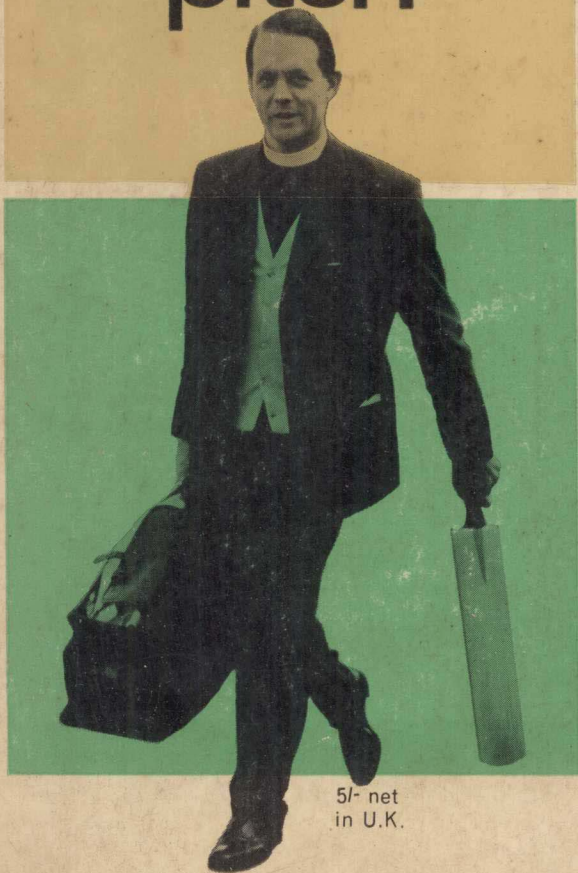




HODDER AND STOUGHTON

David Sheppard

parson's pitch



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PARSON'S PITCH

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BY

DAVID SHEPPARD

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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To my wife Grace
the best partner in my life

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CHAPTER I

BOYS ON THE PITCH

I WAS the umpire standing at square-leg when I noticed a large pair of shoes, unoccupied, standing in the gully. Their owner stood beside them in his socks. He was bowling at the other end, and had obviously taken his shoes off to give his feet a rest. England's great fast bowler Brian Statham often has a conversation with his feet when they complain of too much hard work, but he can't rest them on the field like this in a Test match.

The game in which I was umpire was in West Ham Park and it was between our team of older boys from the Mayflower Family Centre and another nearby club in the East End of London. The shoes that were standing in the gully were of the pointed variety. Our team's clothing is usually in the up-to-date fashion, but I find it very difficult to persuade them to wear white flannels—particularly at home where such unusual dress might attract some colourful comment from their mates. But pointed shoes, drainpipe trousers, braces, cloth caps and all, our team enjoy themselves, bowl pretty well and usually field magnificently. Batting presents more difficult problems as most of our matches are played on a pitch with enough bumps in it to mean that after one ball has hit you on the boot the next may fly past your ear. This means that most of our matches are finished in an afternoon with each side totalling no more than 60–100 runs.

In Australia boys who play their cricket in the parks play on concrete pitches, where at least the ball comes through at a regular height. This means that the batsman can learn to play shots with confidence. English cricketers are inclined to say that even a bad grass wicket is better than a concrete wicket; we have a lot of fun in this sort of cricket but it is almost impossible for a boy playing in such conditions to get very far in the game, while a number of Australian park cricketers have climbed to the first-class game.

We live in a pleasant flat in the Mayflower Family Centre

where I am the warden. Our activities range from a Nursery School to a Grandfathers' club and they take me into many homes. Some of these are in the crowded old streets of terraced houses which were built a hundred years ago to house men who worked in the nearby Royal Docks and in the great factories which sprang up beside them. For years we have walked across the debris of the bombed sites which Hitler caused. They made a great playground for children. Here we might pass a group experimenting with fire; here some would be building a ramshackle house; there others would be finishing off the wreck of an old car dumped there a night or two before. Now the debris and the old streets are fast disappearing and often my visits take me into fine new flats or maisonettes which have been built since the war.

