

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY GAME OF CRICKET: A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE GAME

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The novelty of this paper is that, for the first time, cricket has been analysed in the context of its early seventeenth century geographical locations. Furthermore, connections have been established between cricket and the sixteenth and seventeenth century trade routes in Kent, Surrey and Sussex. The language of cricket in the seventeenth century has been reconstructed, throwing light upon how the game was played at that time and advancing our knowledge of the game. The idea of the Flemish being involved with cricket gained credence recently when, first, John Eddows pointed out that John Derrick, had a Flemish surname and gave evidence in a court case at Guildford that he had played cricket there about 1550; and, second, Heiner Gillmeister put forward a theory that the Flemish name for hockey was probably contracted to krik-ket.¹

The seventeenth century game of cricket was firmly rooted in the counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, but similar bat and ball games were played in other parts of the country. These included Cat and Dog in lowland Scotland, Bandy Wicket in East Anglia, Stool Ball and Bat and Trap throughout England,² Tut in Cornwall and Devon³ and Stow-Ball and Stob-Ball in the counties of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, north Somerset and parts of Dorset.⁴ All of these games appear to have been originally single wicket or double-base games with the scoring of points.

Stow and stob are dialect names for a stump, being the lower part of a tree or its remaining stump,⁵ so we can guess that this was the original wicket. A stow was also a frame used in mining to support 'crawling tunnels', perhaps used in the north Somerset lead mines. For the seventeenth century we know as much about stow-ball as we do of cricket. John Aubrey

recounts his knowledge of stow-ball in north Wiltshire in the period 1648-1686. The withy or willow staves were carefully shaped by their owners, or the local stave maker, and each son when he reached the age of eight was given two staves by his father. The ball was four inches in diameter with a sole leather case stuffed hard with boiled quills. The farm labourers used to hurry home from the fields to gather for a game in the evening, showing us that a cricket-like game was more compulsive than it is today.⁶ A game of stow-ball was played on Bullingdon Green, Oxford in 1667 on an area of three acres.⁷ This is much the same size as today's cricket ground.

Many stow-ball games were played on chalk, particularly in Wiltshire, Dorset and north Somerset, and chalk was the preferred sub-soil. It drains well, and, being used predominately for grazing sheep, the grass is kept short. Flat chalkland is an excellent surface as it is usually drier than other surfaces, which is important when balls are absorbent and thus become wet and heavy. The ball on chalk can be hit some distance and can produce a lively game as the ball bounces across the grass.

The bat itself did not have to be heavy like those 4 pound weapons of the late eighteenth century. They were light in weight and shaped somewhat like a hockey stick.⁸ An Englishman visiting Ireland in 1673 refers to the common people as playing bandy (hurling) with balls and crooked sticks much after our play at stow-ball.⁹ In fact we can get an idea of these bats by looking at some examples. Around 1700 they are like hockey-sticks, shaped with flat surfaces, and the batsman is usually called a striker. He stood with knees bent and used a downward sweep to hit the ball. The objective was to loft the ball over the heads of the fielders, known as catchers and seekers. Balls were hit to either side of the bowler,¹⁰ further emphasising that a hockey-type stick was used. This picture gives us a glimpse of the 'play of the game' with strategically placed catchers and seekers who appear as long stops. The toss of a coin determined which team would choose the pitch, and or, the team to bat first.¹¹ It was honorable in got-up games for the captains or best players to pick teams of equal strength from those available.¹²

In the late seventeenth century, the ball was trundled, not bowled as we know today, in overs of four balls. Does the number four represent the number of stumps used in a game? The lucky number three would have

been a more logical choice as it was used in a number of other sports. It is doubtful if the ball was ever rolled along the ground as the contemporary word 'trundle' describes, but tossed low aiming at one of the two stumps as the ground was seldom level. It was likely that bowlers both trundled the ball, as would children be taught, and skimmed it above the ground when they became more skilled. Some early bats appear to be shaped to block the grass-cutting bowler.¹³ The ball itself came in various sizes and colours around 1700¹⁴ and was waterproofed with grease to avoid picking up moisture.¹⁵ There was the ritual of choosing the ball at important matches¹⁶ and we can probably look at the limits of the ball being between three and four inches in diameter.¹⁷

