground with the old groundsman [Walter "Bung" Brewer, who had started working at the County Ground in 1888 and sadly committed suicide in 1928] and to clear up after the game. He "had to look after [the amateurs'] gear, all pipe clayed in those days, pads, and boots, and the old buckskin..." When the game was on, he went round selling scorecards and photographs of the Essex team.

Mr Hill worked as a dressing room attendant and recalled the arrangements:

You can still see the two entrances down into the ground, the one on the left was the pros' - [they] used to come out there. The only time I come out the gentlemen's entrance was when there was nobody there... With the visitors, you see, the gents had adjoining changing rooms there and the players the other side the same. The pros [of the visiting team] would come out the same gate as the [Essex] pros when they was fielding and when they was coming out to bat. [The batting] usually opened up with two pros, the opening pair would be from the same [entrance], otherwise it was easy to walk down their own stairs and out their own gate. Once on the ground, I think they was all the same. Prejudice, that's all...

Only time you mixed with the gentlemen was when we done what you called the Estate games, all around Essex on a Sunday. That was a wonderful experience for me - there were several of us youngsters who were in that, you see. We used to catch a brake at the Bakers' Arms to take us, the old coachman blowing the horn... I had nearly all me teeth knocked out on one of those pitches.

All the gents used to play, there used to be possibly five or ten of us youngsters, always a golden sovereign if you got fifty runs, five wickets etcetera, and we always got that, one of us, and we used to share. That's what we got for going - we didn't get paid, we was learning all the time...getting to know these people, and of course you had enough food to last you a week... We weren't amateurs, we were paid a basic wage, if you went and done these it wasn't a County game but it was I suppose business, bringing these estate shires and all that...

Jim did some coaching at the Honourable Artillery Company in Finsbury - "six and a half acres that people don't know there's a ground behind those buildings" - and later worked there as groundsman for fifteen years.

Joe Powell recalled that on the High Road side of the ground there was a very high wall, over which you could only see if you went past on the tram. If you looked through the keyhole of a door in the wall, you could just see the pitch and the scoreboard opposite, so "we'd know what was going on quite early in life...four or five". Whenever Essex were playing at home, he and his friends would go round that way so they could see the score.

Mr Powell's father was a policeman who knew many of the Essex players. He was often on duty near the entrance and

only had to nod to the bloke who was on the door and that was it! I never paid [... except] when he wasn't there, and it would then be about half a crown a day. ... Because I was the policeman's son, [the ladies that used to go to cricket] would let me sit in the pavilion and they'd bring me strawberries and cherries and things like that, so I was well in favour...

My father was very fond of his drink. On the day he was retiring from the police force, he was on duty in the ground, everybody knew that he was retiring so you can imagine what happened. When he got home he was due to go up to the police station to sign off and he couldn't get there. My mother went and signed off for him. They [the police] were much more important in those days, they were respected rather like the doctors were...

Mr Powell senior often drank with the Essex players - who also enjoyed a drink - at the Three Blackbirds, an old pub close to the County Ground that is still there today.

Mr Powell vividly remembered some of the leading players of the 1920s, such as [the England and Essex professional C.A.G.] "Jack" Russell who lived in Buckland Road:

On one side of the road was a factory and on the other side...ordinary small houses. Just opposite his house was a lamppost in the pavement and we used to play cricket there, hoping that Russell would come out and see us. And [J.R.] Freeman who was the wicket keeper and opening bat...lived about ten doors away from me in Sedgwick Road. I used to go to Freeman's house, father would take me there. Percy Perrin of course was their leading amateur as a batsman, the only trouble was when I saw him he'd got very big, very fat, so fielding was a bit of a problem for him. Johnny Douglas was captain and he always had his hair parted in the middle and there was never one hair out of place.

Mr Powell usually went to matches on his own, and sat on the hard concrete steps with his own cushion as padding. Sometimes he met up with a lad whose father owned the firm that printed the scorecards, and they went round the ground selling scorecards for sixpence or even less. People came from all over Essex via the LNER [now Central Line] station and the Midland Road station, near which was Breeden's bat manufacturers. Crowds were larger when playing the more attractive teams such as Middlesex and Surrey, whose supporters often made the journey to Leyton. Mr Powell regularly saw the same faces but did not know them personally.

He saw the second day of the 1932 match when [Percy] Holmes and [Herbert] Sutcliffe of Yorkshire scored 555 runs [and broke the world record for the highest partnership by two batsmen].

Later as a councillor Mr Powell became Chair of the Youth Centre which was based at the ground. Essex CCC wrote to ask whether they could run a cricket week at Leyton and it was set up, although it took two years. It was his job to provide entertainment for the teams on the first day, the Saturday, so “from looking through the keyhole I’m now looking out of the keyhole, in charge of the match, as it were”.

