

ETON RAMBLERS TOUR TO SRI LANKA

23RD FEBRUARY -10TH MARCH 2012

After 18 months of organisation, many thousands of emails exchanged, (and a couple of preparatory net sessions at Lord's) 14 Ramblers met at Heathrow Airport on the 23rd of February to embark on the Club's first tour of Sri Lanka in its 150 year history, full of hope, vigour, and anticipation.

We arrived in Colombo and, after taking time to appreciate just how hot it was, promptly made our way north to Dambulla, part of the 'cultural triangle' in the middle of the island and the venue for our first game. Prompt is a very inaccurate description of the journey though, with the quality of the roads leaving a great deal to be desired and the driving somewhat kamikaze. It was the first of a number of lengthy journeys in our trusty coach. The following morning we climbed Sigiriya, the 'Lion Mountain', a spectacular UNESCO World Heritage site that stands 370m high. A ruined 5th century AD palace sits on top and also there are some remarkable frescoes depicting beautiful female figures from the same period painted half way up. With energy levels only marginally sapped we practised in the afternoon at the venue of our first game, the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium.

The ground is flanked on three sides by thick jungle with a lake on the other, providing a fantastic setting. It certainly did not lack in grandeur and this only added to the effervescent mood on the bus as we approached. Inauspiciously we lost the toss and were asked to field first by our opponents, a Northern Province XI. Pre-tour research had revealed that this was the ground most likely to suit our seamers and so it proved, with the opening pair of Fergus Boyd and Rupert Stanning leaving Northern Province in tatters at 38-4. Ed Russell made history, of a kind, by being removed from the attack for bowling too many beamers but the introduction of Josh Ballantine Dykes saw further inroads and at 136-9 the match looked dangerously one sided. However, an ultimately crucial last wicket partnership pushed the score up to 175, Boyd finishing with 5-18. In reply the Rambler opening pair of Ed Farley and Archie Reynolds tore into the Sri Lankan bowlers, racing along at 8 an over to 91-0 and looking so comfortable that William Russell asked if we ought to organise a beer match. This proved to be a quite astonishing moment of hubris. The 'Crumble in the Jungle' commenced with the introduction of some wily left arm spinners who dried up our runs and precipitated the sort of collapse once copyrighted by the England team of the 1990's. We eventually folded for 148 and our performance in this game was perhaps the greatest regret of the whole tour. It provided fertile material for the first fines session that evening though, ably chaired by Messrs Farley and Reynolds.

Our next destination was Kandy, one of Sri Lanka's more scenic cities and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We were staying just outside the city at the Victoria Golf

and Country Club, once voted Asia's best golf course and the venue for our golf day later on. Our next game was at the Pallakelle International Stadium, the scene of England's 10 wicket demolition by Sri Lanka in the World Cup a year ago, against a Central Province XI. More modern than the previous stadium and no less impressive, it was also extremely hot and humid which left all the players gasping for air after the warm up lap and stretches. Another lost toss saw us batting first on an imperfect pitch. Farley and Tom Shaw fell early but gritty innings from Reynolds, Ed Oram, and birthday boy George Deedes steadied the ship. However another lower order collapse in the face of excellent spin bowling meant that we did not bat our overs out and set a below par target of 165. Wickets from Boyd, Ballantine Dykes, Ed Maidment and Felix Hartley Russell had the game evenly poised at 111-5, but a strong middle order saw our opponents home by 4 wickets, frustratingly about 2 minutes before a biblical rainstorm that would have saved us. A very entertaining evening celebrating Deedes's birthday ensued, with huge thanks to Mrs Russell and Mrs Brooks.

The next day we travelled in to Kandy for our next fixture, against a combined Central and Northern Provinces XI. The game was played at Dharmaraja College, one of the premier Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka and home to about 4500 students, perched on top of one of the hills in Kandy with magnificent surrounding views. Having scaled what felt like innumerable steps to get up to the ground, we were greeted by the extraordinary sight of about 800 students performing coordinated dance moves on the outfield in what, to the untrained eye, looked like a very well organised flash mob. Of course these proved an irresistible opportunity to some of our squad to lead the dancing and before long Tim Best and Tom Shaw were cutting some of their finest shapes, much to the (very audible) amusement of the assembled crowd. To the cricket, we won our first toss of the tour and elected to bat first. Ed Farley and Archie Reynolds put on 30 for the first wicket before Farley rifled a catch to cover, but Tom Shaw and Archie Reynolds then set about building an innings with a partnership of 50 for the second wicket. Reynolds fell for 37 and this precipitated yet another Rambler collapse with numbers 4 to 8 contributing a mighty 16 runs in the face of some very skilful spin bowling. Shaw made a stylish 45 and a robust 20 from Ballantine Dykes down the order dragged us to a sub-par score of 181 in 32.4 overs, a disappointment given the start the top order had made. Given our bowling and fielding performances in the previous games we remained confident that we could still achieve a result and the mood was lifted with a wicket in the first over from Boyd. However, the Sri Lankans then set about their task very coolly, punishing any bad bowling with great ease. Further wickets from Hartley Russell, Reynolds, and Boyd were not sufficient to prevent a comfortable 6 wicket win.