The heavy modern-type ball with wound core and thick leather cover did not come into use much before 1760 when Richard Duke of Penshurst, Kent was making first class balls between 1748 and 1762.¹⁸ He is credited with inventing the modern ball. There is mention of a crimson ball in 1753 and this may be a reference to one of Duke's balls.¹⁹ Certainly in 1727 the covers were flying off balls during play.²⁰ These balls were probably of blackthorne wood and covered in leather. We hear of Thomas Ken playing a bat and ball game at Winchester College around the middle of the seventeenth century 'with the bats ringing' from the impact of the ball, and again balls ringing in a game at the end of the century.²¹ Flat-faced bats are more likely to produce a ringing sound than circular cross-section bats and with the combination of a leather covered wooden ball would give rise to ringing or vibrating of bats and the stinging of the hands.

The term 'bat' is comparatively rare before 1720. The older terms are 'staff', 'stave', or 'stick', which tended to be used regionally: for example, 'stave' was used in the Gloucester area, and 'bat' in the south-east, while 'staff' and especially 'stick' were more widely used. 'Bat' is derived from the French *battledore*, shaped like a table tennis bat, which were used by washer women to beat their washing with.²² The use of the 'bat' in cricket is peculiar to Kent and Sussex and their coastal smugglers were known as batmen, because of the cudgels they carried. We first hear of the 'flat-faced' bat in 1622.²³

Prior to the late 1770s the wicket comprised of two stumps with a bail, with the height of the stumps being high and the width between them being

narrow.²⁴ Earlier eighteenth century pictures show a wicket that was wider than it was higher, perhaps two feet wide by one foot high which was the case in America in 1720. The ends of the stumps were forked to support the light bail, and there were criteria for the firmness of pitching the stumps into the ground and for the delicate placing of the bail so that it would easily topple when the stump was hit.

Bowlers were reported to deliver very fast and accurate with the light ball they used, but the batsman had the problem of defending two stumps, about two feet apart. Hence the shape and size of bat could be important. A 1742 wood-cut shows a home-made bat designed more in the shape of an ice-hockey stick, for better defence of the wicket.²⁵ There has been a lot of conjecture about the origin of the wicket, but suffice to say that the seventeenth century outline shape is more akin to the profile of a church stool, which is low and long.²⁶

The term 'umpire' is first noted in 1680.²⁷ They were grey-haired veterans who were rich in cricket lore.²⁸ The function of the umpire's bat was for the batsman to touch with his own to record a run.²⁹ As far as we know there were three methods of getting a batsman out: by bowling him out, catching him out, and hitting the wicket with the ball before he had touched the umpire's bat.³⁰ The double wicket game was controlled by two umpires, one from each team, who would position their bats, before allowing the bowler to bowl. Each team was usually responsible for providing one umpire and presumably both umpires had to agree on the decisions taken.³¹ The holding of a bat represents the staff of office which certainly goes back to the fifteenth century in some sports.³² In cudgeling, the umpire was called a 'stickler', and his stick was used to separate the cudgelers, as also in wrestling.³³ The word 'stickler' does have the connotation of law and order and may have been the name used in cricket in the early seventeenth century.