John Bayliss was born within ten minutes of the ground, where as a boy in the 1920s he went with friends to see Leyton Amateur Football Club, although they were not ardent supporters: “if we supported anybody it would have been Leyton Orient”. He never went to the cricket but remembered that the ground was quite open and from outside he was able to see a scattering of spectators.

HG Russon first went to Leyton after the First World War and recalled that it was “a very poor ground, just sufficient and that was all...the stand was a very poor wooden shack and hard seats, [although] you could hire a cushion for sixpence or something”. He walked to the ground from West Ham and thought that most support was local although “you would have people come from Chelmsford, Braintree and places like that - I think once an Essex supporter, always an Essex supporter”.

Thomas Lesser started going around 1929, with his uncle and brother. He thought that the seats were “pretty comfortable”. He remembered one occasion when “two old ladies were doing a bit of knitting and someone hit a ball and it fell right in between them, and they were so engrossed in their knitting, they didn’t know the ball was coming for them and it hit the back of the seat”. He had heard a story that the ball was hit out of ground on to the roof of a passing tram and carried all the way to the Bakers Arms a mile away, although he was not there on that day.

Alec Billsborough first went to Leyton when aged about ten and saw great players such as Don Bradman [of Australia] and Jack Hobbs [of Surrey and England]. It was therefore “absolutely fabulous” when he was selected as a 13-year-old to play for Leyton Boys at the County Ground. The sports master at his school recommended him to Mr Charles from Farmer Road School, who ran the team. “It’s quite a thing to be chosen for the District Team,” he commented, “when you think of all the schools in Leyton and Leytonstone.” The only boy from Tom Hood School in the team, he was allowed home at 12 o’clock. Having changed into his cricket whites, he cycled to the ground. He usually played on Wanstead Flats, where the gravel pitches had to be swept before they could be used. Even then it could be dangerous because of “the odd stone that popped up”, so it was a “tremendous thrill” to play on grass.

He played several games for Leyton Boys in 1931 but was not selected the following year, probably because the school leaving age was fourteen and “they’d take on someone who was going to play for a couple of years”. He switched his allegiance to football but “packed it up in favour of girls, cycling and music”, becoming a professional musician after the Second World War.

Charles Bent-Marshall was about twelve when he sat through Yorkshire’s record 555 partnership. He did not often go to the cricket and it was supposed to be a special treat, but after he got home he told his parents what had happened and “started to cry because it was such a terrible performance” by Essex. He more often

went to the County Ground to watch the Leyton Amateur Football Club with his father, who was connected with the club. Later he played cricket against the Essex Club & Ground side that included professionals such as Ray Smith and Frank Rist. In the 1950s and 60s he, along with the show business impresarios Les and Lew Grade and Bernard Delfont, was a director of Leyton Orient FC when they rose from the old Third to the First Division and then went back down again.

Edgar "Johnny" Johnson went to Leyton "fairly often...with mates around the neighbourhood". His mother "loaded him up with a bottle of lemonade and a few sandwiches", and he walked to the ground from his home in Raglan Road Walthamstow. He remembered that "the Pavilion was quite ornate...like a palace - it was all those tiers". Down one side of the ground was "this funny little stand...like...you'd see at a local football club, just about two or three rows of seats and felted sort of flat roof". He went there only when it rained, and preferred "getting sunburnt and burnt to cinders". He and his friends sat on two very long concrete steps opposite the pavilion. Behind them were the practice nets where some of the players came to loosen up, so "you were actually very proud to get quite close to some of the professional cricketers - quite something".

Near to where the boys sat was

...this wonderful old printing machine that printed scorecards... Every time a wicket fell they would...print a new batch, and a chap would wander round the ground calling out the latest scorecard... It would clank and clank away in the background all the time you were watching the cricket...When you went in you bought the latest one you possibly could, it was all printed up for you, but you would go on filling up caught by so and so, bowled by so and so and any other details you were clever enough to put down...

Mr Johnson said that his great-uncle had the job of opening the gate for the amateurs to go out on to the ground, although "I don't think that anyone opened a gate for [the professionals], no!" His great-uncle introduced him to cricket and encouraged the boys to bowl at him in a disused laundry that had apparently been a chapel on the old Barclay Estate in Leyton. He had one leg shorter than the other so walked on two sticks, but "would hit this ball with his stick...like nobody's business, virtually on one leg..." Great-uncle brought home a wonderful full size bat with a real sprung handle and a rounded rather than v-shaped back that "one of the cricketers must have thrown...out, I suppose".

One of Mr Johnson's aunts was a barmaid at the Three Blackbirds, "commonly just called the Blackbirds". She knew the cricketers very well through the pub, and because she looked after the players' dining room in the Pavilion: "she would have been a young woman...and probably the young cricketers would have been a bit lively with her". He thought that she was more likely to have served the professionals than the amateurs, although he did not know the exact eating arrangements.