Our district is not particularly keen about cricket, though I know a number of great enthusiasts. But of course there is street cricket as there is in every country where the game is played. I joined in a game recently in the street in Sydney where we lived for some months after the 1962-63 tour of Australia. Some of the local rules were different. Instead of three stumps we had a schoolboy's case, and I had to learn to say 'Strike' if I did not want to risk a second run. In Sussex we always said 'Walking' in that situation, when there was only one batsman at a time. During a game in our Sydney street, a small boy came over to me and asked, "Do you have to say 'strike' when you're playing in a Test match?" But some parts of these games are the same anywhere in the world. I overheard this conversation when I was sitting at home in Sydney preparing a talk:

"You're not going to bat at all."

"Well I don't want to bat."

"Well anyway you're not going to."

Often the games we played as boys involved taking over the personality of some first-class cricketer or even of a whole Test XI—this would include wearing a cap at the correct angle and all the mannerisms of the hero. First-class cricket has an important place in providing the inspiration for boys. R. C. Robertson Glasgow, whose whimsical writings spring out of a real knowledge and love of the game and of people, caught the atmosphere of small boys' cricket in a preparatory school setting in a pre-1939 book.

"I see Copson's got his hundred wickets. I've got 19 so far."

"Counting nets?"

"Yes, counting nets."

"Oh, I never count nets."

"And it wouldn't do much good if you did, as the ball usually goes into the next net when you bowl."

My father died in 1937, when I was eight years old. He had already planted a great enthusiasm for the game in me. We lived in London where he was a solicitor, and my first games were watched at Lord's or, when we were on holiday, at Hove. The first county matches I saw included some very slow batting, but this never affected my loyalty to cricket. There was an atmosphere about the ground, perhaps sitting on the grass at the sea end at Hove or in the public stands at the Nursery End at Lord's. I would always set myself to identify every fielder as soon as I could, for there were no flashing lights telling his number on the score-card then. There was the discussion going on among the knowing ones, who would tell you all the personal histories of the players and why some batsman wasn't very strong in his shots on the leg-side. And the players became real characters, even from a distance.

It was a wonderful game for a boy to follow, for every day in the summer there were the English county scores to read about in the newspaper. There were books to read—particularly *Wisden* which possessed a goldmine of facts and figures. Sometimes in the winter there was the most romantic of cricket moments, when we would switch the wireless on early in the morning, and hear an Australian voice through the crackles telling us about the ups and downs of the day's play in a Test match. I have a vivid memory of going down the King's Road in Chelsea one dark winter afternoon in 1936 and seeing the newspaper placard saying **BRADMAN FAILS AGAIN**. So much was expected of him, for when we read the story, we found that he had made 82.

When I was eight years old my father organised a team called Slinfold Colts in the Sussex village where we had a week-end cottage. For years I remembered with pride my 23 against the Veterans' XI, and because I batted that day at No. 5, I decided that this was my favourite place to bat. We were less successful when we played Storrington Colts who

were well trained and brought over by Hugh de Selincourt, who managed to make village cricket live on paper in some of his books like *The Cricket Match*.

One of the healthiest things I know about post-war cricket is how village cricket has grown again. It had almost stopped by 1945 but there are many villages where it has become youthful and strong once more. I have quite often taken our Mayflower team (some of us adults making up the team with our older boys) to Slinfold and we have had some exciting days. In one match the scores were level and two balls remained before stumps were to be drawn, when our last man went to the wicket. His experience of cricket was not large. He had spent more of the afternoon making the acquaintance of a young lady from Slinfold than in seeing how his team was getting on. Now all our fortunes rested on his shoulders. He wandered out to the wicket, throwing replies over his shoulder to the comments which came from his mates. When he reached the wicket there were some cheerful remarks for the umpires and the opposition. First ball he swung at and missed. The Slinfold fast bowler delivered the last ball of the day. It bowled him middle stump, but the umpire (the Slinfold umpire!) called 'No-ball' and we had won by one wicket. We took a suitcase of white flannels with us one of those Saturdays. The flannels eventually appeared on the field, but were being worn by the girls who had come to support us.