Around 1700 there were two trustworthy scorers, seated on the grass or upon stools. The scorers knotted the score on a stick, with a deeper nick at 20, which of course represented a score.³⁴ This method of counting was much used by shepherds when counting sheep, hence the connection between cricket being played on sheep-shorn hills and the method of scoring for cricket. From the fifteenth century into the seventeenth, the

term 'point' or 'prick' appears to be popular as a means of keeping a tally, this terminology being derived from scoring with a point or prick of the pen upon paper or wood.³⁵

In the early seventeenth century the known areas of play can be broadly described as the area of Sevenoaks and Maidstone in Kent, the Guildford area in Surrey, and Chichester in Sussex.³⁶ These areas are located around the perimeter of the Weald. They also represent seventeenth century trade routes. The game can be traced along the road from London to Rye in Kent with a spur to Maidstone, the Guildford to Chichester road, and along the river Wey from Farnham to Weybridge. There are several hills named 'cricket hill' along the route of the river Wey. The one at Weybridge is recorded in the late sixteenth century in local manorial court records, while others are in the parishes of Bramley, Send, and Seale, all places where early cricket was played.³⁷ While the word 'cricket' can be interpreted as 'crooked hill', it is unusual to find a cluster of four hills so named in such a small area.

The Flemings were active in the cloth trade in all the areas where cricket was played during the seventeenth century. It is interesting to find that one John Derrick, a Flemish name, in 1598, claimed to have played the game of 'creckett' in Guildford about 1550.³⁸ This clue connects the Flemings with cricket. Some Flemings had been in Kent from as early as 1328, but we know they were well established in the south east by the end of the fifteenth century, where they largely controlled the cloth trade. The religious disturbances in western Europe saw some 5,000 Flemish and French Protestant refugees land at Sandwich and make their way to Canterbury in 1566, and as many again in other years entered Kent, Surrey, and Sussex. These immigrants were eventually absorbed into the hinterland, and many probably joined their countrymen in the clothing trade, brewing or glassmaking.³⁹

With the Flemish came their language and perhaps their sport. No evidence has been found of playing a game of cricket in Flanders, but they did play a hockey game which appears to have been known as '*met de krik ketsen*', meaning 'with the stick chase', which gives rise to Gillmeister's theory that the '*krik ketsen*' were foreshortened to 'cricket'.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the church stool was known by the Flemish name of 'cricket' in 1656

in Sussex and 1623 outside the south-east.⁴¹ The profile of the stool is very similar to that of the wicket used in the seventeenth century. Some of the earlier eighteenth century pictures suggest a wicket of about one foot high by two feet wide. Furthermore, the legs of the stool were called stumps, which adds further credence to the idea that the earliest wicket was a stool.⁴² Did the Flemish adapt stoolball and call it cricket? In the games of stow-ball, stob-ball and stool-ball, the name of the game is derived from the target at which the ball is bowled. So why not the same derivation for the game of cricket? The alternative is that 'cricket' derived from the hitting implement, that is the Anglo-Saxon name 'crick' with the French-Norman diminutive 'et'. Another anomaly is the use of the plural 'creckets' or 'crickets' for the game. In the early seventeenth century, both single and double wicket games were popular, and the plural form of cricket identified the double wicket game. At later periods it was the single wicket game that needed identification. The introduction of the double wicket games supposes that number playing was larger than normal.

There is another view that the word 'wicket', which was first recorded in cricket in 1680,⁴³ comes from playing the game against a small wicket gate, but wicket gates are associated with property: this relegates such a game to one played by children outside their houses, not by adults as a folk game played on the village green or in a field. There is a stob-ball field mentioned in Oxfordshire as early as 1525,⁴⁴ which demonstrates that bat and ball games were played in a designated field. The word 'wicket' has a counterpart in Flanders called '*wechet*'.⁴⁵ Interestingly, the south-east English dialect would have called a wicket a 'wecket' and cricket 'crecket'.