Mr Johnson's heroes were Jack O'Connor, "a batsman to be reckoned with", and Morris Nichols, "a wonderful fast bowler". The thing he particularly remembered about Nichols was "the size of his feet...bigger than anyone else - when he padded down you really heard him coming!" [H.D.] "Hopper" Read was "probably so called because he did a little hop before he delivered the ball - he was another huge tall

man with large feet and he used to pound down...” He recalled that Charles Bray who captained the side sometimes was an amateur who became a well-known cricket writer, and that later [T.N.] Pearce and [D.R.] Wilcox were the joint captains.

Joe Hipkin was a “left handed slow bowler who used to like his alcohol rather too much”. Jimmy Cutmore “must have fallen out with the authorities...For some reason or other he didn’t suit the Essex pattern, though he scored a lot of runs for Essex during his time there, they suddenly parted company with him...” [For a young boy Mr Johnson had a remarkable understanding of what was happening both on and off the field. Club minutes show that the committee, made up mostly of former amateur players, dismissed both Hipkin and Cutmore - as much for relatively minor breaches of discipline as for loss of form.] After the Second World War Mr Johnson took up hockey and met Cutmore who was playing for Brentwood and “I had the privilege of playing the week he was 65 and also again in the week he was 70...”

Donald Faulkner recalled that “after fourteen, you had to pay full fare on the buses...so you had to wear your cap to show you were a schoolboy [but] when you got into the ground you stuffed it in your pocket”. There were turnstiles where spectators paid the admission fee, which he thought for boys was probably 6d. During the lunch and tea intervals the boys enjoyed playing “knock-a-ball” on the hallowed turf of the County Ground, a tradition which continues at Essex’s festival grounds but not at the Chelmsford headquarters. Many of them kept the score in their own books. They queued up to get the autographs of the Essex and other players, most of whom “were very good...don’t forget it was us that were their paying customers..!” Mr Faulkner also had heard the story about the six being hit on to the tram roof and added that the batsman was the great Kent and England left-handed Frank Woolley, but he was not there either. [Whereas several of the interviewees saw the famous 555 partnership, none actually saw the incident with the ball landing on the roof of the tram, so it seems that this lovely story may alas be an urban myth.]

Dave Hardy said that after the Second World War the ground was used for school sports days. As a schoolboy he sometimes played cricket there and changed in the Pavilion, although “it wasn’t all that sophisticated”, some boys wearing whites and some coloured clothing. He still has a bat presented to his brother as the best schoolboy batsman of 1960, signed by the South African and Essex teams. The wall next to the High Road had “concrete stands...just over two feet high, more or less steps that you sat on and watched the cricket”. If you had any sense you took cushions because “it was a bit cold to your rear end!”

Lionel Saddler, who lived at the ground when working as deputy warden for the Essex County Council Youth Service, remembered when it was used for festival games. A large central room in the pavilion provided a splendid vantage point for VIPs such as local dignitaries, cricket selectors and business people putting money into Essex cricket. Refreshments were an essential element of the hospitality and were sent up from the canteen on a dumb waiter. Television commentary was done from the room next door, and at one of the last matches the commentator described the opposite end of the ground as the toilet end, so Mr Saddler told him that it was usually known by the rather more dignified name of the bowling green end. The visiting team’s dressing room was larger than the Essex one, so that the players could use it as a sort of hospitality room for their families. There was another small room where the umpires could change and have their refreshments, and “they would

have had someone liaising with them for time and so forth for getting back on the pitch during their break times". There was no permanent seating for spectators, so Essex arranged for a firm called Malcolm's of Colchester to bring in facilities that included marquees, refreshments, and six rows of chairs around the boundary.

After Essex left Leyton for the second time, Waltham Forest Council decided to open up the ground by replacing the old eight-foot high wall along the High Road with railings so that people could see in. Mr Saddler advised them to ensure that the palings were no wider than a cricket ball [maximum nine inches circumference, roughly 2¾ inches wide], but "in their wisdom" the council took no notice and made them four-and-a-half inches apart. There were one or two bad accidents when the ball went through and hit traffic, so "they had to come along and put a square mesh on the inside which cost a lot more than had they put a few more palings in each section of the railing".

Jean Brown grew up in Leyton and lived there until the 1980s. She went with her then boyfriend, later her husband, to see Essex when they first returned to the old County Ground:

It really did bring Leyton on the map, and people used to come from a long, long way... It was really hallowed land...very, very special...Everybody dressed very smartly. It was lovely - white hats and very proper. People clapped very gently, there was no shouting or anything like there is now...You could get cups of tea, and I remember people walking round with pork pies on trays that you could buy... If you could imagine the whole of that wall to there, about 15 deep, and probably a few at the end, it was absolutely packed...

She particularly remembered "the dignitaries and councillors [...and] very splendid ladies in big hats" sitting in the pavilion.

