

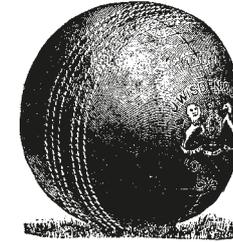
THE HAMBLEDON CLUB



Although historical evidence suggests that the game was first played in the Weald around Kent and Sussex, it is the Hambledon Club of Hampshire that is generally perceived as cricket's spiritual home. Founded around 1767, Hambledon was the leading club in England for some 30 years, regularly drawing crowds of 20,000 to its matches on Broad Halfpenny Down. An indication of its might was that in 1777 Hambledon scored 403 against All England. Key players included the captain Richard Nyren, bowler David Harris, and master batsman John Small, reputedly the first man to abandon the old curved bat in favour of a straight blade. Hambledon's influence was ended by the formation of the Marylebone Cricket Club, which attracted major players to London.

*Here lies, bowl'd out by Death's unerring ball,
A cricketer renowned, by name John Small;
But though his name was small, yet great was his fame,
For nobly did he play the 'noble game'.
His life was like his innings – long and good;
Full ninety summers had Death withstood,
At length the ninetieth winter came – when (Fate
Not leaving him one solitary mate)
This last of Hambledonians, old John Small,
Gave up his bat and ball – his leather, wax and all.*

– PIERCE EGAN



BOWLING CHANGES

By the start of the nineteenth century the finest batsmen had mastered under-arm bowling. Lord Frederick Beauclerk, whose confidence was such that he used to hang his gold watch from the bails, averaged 61 in 1803. It was time for the country's bowlers to try something new. Around 1790 Hambledon's Thomas Walker had attempted to bowl round-arm (his bowling arm level with his shoulder) but had been verbally abused for doing so and quickly returned to more conventional methods. Over in Kent John Willes was enjoying batting practice with his sister Christina in a barn near their Canterbury home. Struggling to deliver the ball under-arm owing to the voluminous skirt she was wearing, she instead began bowling round-arm to him. Willes immediately recognized the possibilities and in 1807 he employed round-arm while bowling for Kent against All England. But the new action was not recognized officially and, in 1822, when Willes bowled round-arm at the haughty Beauclerk in an MCC v Kent match, his Lordship protested against the 'illegal' bowling. Willes is reported to have thrown down the ball in disgust, ridden out of Lord's and never played in a first-class game again. Another Kent amateur, George Knight, took up Willes's crusade and in 1835 the law was finally amended to allow the bowler's hand to be raised as high as the shoulder.