By 1629 the game had attracted the attention of the lesser gentry. At Rucking in Kent, the curate was found playing Cricketts after evening prayer: in his defence, he said he was not playing with mean and base persons but with persons of repute and of fashion.⁴⁶ There are social reasons why cricket would have expanded in the second half of the sixteenth century. It was a time when parishioners began to pay poor rates instead of holding church ales to raise money. Church ales were largely activities within each parish. With the demise of church ales, the rise of inter-village sport came about, and we hear of competitions, one village against another, from the 1590 period, at football, dancing, cudgeling and wrestling.⁴⁷ About 1610, in the Kent parish of Chevening, there was a

Cricketing between the Weald and Upland, which suggests that the best players of two localities met in a grand match.⁴⁸

The Puritans had been pleased to see the decline the church ales and the rowdiness they provoked. By the 1620s the new puritanical laws began to hinder the traditional Sunday sport which depressed the game's development. There is evidence of suppression at Maidstone before 1635. Between 1643 and 1660 the law forbade sport on Sundays,⁴⁹ but this did not always stop cricket being played, as we hear of a game in Eltham in 1654⁵⁰ and one of stow-ball in Westminster in 1658.⁵¹ Cricket was now expanding outside its traditional area.

To conclude, the cloth-working fringe area of the Weald area was poorly populated in the fifteenth century, with villages being small. Flemish migration appears to have increased, particularly in the middle years of the sixteenth century. The Flemish probably molded the traditional game of stoolball into something we recognise as cricket. Population growth in the area in the sixteenth century would have soon demanded a double-wicket game with the deployment of a greater number of players. However, there is much we need to know about Flemish bat and ball games in the sixteenth century before we can reach a conclusion on their involvement in cricket.

Children, perhaps mostly Flemish, were the prominent players of the game during the sixteenth century. From the 1580s, circumstances were ripe for the game to be played by adults, and there are hints to the frequency of cricket being mentioned. Only by about 1610 is it clear the game was in full-swing in three distinct areas, Maidstone-Sevenoaks, Guildford, and Chichester. By 1629 people of quality played the game, and by 1646 gamblers had been attracted to it.⁵² The pressure of the Puritans probably inhibited the game, because after 1660 its popularity increased alongside that of other sports. This, some historians have argued, was connected to the migration of nobility and gentry into cricket areas around the Weald, and bringing the game to London and other parts of England. The name 'cricket' is hardly found outside the three south-eastern counties until the final quarter of the seventeenth century.

The game I have attempted to describe is 'the play of the game of cricket', during the second half of the seventeenth century. It was then evolutionary,

but many elements of the game were in place before 1700. Its terminology had changed, it had ceased to be a folk game, and emerged as a national sport in the eighteenth century.

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Notes

- ¹ Eddowes, 1997, p4 gives Derrick being derived from Flemish Hendrik; Heiner Gillmeister, Bonn University, a European language expert, derives cricket from 'met de(krik ket)sen.'; Bowen, 1963 pp 157-163. I am also indebted to Bowen, Goulstone and Wallace, 1963, for many seventeenth century cricket references.
- ² Gomme, 1984. See, Bandy Wicket, Bat and Trap, Cat and Dog, Stoolball. These games had batsmen, fielders and bowler, except perhaps Bat and Trap, and Stoolball could be played with one to five bases. The old single wicket games of Cat and Dog, Stool-ball and Trap-Ball were sometimes played for points without taking a run, on the basis for each ball that was hit and not caught, a point was gained.
- ³ Wright, 1905, see, Tut, a three of more base game similar to baseball.
- ⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1987. See, Stow-ball and Stob-ball appear to have been the same game and played with two bats, a bowler and fieldsmen in the middle of the seventeenth century.
- ⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1987. See, Stump was the generic name for the dialect names of Stob and Stow, although Stow also meant a wooden supporting frame used in small mining tunnels.
- ⁶ Aubrey, 1847. Aubrey lived in north Wiltshire from c1648 until c1686 and saw the game of stow-ball being played in the evenings during the Commonwealth when Sunday sport was banned.
- ⁷ Manning, 1923. P104, Bullingdon Green was the sports field where many university scholars congregated.
- ⁸ Barty-King, 1979, p37. The cricket bat in south-east England appears, from the early seventeenth century, to have been shaped similar to a hockey stick with a broad flat surface at its base to hit trundled balls. The 1729 bat of Kennington Oval weighed 2.2 lbs.