Ken Hardwick's first contact with Leyton was as a Yorkshire schoolboy in 1932, when he was "wildly excited" by news of his county's 555 partnership against Essex. Later he moved to London and often went to Leyton with his sons, David and Peter. The cricket week was usually in August, consisting of two three-day county games and on the Sunday "something special - Lords Taverners or Old England or whoever". It was exciting because "here we are, we've got a cricket match on the doorstep", and one year the family went for all seven days. Admission charges cannot have been very high, otherwise they could not have gone every day. The ground was often pretty full, and the travelling scoreboard and the makeshift wooden stands made for a good atmosphere. Coming from Yorkshire where "you never put a foot on the ground", Mr Hardwick was particularly impressed that the crowd was allowed on to the ground in the intervals between play: "I thought that was great, the children behaved well. They knew how to respect the square...and they just enjoyed playing the cricket."

Like many boys, Peter Hardwick learned to score and still has his book for the Worcestershire match in 1961, when he was only ten. He saw the match right through but Essex lost by five wickets despite a typically dogged 16 by Trevor Bailey, which Peter still remembers because they were made all in singles, "one and one and one". Doug Insole, who attended Sir George Monoux Grammar School at Walthamstow, was also playing and "...the boys went to the Monoux School so there is this feeling about it."

Mr Hardwick remembered Essex's last years at Leyton and confirmed their reputation as being an entertaining team to watch:

They were a good friendly team and later on when [Keith] Fletcher became captain there was a lot of bonhomie among the players. They played cricket and they played seriously to win, but it wasn't deadly serious so that it was flat, it was always fun, and you'd suddenly find the ball flying at you and you'd have to catch it. I've got good recollections of fun and good cricket...

When Peter Stockbridge was a boy in the 1950s he "found cricket totally boring", but his father dragged him along to Leyton several times a season unless he went out fishing before his father woke up. He was "an East End tyke" who did not get on with the "county types...in white all talking in posh voices" who came in from outside the area. He got bored so found other boys of his own age who could make nuisances of themselves: "If the ball ever went out of bounds and came over near us, it suddenly got lost - it's surprising how many people it takes to find a ball when a little kid of ten has hidden it...where adults don't tend to look." Peter remembered that the pavilion was very impressive:

...All these chaps in their tiffers, their posh hats, their waistcoats and all the rest of it, all standing their in their suits - mutter, mutter, mumble in their posh voices. And myself and some of the other kids used to get ourselves into trouble, like sneaking up behind them and tying their shoelaces together, and stuff like that. We got caught a few times but it didn't matter, it was a laugh...

A woman came round selling ice creams but he seldom got one because his father told him "If you don't behave you won't get an ice cream", and that was it".

Later Mr Stockbridge found that cricket was "a little bit more lively" so he enjoyed it a lot more. He thought that the pavilion was part of our heritage and so

should get Lottery money to restore it to its original glory. There's a lot of kids round here. If you put a cricket bat in their hand, particularly now there's a large Asian population... You look at India or Sri Lanka, their cricket teams are blinding, and they take cricket to heart and a lot of the kids round here do, but if you give them somewhere like this to play, they play...their hearts out because they're playing on a proper pitch, it's not like some little back alley somewhere with the stumps chalked on the wall. I reckon some of tomorrow's cricketers could come from areas like this provided you give them the facilities.

In the 1930s George Love went to the County Ground for school sports days and knew "Bung" Brewer the groundsman, who would "get drunk and sleep underneath the cover on the field". In his day they had no motor mowers, but cut the field with a mower and a pony. Little did George Love know that one day he would follow in Brewer's footsteps as groundsman.

After the Second World War Mr Love went to Bangham's, the Walthamstow paper firm, where he worked for 25 years until they closed in 1971 or 2. He "didn't want to be inside in a factory any more", so he applied for a job with Waltham Forest Council. He first worked as a school caretaker and one day the goalposts at the County Ground fell down so he was asked to go and fix them. He was helpful on that occasion so then, aged 55, he was offered the vacant job of groundsman at the County Ground. His father had talked about cricket at Leyton, although Mr Love did

not remember him going there because “in those days people didn’t have the money, that was the trouble”. Sadly Mr Love senior died before George was appointed: “If only he had been alive, to know that I was groundsman - makes you a bit choked really... He used to say...down the County Ground...and when you finally get to go there you think, marvellous, marvellous.”

Mr Love’s first year was 1973 when “we had a marvellous summer and... everything fell into place... Our festival went on, and we had crowds, and it was a beautiful turnout...” The umpires and captains had to make a report on the wicket and “if there’s any complaint...you have to go up to Lords before the Board”. Far from having any complaints, “they must have had a good report, because the next I knew, I’d got an invite to Lords to go up there, to receive the award”. The week brought in £13,000 for Keith Fletcher [it was his benefit year] and a profit of £17,720 for the club. Lionel Saddler said that Mr Love would also have won the award the following year but two days of the festival were rained off. Paying tribute to his hard work, the Waltham Forest Guardian reported that “Love’s labour is by no means lost”.