After my father died we moved down to Slinfold and my school holidays included many days at Hove. We would also go and visit my grandparents in Gloucestershire—most conveniently when the Cheltenham cricket week was on—so that we could watch two or three matches there. If I was lucky there would be a day or two at Lord's or the Oval to see a Test match, and I saw one day of Len Hutton's record-breaking 364 in 1938.

Hedley Verity, the Yorkshire and England slow left arm bowler, was my hero in those days. He was to die of wounds in Italy in the war. I used to collect autographs in a small way, only because other boys did. Verity's was the only one I really wanted, and I never did get it. I asked him for it one day as he was walking round to the practice nets at Lord's and my disappointment that I didn't get it remained for a

long time. But my loyalty stayed firmly fixed to him and my indignation was great if he was ever left out of the England team.

I followed Verity because my main cricket ambition then was to be a slow left arm bowler. When I was ten years old I won a place in the 1st XI at my preparatory school: I batted last and got quite a few wickets. I had picked up the ball one day with the seam across, bowled a huge off-break and decided that this must be the 'grip for the off-break'. So I trotted up and bowled what cricketers call the 'Chinaman' without having any notion of the technique of how to do it. A little later I started reading books and learning how to spin the ball properly, and I have never been able to spin the ball, off-breaks or leg-breaks from that day to this. Well, that's not quite true. I remember that I turned a ball quite sharply from the leg when I was playing for the Chelmsford Clergy one day in 1958! My bowling has always been something of a joke, and I wish that I had kept my preparatory school headmaster's comments in 1939. Of course I have always remembered what he said: "Young Sheppard, if I am not very much mistaken, will one day cause a great many batsmen a great deal of trouble with his left arm slows." Sadly, he was very much mistaken.

Verity was my hero, but there were others who had their places in my firmament. 'Tich' Cornford, the tiny and extremely skilful Sussex wicket-keeper, probably had a special place for many small boys. Someone so small did not seem too far removed from us. Then there were others whom I had not necessarily ever seen, but who had a melodious ring to their names and initials. I met Les Townsend, who used to play for Derbyshire, in New Zealand in 1963. I told him I had followed him as a boy, but was too embarrassed to tell him that I used to have a song I would sing to myself which went to one of the tunes from the *Three Little Pigs*.

Oh Townsend (L.F.)

Oh Townsend (L.F.)

Oh Townsend Townsend Tiddle Iddle Townsend

Oh Townsend (L.F.)

Towering above all the others to me was Wally Hammond. He was more than a hero: he was like one of the Greek gods from Mount Olympus. I was lucky. What with the Chelten-

ham matches, and several games I watched at Lord's I saw him make a great many runs. I can almost recapture now the thrill I used to feel as I waited for him to come in to bat at Lord's. None of your 'incoming batsman must pass the outgoing batsman on the field of play'. There was always a pause, and then from my seat in the stand facing the pavilion I would see through the windows a white shirt moving through the Long Room; then out through the doors, down the steps and on to the field. We have sharply etched memories from boyhood and I can picture many of his strokes now—mostly his forcing back shots and drives into the covers, or a thunderous straight drive back over the bowler's head.

The war came when I was ten years old. For six years I learned about our warships and aircraft with the striking amount of details which lodge in a boy's memory. I listened to the News bulletins with intensity and heard the grim score-cards of wartime; "81 enemy aircraft are claimed to have been shot down. 35 of our planes are missing."

Towards the end of the war my sister had a job in London at the B.B.C. Sometimes the holidays were spent in London, sometimes in Sussex. Petrol rationing meant that it was difficult to see anyone else if you lived out in the country, and one way or another my mother and I were on our own at home for most of the school holidays. I learned to read a good deal, from the lightest school stories to *War and Peace*, Churchill's *Marlborough*, Galsworthy, Thackeray, and Jane Austen. I developed a passion for classical music, with Beethoven at the head of the list. My mother and I often used to go to concerts, opera, and particularly the ballet. Margot Fonteyn danced almost every night then, and we often saw her with Robert Helpmann in *Swan Lake* or *Giselle*. Her technique was superb, but as with any great performer the skill was not paraded as she entered completely into the character she was playing. She never seemed to be in a hurry. Sometimes an air-raid would be announced during a performance and if we weren't feeling too brave, we would hurry off to the underground. One evening, after waiting a long time in an underground station while nothing happened, we emerged and walked home. We had hardly left the station when we heard the broken-down car noise of a V1 flying bomb and saw the red glow of its exhaust only a few hundred feet above our heads.