After what had proved to be 3 rather gruelling games of cricket in 4 days a few days of rest were welcomed by all. We enjoyed a magnificent golf day at the Victoria in the blistering heat, taking in some of the amazing views around the immaculate course. Of course we did all we could not to live up to our surroundings, with a selection of shanked drives off the first tee and Ed Maidment nearly flipping his buggy. Ed Farley was the ultimate victor, shooting an impressive -5 on the back 9. We then travelled further up in to the hills to Nuwara Eliya, stopping off for a visit to a tea factory along the way before arriving in the town known as "Little England" in the dark. The air was noticeably cooler;

hardly surprising given that we were about 6100ft above sea level. The next fines session was conducted in the rather colonial, boarding school splendour of the St Andrews Hotel with the poison of choice the local coconut whisky, Arrak. We had a free day to explore, taking in tea plantations, rides on swan pedaloos, the 'local pub', and even the Hill Club, a 19th century building designed as a home-from-home for the British Tea Plantation owners.

The next day was one of the more arduous but also proved to be a turning point for the Tour. We drove from Nuwara Eliya to Maggona, a 7 hour journey that included a repeatedly heart stopping descent from the mountains around a seemingly never ending series of hairpin bends with precipitous drops down one side. While the views were spectacular our progress wasn't, covering 45km in 2 hours. We eventually arrived at the Surrey Village in Maggona, a remarkable ground built by Surrey Cricket Club in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. The temperature was sweltering, the pitch was hard and true, and we had no hesitation in batting first. Felix Hartley Russell and Ed Farley opened the batting, and it was to loud applause that Felix got off the mark with his first runs on tour. He went on to make a solid 20 but the innings was dominated by a brutal century from Ed Farley. He got to three figures in 49 balls and eventually fell for 118 in 55 balls, including comfortably the biggest six of the tour, one of 7 in his innings. Ed Oram made an accomplished 23 and we set what we thought was an insurmountable target of 193 off our 20 overs. Our opponents, the Kalutara Cricket Club, had other ideas and set about their task keeping up with the run rate with some clinical batting. Josh Ballantine Dykes was the pick of the bowlers, recording excellent figures of 4-0-25-2, while Rupert Stanning was also very economical. The wheels very nearly came off in the 15th over when 2 catches were dropped and a couple of misfields gifted runs when no generosity was needed. However, hitherto untapped reserves of "Eton grit" were called upon and it came down to the opposition requiring 13 off the final over with wickets in hand. A tight final over from Boyd yielded only 6 runs and our first victory on tour was secured. It was hugely satisfying not just to record the win but also the manner in which we pulled ourselves together after the poor 15th over. The intensity of the game drained everyone and after a great deal of exuberance in the immediate aftermath, it was with heavy legs that we dragged ourselves back on the bus and drove a further 3 hours south to Mirissa, close to Galle.

Two rest days ensued in Mirissa which gave the opportunity to explore the beaches and also the town of Galle itself. Our original itinerary had included a fixture at Galle but given the proximity of our tour to that of the England test match we were not allowed to play, which was a source of much regret as we walked past what is surely one of the most scenic grounds in world cricket. At the suggestion of William Russell we attended the Galle Music Festival, held in the fort, only to realise that there was no bar there, and it proved impossible for 14 men to spend more than an hour without a Lion beer in their hand, so we left rather swiftly. The next morning we rose at 5:30 to go whale watching. The south coast of Sri Lanka has the largest colony of blue whales in the world and we spotted three or four in our morning at sea, a wonderful experience.

