

The long shadows over English cricket

By Peter Wilby
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The latest Wisden reflects a turbulent year in which the sport has been forced to confront racism and incompetence.



Turn to page 683 of this year's Wisden and you will see a list of the men who played for Yorkshire in the 2021 County Championship with their batting and bowling averages. In that list, you will find not a single Asian name. Since 7.3 per cent of the county's population – and more than 40 per cent of the pupils in Bradford schools – are of Asian ethnicity, that page tells you all you need to know about the calamity that struck Yorkshire cricket last year, leading to the resignations or sackings of the chairman, chief executive, director of cricket, coach and 15 other staff. And if you want to understand why what became known as "cricket's racism scandal" or "the Azeem Rafiq affair" led to hearings before a committee of MPs, turn to page 34. There, the former Guardian cricket

writer David Hopps reports that players of Asian heritage account for 35 per cent of recreational cricketers in England, 20 per cent of players recruited to county academies and just 6 per cent of established professional cricketers.

Last year, in Hopps' words, professional cricket's deep-rooted racism "began to flood into the nation's consciousness". The ex-Yorkshire cricketer Rafiq, who was born in Karachi, moved to England when he was ten and led England in the under-19 World Cup of 2010, bravely spoke about how racist abuse – called "banter" in manly dressing rooms – had wrecked his career and driven him to consider suicide. Thanks to him, others felt emboldened to recall their experiences, earning places in this year's Wisden. David Lawrence, a former England fast bowler, born in England to Jamaican parents, recalled a banana skin being left outside the door of his hotel room during an away match for his county, Gloucestershire. Maurice Chambers, a former Essex player, remembered a drunken team-mate throwing a banana down the stairs and telling him "Climb for it, you f***ing monkey". Zoheb Sharif, another ex-Essex man, said he was called a "curry muncher" and, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, "bomber".

In the wake of such revelations, England began a catastrophic tour of Australia last November. The Ashes Test series, the most important international contest to most cricket-lovers, ended in abject defeat with England, for the fourth time in the past five tours, winning none of the five Tests. A bloated programme of international cricket and players spending too much time in Covid bubbles were partly to blame, but the chief responsibility lay with poor planning, incompetent management, bad coaching, errors in team selection and weak leadership. "From Brisbane to Hobart," writes the Wisden editor, Lawrence Booth, in his editor's notes, "no tactic was too ill-conceived, no plan too half-baked." Departures not only of the England team's coach and captain but also of the game's senior management figures followed.

It is hard to be optimistic about the future of English cricket. The only potential new star to be unearthed in 2021 was the medium-fast bowler Ollie Robinson. But as soon as he emerged, old tweets of a racist and sexist nature were discovered and he was suspended from the next match. In Australia, though he came second in the bowling averages, he often struggled with fitness. When the captain Joe Root resigned, his only possible successor was Ben Stokes, who

missed the 2017-18 tour of Australia after being involved in a brawl outside a Bristol night-club.

These latest travails have diverted public attention from the issues raised by the Rafiq affair. But those issues won't go away. It is striking that, over the past 40 years, exiles from the white community of South Africa have established themselves more easily in the England Test team than black and Asian players born and/or raised in the UK. It is striking, too, that Joffra Archer and Chris Jordan, the only black players regularly included in current England teams, were both born and largely raised in Barbados.

Contrast their success with Michael Carberry, a black player who was born in south London. Despite scoring 35 centuries, including a triple century, in first-class cricket he played just six Tests, five of them in Australia in 2013-14. He ended that series with the third highest English batting average, even ahead of Joe Root, and rarely sold his wicket cheaply. Yet he was never selected for Tests again. His career ended in 2018 when, aged 37, he was sacked from the Leicestershire captaincy after just four matches because he was deemed insufficiently "proactive". Though he has never made specific accusations – and there are no suggestions of racism by anyone associated with the Leicestershire team – he said in an interview in June 2020 that he grew tired of being labelled the "angry" and "temperamental" black man.

Nearly all the game's players and leaders once dismissed such issues as "political" and therefore not to be "mixed" with cricket. In the past, Wisden endorsed this view. When a party of "rebel" English cricketers toured apartheid South Africa in 1982, in defiance of an international boycott, the Test and County Cricket Board punished them with three-year bans from the national side. Wisden's then editor, John Woodcock, who died last year, accused the English board of shamefully "bowing to political pressures".

As for racist stereotyping, Wisden abounded in examples. Before a West Indies tour of England in 1976, for example, Henry Blofeld – who has an article in this year's edition – wrote in the almanack of how Caribbean cricketers play "as they live their lives... gay, excitable and flamboyant". They were, however, "temperamentally suspect", he added. In 1995, an article in Wisden Cricket Monthly magazine implied cricketers of black and Asian ethnicity were not fully

committed to the England cause. The editor apologised after two black England players took legal action.

Under Lawrence Booth, its editor since 2011, Wisden is now much changed. As a volume of record, it quite properly carries substantial reporting and comment on the Rafiq affair, including an article by Rafiq himself. It also reprints a lecture given at Lord's last year by Stephen Fry exploring cricket's inclusivity or lack of it, in relation to ethnic minorities, gay people and those who suffer mental health problems. There's a piece, too, recalling the controversies over the "rebel" tours of the 1980s. For all this, Booth has been accused by Simon Heffer, writing in the Daily Telegraph, of "overkill on the race controversy" and of turning Wisden into "a depressingly woke political pamphlet".

In truth, however, Wisden was always political. Printing annual reviews of public school cricket at enormous length was a political statement of sorts. So were its lists of "addresses of representative bodies", which included, for example, those for the US and Israeli associations but not for the body in charge of non-white South African cricket.

Like Heffer, I am a cricket traditionalist. I prefer the long forms of the game to the limited-overs varieties. I dislike attempts to change the game's language – the subject of another article in the current Wisden – so that "batsmen" become "batters", and "chinaman", the name of a delivery bowled by left-arm wrist spinners, is frowned upon (has anyone of Chinese ethnicity complained?). And I never, ahem, find time to watch women's cricket. But none of those things damages people's lives and careers, as Rafiq, Chambers, Carberry and others were damaged. Wisden, at last abandoning 19th-century political attitudes, has put itself firmly on the victims' side and we should celebrate.