- ⁹ Barty-King, 1979, p. 29. The stance of the batsman defending a wide wicket, in a picture of 1739, is with the bat raised presumably to be in a position to defend the widely spaced stumps. Rait-Kerr, 1950 pp. 4-9 says the striker has a forward stance with bent knee and the bowler bowls at one stump.
- ¹⁰ Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9. The bowler places his fielders in an array around him.
- ¹¹ Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9. A coin is tossed to determine which team will bat first.
- ¹² Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9. Players stood in a line to be selected for the teams of equal strength.
- ¹³ Frith, 1987. A 1742 picture shows a bat shaped like a modern ice hockey stick.
- ¹⁴ Marshall, 1961, p. 45. There was a choice of balls available for the 1727 challenge match between the Duke of Richmond and Mr Brodersick. It appears that most of them were wooden, and sewn into a leather cover.
- ¹⁵ Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9.
- ¹⁶ Marshall, 1961, p. 45.
- ¹⁷ It appears that in the seventeenth century, many balls were made about three inches in diameter: see the collection in the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) museum.
- ¹⁸ Barty-King, 1979, pp. 27, 29, 30.
- ¹⁹ Barty-King, 1979, p. 29. A poem, dedicated to the Duke of Dorset, refers to a crimson ball.
- ²⁰ Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9.
- ²¹ Money, 1997, p. 34. This gives rise to the conclusion that 'flat-faced' bates were used in as in cricket, and not one of the other cricket-type games.
- ²² *OED*, 1987: see Battledore.
- ²³ Sussex Records Society, *NEEDS A DATE*, p. 27.
- ²⁴ Rait-Kerr, 1950, p.66. The c.1744 rules give the wicket as 22 inches high with six inches between the stumps. The earliest mention of a wicket is 1695.
- ²⁵ Frith, 1987, includes a picture of a bat looking like an ice hockey stick.
- ²⁶ Goulstone, 1997.
- ²⁷ Buckley, 1935, p.1. It is not absolutely certain that the umpires were officiating.
- ²⁸ Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9.
- ²⁹ Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9.
- ³⁰ Rait-Kerr, 1950, pp. 4-9. As far as we know there was no batting crease: the position was known as 'the striker's place'.
- ³¹ Marshall, 1961, p. 45. The Duke of Richmond's articles in 1727 stipulated twelve gamesters to each team, inferring that this included umpires.
- ³² Barber, 1989, pp. 1787-88.
- ³³ *OED*, 1987. See Cudgeling
- ³⁴ *OED*, 1987. See Score.
- ³⁵ *OED*, 1987. See 'Prick or point'.
- ³⁶ Ogilby, 1971. Ogilby's road maps of 1695 show that the seventeenth century cricketing villages and towns formed a distinctive pattern.
- ³⁷ Gover, Mawer and Stenton, 1934, pp. 99, 149, 182, 229.
- ³⁸ Green, 1988, p. 188.
- ³⁹ For the Flemish immigrants economic activities, see Power, 1965, p. 122; Lipson, 1921, pp. 20-22, 26; Bowden, 1971, pp. 34-5, 50-51; Darby, 1986, p. 178.

- ⁴⁰ EddowEs, 1997, p. 5.
⁴¹ Churchwardens' Accounts 1504-1635.
⁴² *OED*, 1987. See Bench. Goulstone, 1999.
⁴³ SPORTS QUARTERLY MAGAZINE
⁴⁴ Goulstone, 1997.
⁴⁵ *OED*, 1987. See Wicket.
⁴⁶ Green, 1988, p. 190.
⁴⁷ Underdown, 1988, pp. 84, 94, 95, 261, 267. See also Bowen, Goulstone and Wallace, 1963, p. 158.
⁴⁸ Goulstone, 1963, p. 158.
⁴⁹ See Whitaker, 1933, for a detailed account of the decline of sports.
⁵⁰ Green, 1988, p. 188.
⁵¹ Davies, 1988, p. 78.
⁵² Bowen, 1970, p. 262.