We played our 5th match at the Sri Sumangala Foundation of Goodness College, also built in the aftermath of the tsunami and supported by a charity involving Sri Lankan cricketers such as Muralitharan and Sangakkara. The pitch was artificial and with

relatively small boundaries, and a run fest beckoned. Unfortunately the first major incident was a very nasty injury to William Russell. Batting without a helmet on account of the heat, he had already fended a bouncer off his face for a one bounce four, but was starting to look in good touch with a languid clip off his legs for another boundary. However, he was unprepared for the second bouncer in the over and was hit in the face, drawing a fairly substantial amount of blood and ultimately requiring 10 stitches. 5-star became 5-scar for the remainder of the tour. Ed Oram came in and batted very fluently alongside Farley, who hadn't altered his style particularly from his 20-20 heroics and made a brisk 57. Oram went on to make a very impressive and ultimately crucial 74, ably supported by Michael Brooks, who made an elegant 34, and Tim Best who hit an enormous slog swept 6 in his 18. When Brooks and Best were batting we had a combined 125 years and goodness knows how many Rambler matches of experience at the crease, surely a record of sorts. Our solid middle order performance allowed the brute strength of Maidment and Hartley Russell to come out and pile on the misery for the Sri Lankans. Maidment found the boundary a few times in his 17* and Hartley Russell's immaculate striking, including a six so big that the ball was lost to the jungle, brought 41 off 19 balls. Our final total was a mighty 287 in 40 overs, which we were later informed was a record for the ground. As we were beginning to learn, no total is too big a challenge in this part of the world and any thoughts of an easy win were rapidly dispelled as the Foundation of Goodness started strongly. At 144-1 after 20 overs they were in line with the required scoring rate and heads were starting to go down in the heat. However, the introduction of senior pro Michael Brooks proved an inspired piece of captaincy from George Deedes. Bowling straight and taking the pace off the ball, Brooks inspired what could only be described as a Rambler-esque collapse by our opponents from a position of 164-1. Farley took a very impressive catch, throwing the ball in the air as he overbalanced on the boundary edge, and then running back on to the field to take it cleanly. Ed Maidment dismissed the dangerous opener and Stanning returned to administer the last rites and he and Brooks both ended up with 4 wickets. Some fine catching in the outfield, notably from Tom Shaw, Ed Russell, and Felix Hartley Russell saw the Ramblers home by 24 runs. We heard a very poignant presentation from the Foundation of Goodness about its origin and the work that it had done after the devastation of the tsunami to help the lives of those who had been so affected by it. We then retreated to the Vijaya Beach Resort on the coast to watch the sunset and enjoyed a memorable evening revelling in the glory of a second victory, with Ed Maidment treating the party to his much vaunted 'variations' on the dance floor.

We dragged our sore heads from Galle to Colombo the following day along the brand new highway that now connects the two cities and proved to be our easiest journey in the trip by some distance. Our penultimate game was at the R Premadasa Stadium, a monumental 35,000 seater that played host to England's warm up match in March and, inauspiciously, was also where Sri Lanka once notched up 902 in a Test match. We were playing against the Red Dot Invitational XI, comprised primarily of Sri Lankans with a few expat English thrown in. We fielded first and Red Dot started well, with their talented opener taking a particular fancy to Boyd's bowling. However, Stanning was on menacing form, giving away few runs and taking the crucial wicket of Archie Fellowes, the Wykehamist who had done so much to organise our tour. From then on Hartley

Russell turned the screw, removing the opener and then running through the middle order, returning figures of 4-20. Boyd returned at the end to collect 4-36 and Red Dot collapsed from a promising 96-2 to 145 all out. In reply, Ed Farley made a rapid 33 before being caught, and then Oram failed to trouble the scorers, which revived the unhappy memories of our performance in the first game. However, a gutsy innings of 62* from Archie Reynolds at the top of the order saw us home by 7 wickets, ably supported by Tom Shaw (20) and Ed Russell (19*). The team spirit was now positively feverish after 3 wins in a row. All the talk turned to the possibility of winning the tour if we could succeed in our final game the following day as we headed to the Irish pub in Colombo to toast our success. We said farewell to Antonia Brooks and Hilary Russell that evening who were heading back home a couple of days early, and who had proved fantastic members of the touring party.