After his first season, council officials asked Mr Love to go to evening classes at Capel Manor in Enfield so “I’d already won the award, and then I went and got the qualifications - I done it back to front!” He passed his City & Guilds exam and was chatting to his teacher and the college principal at the certificate presentation when for the first time he told them about his award for the wicket at Leyton and they were most surprised.

When he first started, Mr Love was given valuable advice by Harry Brind, who was then the Essex groundsman at Chelmsford, later groundsman at The Oval and finally the MCC’s Inspector of Wickets. The wicket should be as hard and even as possible so that the ball bounces off predictably and gives batsmen and bowlers an equal chance. Essex’s splendid left-arm seam bowler John Lever put his foot in the same place every time he bowled and by the end of the day his spikes had torn a hole in the ground. Brind advised Mr Love to mix up a special loam and hammer it into the spot, so that by the morning it was like dried clay and the hole was filled up. Once Lever and a few others came out to have a knock-up before the start of play and

he whacked the ball and I’m on the heavy roller and the ball come under the roller and I couldn’t stop it in time. It pressed the ball three-quarters of the way into the wicket but luckily it was out of the line of play and we was able to get a screwdriver and lever it out of the pitch and fill the hole in...

Certain wickets favoured certain types of bowling. If they were “a bit loose” they would suit the Essex off-spinner David Acfield, because the ball would spin and go off as it touched the ground. By chance outside a pub in Essex Mr Love met Acfield, who asked him what the wicket was like and jokingly asked him to “rough it up a bit”. “Rough it up a bit! You can’t dare do that,” laughed Mr Love. “The umpires inspect before a match... You mustn’t do anything, daren’t water or anything - they would say it was unplayable if it was really bad.”

On another occasion a sudden storm blew up and the ground staff could not get the covers on quickly enough.

The wind lifted the cover up and I was sitting on one end...They were saying to me "Let go! Let go!" and I wouldn't let go and it took me across the field. It was up in the air like that one end and dragging me along. My wife had to come home and get a change of clothes 'cos I was soaked. And then it came out sunshine...and it was water everywhere...and we was trying to mop up with the... blanket roller like a sponge, and it soaks the water up and you drain it away. I remember [...the] umpire came up, he put his arm on me shoulder, he said to me, "Cocksparrer, you're fighting a losing battle!"

[Mr Love gave a detailed description of his methods which is too long for transcription here, but would be of great value to anyone with a specialist interest in the subject.]

Playing for Essex

The Waltham Forest Oral History Society was fortunate in being able to interview two former cricketers who in their different ways made immeasurable contributions to Essex cricket and to the entertainment provided at Leyton.

Frank Rist was a professional who joined the ground staff aged eighteen in 1932. Later as Essex's chief coach he helped to bring on some of the young cricketers who became the backbone of the all-conquering Essex team of the 1980s. He was one of the great unsung heroes of Essex cricket. The leading historian of Essex cricket, David Lemmon, wrote of him:

Few people outside Essex would be able to recognise the worth of Frank Rist to the county. He joined Essex in 1932, made his debut in 1934 and played his last game...in 1953. During his long association with the county he appeared in only 65 matches... [yet] he was a cricketer whose worth could never be gauged by statistics... After World War Two...he was mainly concerned with the welfare and development of young players and simply played himself when required. In 1949 he became the county's official coach, and, in the difficult financial period in the late 60s, he ran the 2nd XI and coached without receipt of any salary. The county's debt to him is incalculable...

Though he was not always treated as well as he might have been, he comes over in his interview as a cheerful and uncomplaining man who appreciated the opportunity to have a long and happy association with the game that he loved.

As a boy Frank Rist "always wanted to play football and cricket". His father was a CID inspector who ran the station team, for which Frank played. When he left school aged fourteen he worked for a rubber company at Hackney Wick.

The Guv'nor called me in his office, I thought I'm in trouble here and he asked me if I'd go down and play cricket for his firm...against Welwyn Garden City. We won the game...and he sent his chauffeur to pick me up and bring me back home and...on the Monday he called me in his office and said "I was very pleased with what you done"...He gave me a couple of pound for playing which was more than I got in a month and he said, "I know you're very interested in becoming a cricketer and a footballer. Now while you're here you can have as much time off as you like to play." Well, I was made, wasn't I?

He had watched the Essex and England players Jack O'Connor and Stan Nichols at Leyton, and he had coaching lessons from them. Knowing that he wanted to become a professional cricketer, they recommended that he came on to the staff. Working under "Bung" Brewer's son Dick, he did all sorts of jobs around the ground. They included mowing the outfield on a motor-mower, cutting and rolling the pitch, and covering the ends of it when it rained. He recalled that Brewer was the "sort of chap, if there's a drop of rain, about three o'clock in the morning, he'd get up and roll the pitch or do something, you know, he was a complete nutter..."