London had the lake in Regent's Park where I often went rowing, and courts for squash which was the only other game I ever played well. In Sussex the war, which was followed so closely on the maps indoors, was fought out in imaginary battles at battalion level in the fields and woods around us.

But cricket went on in the garden: my mother was a faithful steady underarm bowler, but my sister would never stoop to bowling underarm. She would bowl fast round arm and about every other delivery meant a prolonged search in a prickly hedge for the ball. She was probably cleverer than she knew, as I organised my cricket on my own without demanding her services. I met the sister of a great friend of mine in New Zealand. It appears that she and her brother played five day Test matches which would start promptly at 11 a.m. each day: halfway through the morning their mother would bring out the drinks on a tray—for the batsman and all eleven fielders. He always chose to be England and she had to be Australia. She got ten innings for her team and he one innings for his: but she said that trees which were the fielders had a disconcerting habit of diving full length to take a wonderful catch when she was batting, while they remained very still when he was at the wicket. Anyway that was her story.

One day three or four of us in the England dressing-room were discussing the kind of games we played as boys, and we discovered that each of us had invented some kind of home-made cricket which we played alone or with a friend. I was alone and my pitch used to be the coal-shed door. I would throw a tennis ball at the door, and then bat as it rebounded. I still have a notebook with the matches I played this way: I started a full English County Championship season—seventeen counties playing each other, and I had to be each player in turn on either side. I got through the whole month of May and well into June. I have never dared to reckon up how many hours must have been spent in this way. But I believe that I learned more about batting then than in any other way. I tried to stand in the way the great players did, to play the same strokes they did, and I had to concentrate especially hard if Hammond, Compton or Hutton were batting.

I went to boarding school when I was nine years old—Northcliffe House School at Bognor on the Sussex coast.

When the threat of air-raids and invasion came in 1940 the school took a large house near Truro in Cornwall. We still played plenty of cricket and I think I must have been a very correct little player though I was not outstanding. The same was true when I went on to Sherborne School in Dorset. I was very small until I was past 16, and was not strong enough to be a dominant batsman. But I played each year in the right team for my age and I remained a great enthusiast for cricket.

There were other enthusiasms too: particularly I gave a lot of time to music. I learnt to play the piano, without ever really 'breaking through' to play with real enjoyment. But it helped to give me a great delight in music: singing took a large part of my time as my voice did not break until I was sixteen and I was one of the two leaders of the choir trebles for two years at Sherborne. For four or five years I was involved in singing a wide range of music, and whether it was singing solo or leading the choir it meant a responsibility which was very good for a small boy.

I learnt much through singing which was to stand me in good stead when I wanted to speak in public later on. And I had my first experience of stage fright: I had quite often sung solos in a church before, but this was the first time at a large school concert at Sherborne. The whole audience was in darkness and I was alone in light on the dais there. I remember catching hold of a brass knob which was on a little rail at the front and holding on to it for all I was worth while I got through *Who is Sylvia?* and *Where'er you walk*. It is not obvious that there is anything in common between singing, public speaking and batting; but in fact there is a sense of ordeal about each of them which has to be overcome.

My music master who remained a very good friend, was very angry with me when at 16, under pressure of a lot of work for examinations and increasing calls of cricket, I gave up my singing and piano playing. "When you're old, you'll not have your cricket," he said, "but you can always have music." As it has turned out I don't think he was necessarily right in my case as cricket has given so much to me. And, though I cannot be a performer, I have kept a keen appreciation of music, now widened to take in a liking for jazz and pop records. Perhaps the highlights of my singing days were the many times when we sang in Sherborne Abbey. It was