

ETON RAMBLERS TOUR OF THE UAE
MARCH 1984

In March, eleven privileged Ramblers blazed a brief, spectacular trail to Dubai and Sharjah. Two games were played in each Emirate, two on concrete with sand outfields, two on the amazing grass surface at Sharjah stadium, with its baked mud square.

Preserving the symmetry, we won and lost once each in these very different environments. We were truly engulfed by the magnificent hospitality of many kind people, of whom more anon.

The inspiration for the tour - and the ensuing faultless organisation - came from Lindsay McNeile and Nigel Hodges (himself a Salopian, but with close uxorial connexions with Eton, and a boy currently there.) A very special debt of gratitude is owed by us all to these two. The deal with Gulf Air secured by Lindsay to transport us there and back attracted the envy of many Gulf residents.

To the cricket, first in general : the style of many opponents remains vividly in the mind. There were the elegant grace of Talaat Butt, the fierce power of M.A. Qureshi, the subtle spin of Javed. Simon Adams twice played accomplished innings against us, and produced, for your correspondent's dirhams, the "shot of the tour" with his long-off six at Sharjah (with nearly tragic results). R. Advani showed his all-round belligerence at Dubai C.A.; the years lay lightly on the suave shoulders of M.V. Haq; the genial countenance of Abdulrahman Falaknaz lingers in the memory.

Nigel Hodges bowled elegantly with little luck (chiefly because he twice took the brunt of Jerry Cornwallis at his most brutal). On our side, Cornwallis was outstanding with the bat, accumulating nearly one third of all our runs, attractively and fast. In addition great credit is due to him as wicket-keeper, never having wilted under the dual hazards of unaccustomed heat and returns directed unerringly at his toes. Others deserving mention in a batting capacity include James Leonard, Giles Pemberton (who became a steady opener, very much a necessity in limited-overs cricket), Johnny Boden and the captain, Tommy Pugh.

Theo Fennell and Malcolm Hogg bowled extremely well with the new ball, adjusting quickly to the shorter length required on concrete, and the flatter bounce of Sharjah.

David Christie shone as our all-rounder. Of out-fielders, Alex Hambro deserves high praise for his long, accurate arm; of in-fielders the captain secured seven catches (none easy) in the arc mid-wicket/mid-on. A very few were dropped by others, but none remembered.

Most of us were unaccustomed to playing in Rambler sides containing only one captain, the usual minimum being ten, with one man off-colour. The ensuing cacophony often results in the celebrated description of a

camel: a horse designed by a committee. However, on this occasion there was no doubt at all who was "running the show", and what success was achieved owed much to Tommy Pugh's shrewd deployment of bowlers and fielders, plus masterful manipulation of sundry elderly gentlemen to places where they could do least damage. A captain's vital role in limited-overs cricket was vividly demonstrated in this example.

There were moments of hilarity. Most Ramblers can identify the participant cryptically recorded in the score-book as "retired shagged". Another applied soothing balm to a totally inappropriate part of his anatomy, suffering dire agonies as a result, to the accompaniment of heartless mirth from his colleagues. "Don't rub them, count them", was the most sympathetic advice on offer. An old man who should have known better proffered advice to his captain at Dubai C.A. to insert the opposition on winning the toss, on the grounds that at 9.30 a.m. the heavy dew would remain in the ground (but not, perhaps, the concrete).

Specifically, we were heavily - and not entirely surprisingly - over-whelmed on the first day by the full Sharjah XI, containing five Ranjit trophy players (or Pakistani equivalents). Leonard and Cornwallis set off steadily, but after their fall in attempting to increase the scoring-rate in a 30-over match, and a contribution from Pugh, the innings fell apart, and the opposition were set less than three per over to prevail. They conceded four wickets, but won with great ease.

On the second day, at Darjeeling C.C., in another 30-over game, more of our batsmen came into form, especially Cornwallis (who imperiously drove for four the first ball of the game), but 178-6 was no more than an adequate score. However, good bowling by Hogg, McNeile and Fennell, assisted by excellent catches by Pugh and Pemberton, secured our first win in dismissing the opposition for 153.

The third game was of 40-overs duration at Dubai C.A., where, despite fine bowling by Hogg (8-0-26-2) we let slip a distinct advantage, permitted their "tail to wag" and eventually conceded the formidable total of 266. Fortified by the Khyber's fiery curry, we embarked steadily in pursuit of this target, but became rather becalmed mid-innings and succumbed in the 37th over for 195. An l.b.w. decision against Cornwallis was unhelpful, though your correspondent found umpires, in general, unobtrusive and fair.

On the final day, back at Sharjah, this disparate group of players really moulded into a team, and produced a comprehensive win against the Ancient Britons to "halve the series". Cornwallis' explosive century set the scene, Boden and Pugh maintained the impetus and 30-overs produced an impressive 209-5.

Early contributions from Farndon, Adams, Knowles and Haq all promised much, but each got himself out at a crucial time - the original run-out, in hindsight, having been particularly significant. The middle-order collapsed, possibly feeling their age, and the final score was 138-9. Fennell's bowling figures merit a nod : 8-1-27-0.

So a memorable week came to a climax. Plucked from the depths of an English winter, we think we acquitted ourselves reasonably well. It remains only to offer heartfelt thanks to the many generous people who looked after us so magnificently : Miles and Sally Stockwell, M.U. and Amy Haq, Abdulrahman Falaknaz and Rodney and Cecily Agar arranged special - and highly enjoyable - parties. The Clifton-Browns, d'Abos, Agars, Allens, Hodges, Stockwells and Pecks had us all to stay.

To each of these, and others, we convey deepest thanks for a marvellously enjoyable experience.