He also played for the Club & Ground XI and remembered his last game at Leyton, when he scored a hundred against Buckhurst Hill:

These two policemen were standing watching me and they knew me and I think I hit the ball out the ground about six times and they scarpered, because they saw me later and said "Well, we thought you were going to injure someone so we left you to it..."

On the second day of Yorkshire's 555 partnership, his job was to answer the phone in the Pavilion to all the people ringing to ask whether the record had been broken. The atmosphere was "terrific". Matches were regularly written up in the national press:

We had the scoreboard, as you came in the ground it was on the far side of the ground...Then you used to have a tent more or less attached to it, and the scorer, they was altogether there, they could check the score and they could go and have a talk with the scorers...

Mr Rist said that on the whole the Pavilion compared well with others he remembered, although facilities were not as good as at the test match grounds. Amateurs and professionals dined separately. The visitors' dressing-room was shared by their amateurs and professionals, but the Essex pros had "a little place that was sort of attached to the Pavilion" while the amateurs had their own dressing-room. "We were treated like pros and they were treated like amateurs [but] we got on all right on the field, obviously." He particularly remembered Ken Farnes, Hopper Read and LG Crawley. The committee were mostly retired amateurs, although they did not always turn up at matches. He accepted the situation because "It was all we knew, wasn't it?" He thought that the amateurs were wealthy and could afford the time to play a game that could take three days or at least two - "depends how they batted and bowled". After the war, they "got paid [and] weren't amateurs, they were pros" because they claimed expenses such as petrol.

Mr Rist was paid £4 a week in summer and £3 in winter, with an extra £2 if he played in the first team. In winter he played soccer, initially for Clapton Orient but then with Charlton Athletic, for whom he was the famous manager Jimmy Seed's first signing. [With typical modesty, he did not mention that he was their centre-half when they made their unprecedented rise straight from the old Third Division to the First in successive seasons.] He started at £4 which when he got into the first team went up to £8, with £6 in winter. Essex "were not bothered" about his playing football, because the cricket and football seasons did not overlap and many men played both sports at first-class level. Denis Compton, who was "probably the best cricketer I've ever seen", played cricket for Middlesex and football for the Arsenal, as did his older brother, Les. Football was "more beneficial financially" but the

cricketers thought they also were well paid, even though they had to pay for their own bats, pads and other gear.

The Essex cricketers bought their equipment from Breeden's, the bat manufacturers who had a shop under an arch at Leyton Midland Road station. Most equipment has changed little since their time, although "we had great big heavy [boots], leather things, but now they're like slippers what they play in". When he first started playing he would have had to pay two guineas for a top price bat, but later he was sponsored and given all his gear by Gray Nicholls, a big firm manufacturing sports goods, although he did not have to wear their logo.

If players were sick or injured they got their basic pay but no match money, although "no one ever seemed to get sick or injured in my day...not like they are now". There was not as much protective gear as in the modern game and it would perhaps have prevented the odd injury. Mr Rist never got hurt on the field, perhaps because he was "a big lad" who had "always played with big fellows like policemen".

When Essex played at Leyton Mr Rist was in digs close to the ground at Francis Road, where his father's police station was. He thought that the players took the change to a more nomadic existence in their stride. The younger players stayed singly in various digs; for a while he lodged in Chelmsford where his landlady was the wife of a former Essex cricketer.

He thought that Essex left Leyton to reduce overheads and because of lack of support there. Crowds improved when the club went nomadic because "we spread ourselves out so that members didn't always have to travel so far". The improvements to the new headquarters at Chelmsford had made it into "a very nice ground now".

During the war he was stationed in Blackpool where he played League cricket and came up against older class attitudes. Younger cricketers had great respect for capped professionals - "you almost stood to attention, you know". He was therefore greatly honoured to play against the great England and Nottinghamshire fast bowler Harold Larwood [who, as a professional of the old school, would have thought that only amateurs should be addressed as Mr].

He was coming down the steps before the game and I went after him and said, "Hello Mr Larwood". He said, "My name is Harold, not Mr Larwood. Remember that, OK?" ... The ground was packed...I went in first, scored a hundred, mind you he wasn't the bowler that he was in his prime... I can always remember our captain, he was a wing commander, playing for Somerset. You stood to attention when you spoke to him. They suggested that I should have a collection, 'cos professionals in those days had collections in the league, and the captain said no, he's a service player, he's not entitled to a collection. I could have done very well...

After the Second World War he joined a sports outfitters in Walthamstow that was owned by his father-in-law, Arthur Sedgwick. Essex asked him "to become coach, which was an unpaid job, they couldn't afford the money, but I was in a position where I could have what time I liked off, and all they did was pay for me petrol..." He also had a benefit that raised just over a thousand pounds which was "quite good". His work with Sedgwicks ensured that he was never on the dole. After retiring, some of his colleagues "got decent jobs, but some of them didn't", although he couldn't

remember any specific cases. He kept in touch with some of his former footballing colleagues who became managers and then “came in the shop and bought their gear”.