Our final game was against a Wisden Invitational XI at the Thurston College Club Ground, one of the youngest sides we had played and on one of the hottest days. Following our demolition of Red Dot the previous day their side had been bolstered by some Sri Lankan Under-19 players, so we knew from the outset that we needed to be very much on our game. We batted first and started badly, with Farley falling cheaply and William Russell, back at the top of the order in spite of his stitches (but wearing a helmet this time), receiving an awful decision. Michael Brooks and Tom Shaw set about rebuilding the innings until Shaw was run out and Brooks hitting straight to cover. Deedes and Maidment steadied the ship for a while but it was a remarkable partnership between Ed Russell and Felix Hartley Russell, coming together at 88-6, that changed our fortunes. Both looked to attack from the start, Russell getting off the mark with a clean strike over extra cover, while Felix opened his shoulders in majestic fashion, striking five 6's and seven 4's in a critical innings of 78. Russell made an equally important 24 as the pair put on 66. Clean hitting from Ballantine Dykes (15) and some lower order nurdles from Boyd and Stanning, who hit an imperious straight drive that was almost shot of the tour, brought our total to 231 off 44.4 overs. It was not the sort of total we had hoped for but was, at least, something to bowl at. In reply a (now customary) quick start was made by our opponents who raced to 42 off 5 overs. Boyd limped off with an injury leaving Stanning and Hartley Russell to staunch the flow of runs and removing their top three batsmen, with the score at 66-3 after 10 overs. A 100 run partnership then developed between their number 4 and 5 batsmen, and hopes were fading for our victorious tour. At 166-4, with plenty of overs in hand, Deedes (standing in as skipper) once again pulled out the Ramblers trump card in the form of Michael Brooks. Repeating the same formula from the Foundation of Goodness College and taking the pace off the ball, he removed both of the batsmen who were set and had another LBW. Stanning then returned with another wicket and at 210-7 the momentum of the game had very definitely shifted. A tense 3 overs followed when Brooks and Hartley Russell conceded only 5 runs and our fielders applied all the pressure we could muster. Two wickets followed in quick succession, Hartley Russell removing one man LBW and then holding his nerve under a skied catch in the next over off Brooks's bowling. With 16 runs and one wicket needed, the tension was unbearable. The very sharpest of chances went past Ed Russell the next ball, and thanks to a few streaky shots the Sri Lankans edged closer to our target. With 5 runs required, another skied catch was hit off Brooks and down towards the man-of-

the-moment Felix Hartley Russell. 14 hearts were in mouths, pulses racing, as he initially appeared not to pick it up. For what seemed like an eternity the ball hung in the air as Felix finally called, sprinted in from the boundary, took half a second to steady himself, and took the catch. Pandemonium ensued, and Felix was mobbed as if he had just scored the winner in a World Cup Final. Michael Brooks ended up with a remarkable 5-40 and we had won our final game by 4 runs, the thinnest of margins, to secure the first victorious Rambler tour of the subcontinent. If one could have bottled the spirit in the aftermath of the match, the problems of the world would be no more, such was the exuberance among the team. Seelan, our wonderful guide, had organised cold Lion beers and of all the (many) bottles consumed on tour, these undoubtedly tasted the sweetest. Recalling the occasion writing this report now, back in London in the spring, I can feel the adrenaline pumping once more.

Enormous thanks are due to so many people who both made the tour possible and also so enjoyable. First and foremost among those is William Russell, whose endless enthusiasm and energy (and ultimately unrequited desire to play at Galle...) made sure that the tour went ahead even when recruitment and scheduling proved troublesome. Given the almost perfect correlation between Rambler tours and financial crises in recent years (perhaps the announcement of a tour is the ultimate contrary indicator?), getting a squad together at all was no mean feat. Trying to get a group of Old Etonians to hand over money and be in the same place at a particular time can make herding cats look straightforward, but Tim Best and Rosie Whitefield at Original Travel were fantastic. They resolved the endless issues that kept on cropping up with the minimum of fuss and greatest possible charm. George Deedes utilised what can only be described as a natural editorial flair to produce what one senior Rambler described as the best brochure ever. Huge thanks must also go to our advertisers in the brochure whose generosity helped defray some of the costs along the way. Archie Fellowes at Red Dot Tours organised an excellent itinerary for us in spite of all sorts of problems with the Sri Lankan cricket board, and we were very fortunate to have the services of the extremely knowledgeable and helpful Seelan as our guide for the fortnight. Ed Russell and Felix Hartley Russell also took on the role of Chief Technology Officers with aplomb, keeping the results-hungry Rambler membership back in England updated on our progress with their excellent blog.

With thanks to Josh Ballantine Dykes, who spent half of the flight back from London sorting them out, the tour statistics are set out below. Ed Farley topped the batting list both in terms of runs scored and average, while honourable mentions must also go to Archie Reynolds, Ed Oram, Felix Hartley-Russell, and Tom Shaw. Michael Brooks was top of the bowling averages while Rupert Stanning and Fergus Boyd shared the honour of leading wicket takers. Our spin trio of Josh Ballantine Dykes, Felix and Archie also bowled a substantial number of overs with great skill if not always the results that were deserved.

Fergus Boyd
Hon. Secretary
March 2012