As supporter, cricketer, captain, vice-chairman, chairman and president, Doug Insole has been involved with Essex cricket for seventy years. According to Lemmon,

Doug Insole’s record as a player put him among the very greatest of Essex cricketers. When one adds his contribution as captain and chairman of the county club he becomes a giant among men... His captaincy was inspiring, ever looking to win, never lacking enthusiasm... He was chairman of the county from 1976 to 1978 and again from 1984 to 1993...What Essex County Cricket Club has achieved since 1979 owes a tremendous amount to Doug Insole. In a life marked by personal tragedies, he has never failed to give his all to the club and to the game as a whole... He was an England selector for nine years, chairman of the Test and County Cricket Board for three, and an MCC committee member from 1956 to 1980. He also managed two England sides to Australia, and he has remained a powerful voice in English cricket. He was, rightly, appointed CBE for his services to the game.

He clearly takes a great pride in Essex’s achievements on and off the field, while not boasting about his own significant role in them.

His father was a “cricket nut” who named him after the England and Essex cricket captain John Douglas. As a seven-year-old he sat on the hard concrete seats at Leyton, where he vividly remembered a brilliant piece of cricket involving Essex’s Jack O’Connor and Patsy Hendren of Middlesex.

Much later as an England selector he got to know Herbert Sutcliffe, who shared in the Yorkshire 555 partnership. Sutcliffe told him that it was a marvellous wicket, and he “thought they could have batted for ever if they had wanted to because it was so good”. Mr Insole reckoned that one reason why the pitch was so good was that “Bung” Brewer used a cow dung mix to quieten it down.

He thought that Essex had moved away from Leyton because “there wasn’t the sort of interest from the County [or] the surrounding population of Leyton”. The area was nevertheless “a hotbed of sporting talent” that provided many of Essex’s best players, “which is surprising because there isn’t much cricket played in that inner London bit”. In his day children played informally and in school where staff were willing to give time to whatever was necessary. Schools played less cricket than they used to but Essex were going back into them because “there’s an enormous reservoir of potential talent there if only you can find it”.

Mr Insole said that Essex

were the first county to really do anything commercial. It’s amazing, looking back, to think how uncommercial it was. We, before the War, had sponsors... who paid for lunch...and tea for the team... And in exchange for that...the chairman of the company ...came along and the two captains sat with him at lunch... [The sponsors] were nearly always local... Shopkeepers, hoteliers or something used to stick up the money... When we were extremely badly off and

on the verge of going under, about thirty years ago, we had a situation where a couple of the players' wages were paid by local sponsors.

He pointed out that, far from being a "fuddy-duddy sort of game", cricket has pioneered innovations such as Sunday play and commercial sponsorship of competitions. Essex were at the forefront of some of these changes. The first game broadcast on radio was Essex v New Zealand at Leyton in 1927, and

The first County match ever televised was at Ilford in 1950... We pushed very hard [and] were selected to do it...

We had the first Sunday of a championship match at Ilford. You weren't allowed to pay to go in to see sport on the Sabbath so...we put buckets on the turnstile and it was just unbelievable how mean people are...We got...about fourpence per spectator for our trouble and so we thought that's no good, we can't do that again. So we...simply made everyone members and...charged two bob or something to become a member for the day.

Mr Insole was club captain from 1950 to 1960 and was heavily involved in the decision to return to Leyton in 1957:

We were seeing a big revival of interest in cricket around this part of the world... so we decided we'd try Leyton again. And we had to get the local authority to get the ground into shape. I had a lot of meetings with the Town Clerk [and] eventually it was agreed that they would spend the money to get the square right. We brought all the tack in, all the seats and the boundary boards and the scoreboard and everything, and we formed a Festival Committee here, the Chairman of which was ...Arthur Sedgwick... We got all sorts of people, with quite well known local names at the time...

One of my father's exercises was to collect Green Shield stamps from members. He'd put sacks up at the ground...and he did a deal with whoever ran the scheme that he'd get money rather than goods. And so you'd pay one player's wages for a year by sending in millions of Green Shield stamps...

...The first game was a match against Middlesex which was the benefit match for our opening batsman...Dickie Dodds, who was a terrific entertainer...It was amazing, there were people lining up there at eight o'clock in the morning... It so happened that we won the match about an hour from the end of the scheduled time, and the gates were very good, Dickie Dodds giving all the proceeds to Moral Rearmament... Denis Compton... scored his last century in first-class cricket... [He] was a player that very few opposition players begrudged his runs to. He was a very popular man but he was a magnificently entertaining player... When he scored a century and we won the match, that was the ideal situation... It got off to a great start and for many years it went very well there.

The best match he played in at Leyton was "a tie with Gloucestershire which finished...almost with the last scheduled ball of the match". [With typical modesty, he omitted to mention that he scored 177 not out and 90 - almost half of Essex's runs in the game.]

One of the things about Leyton was you used to get very good third day gates. People tended...not [to] bother about the third day because it might be dull, it might be over. If you were taking time off work you'd take the first two days. But

Leyton for some reason was an exception, there was a big crowd there and they all went bananas...

Mr Insole explained that

I was only ever an amateur, so cricket was a hobby for me. I came down from university and got a job with a building organisation...called George Wimpey, and they asked me if I would like to play cricket for a few years, mainly because I'd done fairly well for Essex... And I said "Are you going to pay me?" and they said yes so I said "Well OK, yes." A year or two turned into...eleven years... They were always the governor. If they wanted me in, I had to go in. It happened twice in eleven years...

There were a lot of amateurs in those days... Even when I was skipper, we had five... The amateurs of course played for nothing except they stayed in hotels and that cost a few bob. Essex pre-war nearly always had three or four amateurs and a lot of the best cricketers in Essex's history were amateurs... Trevor Bailey was a great mate of mine, still is. He was Assistant Secretary and then Secretary, but playing the whole time and also going on tour playing for England a lot... There was a lot of people who had jobs and took a month off, or six weeks or whatever, to play cricket, either in their holidays or through unpaid leave. Schoolmasters...DR Wilcox...Ken Farnes...and when I was playing we had two or three.

He claimed that abolition in 1962 of the distinction between amateurs and professionals was another first for cricket and for Essex.

...It wasn't abolished in football for fifteen years after that and...in rugger until about three years ago. It became basically an untenable distinction. A lot of people regretted it because when you had an amateur captain he was totally independent of everybody, he wasn't being paid by the club, he could tell them to get stuffed if that's what he wanted, and there was a greater degree of independence about the place...It was abolished when the Essex Chairman, Sir Hubert Ashton, was also President of MCC who were then running the game... because there were a lot of people who were pseudo-amateurs...

Class distinction between amateurs and professionals became "much less prevalent in Essex than anywhere else" once the club left Leyton with its separate dressing-rooms.

If you ever went to Brentwood, the pavilion's about ten by eight so everybody chucked everything into the same room, about three blokes could change at a time. There was no question of any distinction, you all mucked in and that was that. So from that point of view it went out of the window at Essex very early but in other counties it lingered...well into my playing career. The amateurs used to stay in a separate hotel and so forth...it just depended on the sort of hierarchical situation back home.

I well remember we had an amateur playing for us in the 50s called Roy Ralph, an Ilford man, he was a tailor in Stratford, and he played as an amateur for a year, and he did pretty well. And at the end of the season he came to me and said "Skipper, do you think the club would take me on the professional staff?" and I said "I'm sure they would, Ralphie, any particular reason?" "Well," he said,

“there doesn’t seem to be any advantage to being an amateur in this side.” I took that as being something of a compliment, he felt that he wasn’t getting any different treatment from anyone else which I hope was right... We had some very egalitarian blokes running the side. Tom Pearce who was my predecessor was a simply marvellous bloke that everybody liked very much, he often liked the pros much better than he liked the amateurs...

He explained that for 102 years Essex did not win anything, mainly because cricket was more developed in the counties that had big headquarters grounds with large staffs and big populations. And

Through the time that I was playing the championships were won by very good spin bowlers. The wickets weren’t covered, the rain came down, the wickets got wet, then the spin bowlers made the ball talk... We had none, and couldn’t find any, not from within Essex. Qualification for counties was very much from within county boundaries, and you found your own players and held on to them. If somebody was born in Essex and you offered them a contract, then they couldn’t go anywhere else without qualifying for that other county and that meant they had to go and live there for two years...

Essex’s fortunes began to turn round when they acquired their own headquarters ground at Chelmsford. They played on eight different grounds and

You never knew what you were going to find there by way of a wicket, never had any nets to practice in because these grounds didn’t have any. In about ’66, ’67 we were in danger of going under because the performances weren’t good, the crowds weren’t turning up. The costs were escalating because of the cost of setting up all these grounds so we cut our staff down to twelve [rather than the norm of at least eighteen] which in modern terms is ridiculous.

At that time by a great piece of good fortune we had the opportunity of buying the Chelmsford ground for a very small sum of money... Warwickshire lent us the money and then we had a headquarters and that really transformed the club’s fortunes. Coincidentally we started to get some very good young players coming in and they suddenly gelled and six or seven of them turned out to be England players. We also had a couple of good overseas players, partly by luck, partly by judgment - mostly by judgment I hope.

We suddenly found ourselves building a very good side indeed, so in 1979 we managed to crack it and won our first Championship and at the same time one or two cup competitions. And from then on we’ve been the most successful county in the country...

This summary was written in 2004 by David Pracy, Local Studies Librarian at Vestry House Museum, who is researching the social and economic history of Essex County Cricket Club. He would welcome comments and further information at the museum, at d_pracy@hotmail.com or 16 Shooters Drive, Nazeing, Essex, EN9 2QD.